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# Searching for the Symbiocene in Alice Gosti's *Bodies of Water*

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## **Abstract:**

This paper utilizes Glenn Albrecht's concept of the Symbiocene to explore Alice Gosti's durational public dance work, *Bodies of Water* (2016). The author argues that there can be no complete understanding of the Symbiocene without incorporation and consideration of movement – a lexicon connected to both epistemology and emotion. Gosti's attention to relationships of presence and care, to and among performers, with the audience, and to the specific environment of the site, offers a level of complexity necessary to address the often-paradoxical relationship of humans and their environment inherent in the Symbiocene.

## **Keywords**

*Symbiocene, Anthropocene, public dance, durational performance, community care*

## **Biography**

Elise Butterfield is a graduate student in the dual MA in Arts Administration and Contemporary Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she received the New Artist Society award. Prior, Elise was Programs and Gallery Director at Art Access in Salt Lake City, where she helped launch Breaking Barriers, a state-wide cultural accessibility program. A 2021 Magdalena Abakanovicz Fellow, she is associate curator for Start a Reaction and dramaturg for Eiko Otake's new work, they did not hesitate. She holds BAs, magna cum laude, in Dance and International Studies from the University of Washington.

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*As I step out of the airport in Seattle, it hits me at once: I can smell the saltwater.*

*When I lived here, over 8 years ago, I never noticed this – I guess I was just used to it then. Now, after being away, I can feel the air: the weight of it somehow heavier, filled with the possibility of rain, a hint of brine, and car exhaust.*

*The sensation makes me well up with emotion. It is bittersweet.*

*As we approach the city from the freeway, I notice the building cranes that loom and the old landmarks that have disappeared as gentrification washes through. While verdant life still blooms all over, I find myself noticing that it is more yellow than green, these days. The changes leave me with a sense of concern and a strange lack of familiarity, for I have a deep love and sense of belonging here.*

## **Introduction**

Solastalgia, a term crafted by Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht, describes the “sense of powerlessness and grief experienced by people when their homeland is under duress” (Richards, 2019, p. 267). Albrecht calls solastalgia “psychoterratic,” as in “earth-related (terratic) mental (psychic) conditions that draw attention to the mental effects of exponentially expanding human development and climatic change” (Richards, 2019, p. 267). This term assists me in

describing and understanding some of my own experiences, such as my return to Seattle as I notice the landscape and environment changing around me.

According to Albrecht, these experiences are increasingly common in the age of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a geologic age in which human impact on the earth has fundamentally changed the earth’s climate, widely accepted to be ongoing.<sup>1</sup> Scholar Anna Tsing has described the Anthropocene as “a time in which business as usual is likely to kill us” (Carlin, 2020). Out of this despair, Albrecht offers a concept for what he hopes will be the geologic age after the Anthropocene: the Symbiocene. This concept is a vision of potential positive human-Earth relations that is defined by the “reunification of human societies with the rest of life,” including land, animals, and plants (Albrecht, 2020, p. 2).

In this paper, I engage with Alice Gosti’s durational dance work *Bodies of Water* (2016) because I identify this performance as embodying a level of complexity necessary to address the often-paradoxical relationship of humans to their environment inherent in the Symbiocene. Gosti, a self-described “architect of experiences,” is an artist and choreographer known for creating immersive and emotive performances in conversation with current and historical social realities. Gosti’s five-

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<sup>1</sup> There has been much debate over this term’s utility and the exact start date of the Anthropocene. For the purpose

of this paper I will not rehearse these nuanced and important conversations.

hour “hybrid performance spectacle” produced by Velocity Dance Center and presented by Friends of Waterfront Seattle, featured eight dancers and a score composed and performed by Benjamin Marx (“Bodies of Water,” n.d.). *Bodies of Water* was billed by Gosti as both a celebration of Seattle and a critique of its relationship to the landscape. Since I was not present for the performance, I rely on video documentation from the artist, my own past experiences of visiting this place, over twenty years of living in Seattle and having danced with and for Gosti in previous work.

While Gosti does deal with the darkness of human-led destruction in this work, in this article I particularly focus on how the dance performs a system of collective and caring community among and beyond humans. In the following sections, I outline for the reader four moments during *Bodies of Water* which I identify as metaphorical embodiments of the Symbiocene: reclamation, interconnection, care, and presence. I begin each section with a sensory description of the dance before delving into contextualization and analysis of the work. I do this in part to give the reader a feeling for the performance, and in part to emphasize the importance of kinaesthetic and sensory knowledge in developing the Symbiocene.

### ***Reclaiming the Waterfront***

*Amidst the bustle of the crowd and the roar of traffic, the performers, still and observant, stand out in their white*

*jumpsuits, white Keds, and blue socks. Their faces are pleasant but neutral, and they look around, taking in their surroundings. Their presence is a gentle interruption in this busy weekend scene. Baseball fans, toddlers, and confused tourists weave between them.*

*After five minutes of impeding foot traffic, one dancer takes a single step back. Then another dancer takes a step back. Soon, they are taking a single step in unison, backward through the crowd.*

*A breath. A pause. A step.*

*The audience watches as the dancers descend into a small concrete proscenium and the world of the dance. In this world, I watch them become bodies of water, bodies with water, bodies in water, bodies as water.*

In *Bodies of Water*, I see the dancers and the audience in active conversation with each other and the place in which they are located. This effect is highlighted by Gosti’s choice to set the work in a public place where the concept of “stage” is constantly shifting. During the five-hour performance, the dancers and audience travel around different landmarks along the waterfront. They begin the dance facing the Alaskan Way viaduct.

The Alaskan Way viaduct was an above-ground commuter highway that ran along the downtown Seattle waterfront for seventy years and was torn down in 2019, three years after this performance. In 2016, however, it was still in active use. Following significant structural damage sustained during the 2001 Nisqually earthquake, its

future was the source of more than a decade of political debate (Wessells, 2014). At the time of the performance, progress on a state-led plan to demolish the Alaskan Way viaduct and replace it with a two-story commuter tunnel running underneath downtown Seattle was underway. Part of this long-term and transformative plan's goals involved the reimagination and redevelopment of the Seattle waterfront and seawall.

Friends of Waterfront Seattle, a committee established in 2012 and the presenting partner of *Bodies of Water* in 2016, has been a part of this transformative, yet fraught plan to revitalize the waterfront. Friends of Waterfront Seattle's goal is to establish a public 20-acre Waterfront Park where once industry and tourist commerce dominated, a feat which is complex and has dealt with competing interests and political constraints over the years (Wessells, 2014). The revitalization has been in the works for decades, and currently has a planned completion date of 2024 ("Waterfront Park," n.d). *Bodies of Water* was presented as part of the committee and the city's coordinated efforts to revitalize the downtown waterfront as a cultural destination, an effort which remains in progress today.

The Alaskan Way viaduct, whose fate was well-discussed and debated by Seattleites, serves as a reminder of how often Anthropocentric structures fail because they were designed without serious consideration for the environment around them. The transition to the Symbiocene is contingent upon both a recognition of the brokenness of the Anthropocene's structures (from the architectural to the economic) and a reimagining of them. Albrecht writes that "The Symbiocene will be in evidence when there is no discernible toxic impact of human activity on the planet," however, the reality of transitioning from the Anthropocene to this theoretical Symbiocene is complex and messy (2020, p. 2). It involves de-centering humans in favor of integrating them more consciously into the environmental ecosystems of which they are, in fact, already a part. Certainly, the project of replacing the viaduct with an underground tunnel cannot claim to have no toxic impact on the planet, nor is it de-centering humans. However, viewed generously, the process of transitioning from Anthropocene to Symbiocene in some way parallels the City of Seattle and its attendant committees' redesign of the waterfront.<sup>2</sup> And it is here that Gosti's dancers and their reclaiming of this space via their dancing bodies helps one to see this space in transition.

With this in mind, it feels significant to me that Gosti chose to start *Bodies of Water* with both

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<sup>2</sup> It merits repeating, however, that the viaduct was replaced with a tunnel that required massive terraforming and resources to complete. Additionally, one of the reasons for the redevelopment of the waterfront was to

draw tourism and economic activity for the city (Wessells, 2014). Not all of this project was about reclaiming land for a more integrated and symbiotic future.

dancers and audience facing, and slowly backing away from, the Alaskan Way viaduct. It is the iconic, crumbling, human-made structure whose demolition will make room for the reclamation of land and water by human and non-human life. Perhaps then, it is possible to view Gosti's choice to begin next to the viaduct and slowly move closer to the bay throughout the five-hour dance, as an embodied shift from a human-centered Anthropocentric experience of the space to an integrated Symbiocentric relationship.

### ***Interconnections: An Ecosystem of Dancers***

*Suddenly, dancers fall into the movement phrase that will serve as the central motif of the work, repeated many times throughout the performance.*

*They are moving quickly: rippling, turning, manipulating each other's bodies with lifts and pulls and spins. They are up and down and around each other before I know it.*

*The choreography is a cause-and-effect relationship:*

*You push me, I fall, she catches me, I lift her.*

*Intricate, intertwined, and surprising.*

*There is intimacy in this complexity. Not only do dancers approach each other with familiarity and playfulness, but every person and every movement is necessary in order for it to work. The dance is a living organism with discrete entities. It prioritizes instances in which dancers share weight, with quick moments of catch-and-release. There is non-verbal communication, trust, and risk in this, yet it is smooth and safe in their practiced hands.*

Underneath the sidewalks where the dancers perform sits Elliott Bay. This edge of the bay is only now precariously recovering from human interventions that led to a crumbling vertical seawall and 200 years of crushing darkness created by piers and concrete. These constructions killed off the microalgae necessary for local salmon survival, leading to dwindling populations of species that are an essential part of the regional ecosystem (Beekman, 2015). As part of the revitalization of this waterfront, the old seawall was replaced with a new, tiered wall in 2015 to create a better shallow water ecosystem for salmon and their interspecies neighbors (Beekman, 2015). The new wall was equipped with shelving that created a staggered slope, rather than a vertical drop, and mimicked a naturally occurring shoreline. Additionally, the walkways above were replaced with sidewalks that feature light-penetrating rectangles, allowing more sunlight to reach the delicate shallow water plants and the salmon below who use this area as their own highway. Together, these changes allowed the microalgae and plant life essential to salmon health to thrive, encouraging the recovery of local salmon populations and the broader ecosystem.

Anthropocentric thinking, exemplified by the vertical seawall and over-developed shoreline, does not concern itself with the impact human intervention can have on existing ecosystems. The Symbiocene, by contrast, seeks to understand existing symbiotic ecosystems in order to instruct

humans on how they should engage with human and non-human life around them. The Symbiocene takes into account human impact while proposing and valuing a new relationship. This method is greatly influenced by Indigenous thinking<sup>3</sup>, such as that offered by Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Professor of Environmental Biology at the State University of New York in Syracuse and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013). Kimmerer's book is a series of stories "meant to heal our relationships with the world" (2013, p. 1) which include close descriptions of plants and their ecosystems as lessons about how humans can engage with their own habitat in a radically different way. In her chapter entitled "Becoming Indigenous," Kimmerer (2013) describes First Man Nanabohzo's relationship to Earth upon arrival: "His role was not to control or change the world as a human, but to learn from the world how to be human" (p. 202). In order to do this, one must value the knowledge inherent in ecosystems and organisms made up of individuals who are inextricably connected and collaborative. This requires a willingness to think beyond the confines of an individual's physical body, needs, and desires, in order to see a larger picture.

Though on a much-reduced scale, Gosti's choreography visualizes this larger picture, the intricate connections of a group that operates with a community-centered, symbiocentric focus. The movements of the dancers in this section of the dance echo the delicate and precarious interconnections of an ecosystem. Each dancer must remember their exact movements, lifts, and connections at just the right moment in order for this opening sequence to run smoothly, otherwise, the entire phrase is impossible. Remove one dancer, and the choreography cannot function. This precarious and precious symbiosis of the dance echoes how the right light, microalgae, and wall structure must be in place in order for the salmon, and thus the broader ecosystem, to survive. In both cases, the ecosystem is strong when all contributors play their role, though it can be thrown off by a disruption to any part of the ecosystem. Additionally, the playful, unpredictable, and quick movements of the dancers evoke the way a school of fish might move. Like a school of fish, the dancers are difficult to tell apart due to their speed, identical outfits, and constantly shifting relationships. To me, this choreographic choice of intimate interconnectedness further emphasizes Gosti's possible embrace of the non-human as an influence on this work.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In his book *Earth Emotions*, Glenn Albrecht (2019) is explicit about the influence of Indigenous thinking on his development of psychoterratic terms like the Symbiocene. An Australian academic, he specifically discusses Australian Aboriginal concepts. For this context, I found Robin Wall Kimmerer's work as an

Indigenous scholar living and working in the United States to be more relevant.

<sup>4</sup> Notably, Gosti cited Seattle's relationship to its waterways and fishing as inspirations for this work ("Bodies of Water," n.d.).

## *Care and Empathy for the Collective in Two Parts*

*Down on the dock, eight dancers are slowly joined by eleven others also wearing white jumpsuits. The large group stands in a clump, swaying gently back and forth in sync, sometimes holding hands, or facing each other.*

*At seemingly random intervals, someone will fall,  
lie still,  
and then rise with the assistance of another performer.*

*It continues and repeats. Then, someone who seems to be an audience member joins.*

*They place a hand on one of the dancers' shoulders, swaying along with them.*

*Soon, more than a dozen people of all ages dressed in street clothes have joined the dance. Like the others, they fall,  
lie still,  
and then rise and rejoin.*

*Many dancers who are not wearing jumpsuits appear to be regular audience members. It takes me some time to discern whether this is choreographed or not. Some of the new performers, however, sport colorful life jackets. As more of these individuals join, I begin to see that this is, in fact, going just as Gosti has planned.*

In this section, the longest of the entire performance, I see an embodiment of Gosti's stated concern about the immigrant and refugee crisis ("Bodies of Water," n.d.). I see evidence of this in

the slow and steady addition of performers; including both those who do look like the core group and those who are quite distinct from the group through dress. By choosing to not have all additional performers wear the uniform of the dancers, Gosti probes her audience to question whether or not these new performers belong in the dance. Additionally, the colorful life jackets upon collapsed and vulnerable bodies, reference iconography and imagery that has come to be associated with migrants in Southern Europe.

Gosti, born in Italy to one American expatriate parent and one Italian parent, is a dual citizen of the United States and Italy and often wrestles in her work to make sense of belonging and citizenship (Manitach, 2016). During the time of this performance, Italy was experiencing a surge of refugees arriving primarily via boat from North Africa, displaced by poverty, violence, and famine ("Why Is Italy Seeing a Record Number of Migrants?" 2016). This, along with the previous year's surge in refugee arrivals in Greece, produced a significant amount of political hand-wringing and resulted in European leaders' efforts to seal borders (Connor, 2016). Though this issue on the surface may appear different from the crumbling seawall and cracked viaduct, migration crises are, too, a symptom of the Anthropocene. Not only are the reasons migrants leave their homes products of the Anthropocene, but the restriction of human movement and lack of care upon their arrival are, too.



Gosti demonstrates a response to the movement, displacement, and distress of immigrants in this large group section that counters the logic of the Anthropocene in her promotion of care and empathy for the collective whole. One of the recurring motifs in *Bodies of Water* is a person lying on the ground. Over and over, the dancers falling to the ground create an amplification of this repeated motif. The moments in which the performers lie on the ground are important on multiple levels: beyond the interpretation as a signal to the issue of the refugee crisis, the dancers are in a kind of practical respite. Here Gosti considers the physical needs of her performers while also using these moments on the ground as an artistic choice. While she herself has performed previous durational works that put her body in distress, she chooses not to do that to her performers here. When asked in an interview about enduring a durational performance, Gosti said “you can do something for a long time and not have pain, and not subjugate yourself to some kind of emotional and physical distress” (as quoted in Smith, 2016). A lengthy task does not have to be a strenuous one if the needs of one’s body are taken into consideration. Gosti is not interested in pushing the dancers past their physical or emotional limits, but rather in creating a structure that will support their bodies in performance. Care is evident in multiple levels of Gosti’s choreography here: the care she has shown for her performers, the care they show each other (petting one another’s backs and offering a hand to stand), and, as we will see later, the care shown to the audience. This care can be understood as an

embodiment of an interconnected symbiotic ecosystem.

*One of the dancers has fallen to the ground. They seem so vulnerable here, on their own.*

*The group slowly moves forward, swaying all the while.*

*What if the group forgets about her?*

*What if she is left behind?*

*When will she get up?*

*Will she get up?*

*A toddler waddles over to the dancer on the ground and crouches down to see if she is okay. The dancer looks up at the young audience member and smiles reassuringly.*

*One of the other dancers helps her up.*

*When the second dancer falls, the toddler waddles over to that one.*

In a piece that seems to be invested in the creation of a symbiotic ecosystem, the moment a dancer falls, lying apart from the group, is also a moment in which the audience sees them as an individual. In this moment, a sense of empathy is triggered (Foster, 2005). Even though the adult audience members know this is a performance and that person is okay, Gosti’s choreography can trigger an impulse to wonder if they should step in. This impulse is a reminder of the interconnectedness not only of the dancers but of all those present. And yet, the audience is reassured as each time, no matter how long it takes, the person who has fallen gets back up

and rejoins the group. Often, they are met with warmth and acknowledgment from their peers, and one is reminded that the dance is not a contest or a race. Rather, to me, it is another representation of the possibility of a Symbiocene and the community care required to create such interconnected resiliency.

In Gosti's structure, there is room for everyone to fall, take a break, and rejoin the group. Here, it is expected that dancers help others up and welcome them back. It seems plausible to view this section as a call for care that extends beyond human-made borders. Adopting this kind of care in geopolitical interactions would require an overturn of Anthropocentric ideals that place individuality, profit, and growth ahead of life.

### ***The Presence of the Audience***

*In this durational work, gradually, your feet may begin to ache while standing, begging you to sit.*

*Once you've been sitting for a long time, your hand may begin to throb, pink indentations appearing in your palm from holding your weight against rocky concrete.*

*When you stand to follow the dancers to a new location, you may start to notice how different your body feels upon moving.*

*As the sun slowly begins to set, you may observe that the wood of the dock is cooler than the cement was a few hours earlier.*

*And that underneath the noises of the crowd, you can hear the sloshing of waves beneath you.*

While Gosti brings performers and the audience into a sense of presence and care with each

other, she also brings them into that same sensation with the site of the dance. The ground, not just the person lying on it, is important to Gosti. Dancers often spend a lot of time thinking about the ground and its surface, as a way to understand how one can move in and on any given place and surface. Different movements are possible given different surfaces. Is it springy enough to comfortably and safely jump? Is it smooth enough to turn with ease? Most of the time, dancers rehearse and perform in spaces designed for optimal turning, resistance, and bounce, but that is not the case with *Bodies of Water*. All of this piece takes place outside, and at least half is performed on concrete, the "most abundant novel rock type of the Anthropocene" (Waters and Zalasiewicz, 2018). The dancers, in their thin-soled shoes, would be able to feel the coarse texture of man-made rock in any kind of foot rotation or jump, and certainly during their extended periods lying upon it.

While dancers often think about the surface beneath them, many nondancers may not consciously be aware of this relationship. The durational aspect of this performance, however, can force audience members to become aware of the place upon which they reside through the experience of their own bodies. Five hours is a very long time to stand and look, and the waterfront does not have a lot of seating. As a result, many audience members sat down on the ground, imitating some of the postures of the dancers. Gosti has said of this work, "You can do something for a long time because a story needs

to be told for a long time” (as quoted in Smith, 2016). The story of becoming with your surroundings takes a long time.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), Robin Wall Kimmerer writes:

The land is the real teacher. All we need as students is mindfulness. Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving gifts with open eyes and open heart. My job was just to lead them into the presence and ready them to hear. (p. 215)

In this quote Wall Kimmerer is describing her own teaching practice however, I find her conclusion that presence is an important teacher is relevant to Alice Gosti’s project in *Bodies of Water*. Gosti invites the audience of *Bodies of Water* to move into a space of presence. Because of the work’s duration and non-traditional venue, audience members are gently pushed into intimacy with their own physicality and the environment around them. This can take the audience from a state of voyeuristic observation to that of connection between their own bodies and emotions and the site of the dance.

This kind of kinesthetic-environmental connection refines our understanding of the Symbiocene. Through this choreography of the audience, as much as through the dynamic movement of the dancers, Gosti plays with the possibilities of a tangible Symbiocene. In this choreographed encounter, no one is outside of the experience or the place. It is not a stage, where some

people are lit and others sit quietly in the dark with disembodied faces invisible to the performers. Here, everyone has a body, everyone is on view, and the rules of interaction and roles of individuals are flexible. This is not always physically comfortable – it is a long time to be outside, standing, or sitting in areas not designed for this kind of engagement. Nor is it always emotionally comfortable – being visible to the performers means that the audience may be more aware of their own engagement, and though this can be very rewarding, it can also be tiring. Yet through this, Gosti draws attention to our inextricable entanglement with one another and with the place in which we find ourselves. This is a core tenet of Symbiocene thinking. Additionally, no one can opt out of the devastating effects of the Anthropocene, and everyone must acknowledge their responsibility and commitment in order to live out and transition to the Symbiocene.

### *Conclusion*

Alice Gosti’s work has not previously been written about through the lens of the Symbiocene, yet I find that *Bodies of Water* incorporates the reunification and integration of life that Glenn Albrecht’s concept describes. Gosti’s choreography puts both dancers and the audience into interconnectedness with each other and their surroundings, offering a kinesthetic and sensory understanding of a seemingly abstract concept. Furthermore, I view her dance as enriching our understanding of how the Symbiocene may

realistically be conceived through her insistence upon reckoning with the complex local and global effects of human impact on the earth. To me, this speaks to ideas of reciprocity and transformation. In her chapter on distilling maple sap into syrup in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall-Kimmerer (2013) writes:

[Nanabohzo's] teachings remind us that one half of the truth is that the earth endows us with great gifts, the other half is that the gift is not enough. The responsibility does not lie with the maples alone. The other half belongs to us; we participate in its transformation. It is our work, our gratitude that distills the sweetness. (p. 67)

In the age of the Anthropocene, human-built systems, fueled by capitalism and the greed of a few, extract the earth's gifts often without contributing any responsibility in return. As I remember *Bodies of Water*, I am reminded of the ways in which the Symbiocene is not a paradise where climate change and terraforming of the Anthropocene no longer haunt our dreams; it is a cultivated reality that requires sacrifice and accountability collectively and massive change systemically. Like *Bodies of Water*, it is durational, and though it will not end after a few hours or even years, it does not have to be only endured. There can still be moments of lightness, connection, and joy.

Ultimately, *Bodies of Water* concluded with a celebration. The complex opening phrase was performed for the last time on the dock above Elliott

Bay after the sun had set, with the dancers' bodies illuminated by just a few lights. By the final repetition, they were clearly tired and a little sloppier in their movement, but they still appeared to be connected and in conversation with one another (Vidrin, 2018). And then suddenly, from the other end of the dock, came a dance party led by Chaotic Noise Marching Band for audience and performer alike. In the dark, between the edge of the city and Elliott Bay, everyone moved and laughed and embraced. No bows, no speeches, no audience. The Symbiocene is still amorphous and mostly unarticulated, but it is clear that only talking about it will not get us there. We cannot think our way out of the Anthropocene. Rather, as Gosti's *Bodies of Water* reminds me, the Symbiocene's potential lies in feeling into our bodies, connecting with our human and non-human neighbors, and listening to our beloved places.

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