Topophilia and Inner Landscapes: On Being a Body in a Place

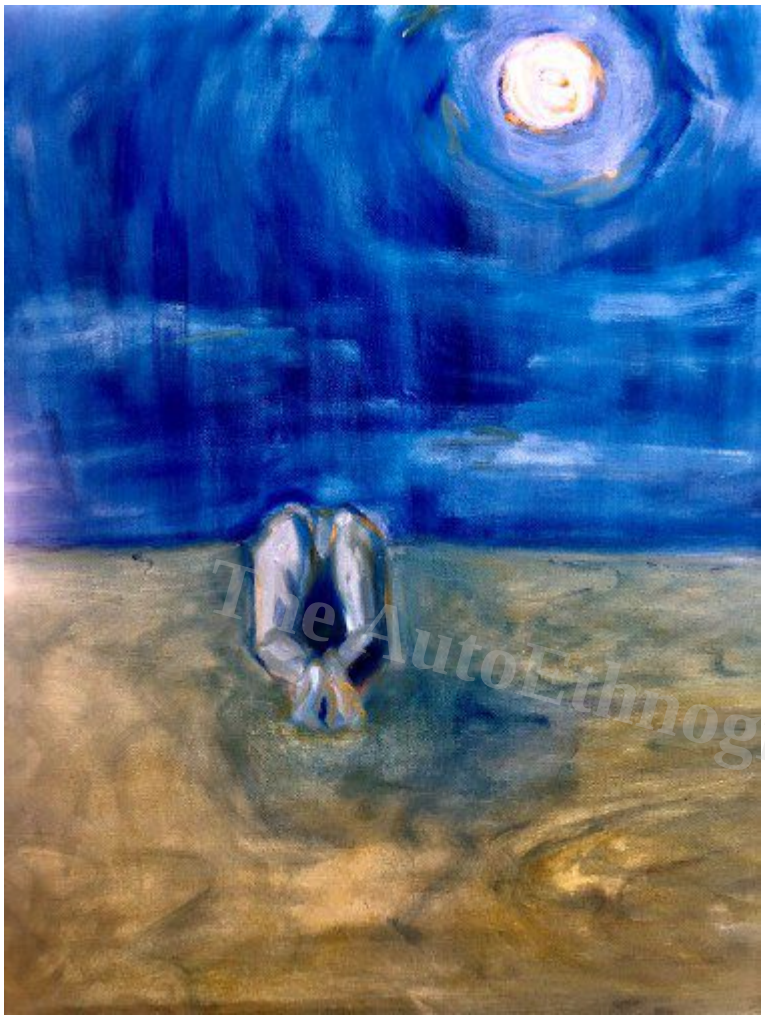
Description

The AutoEthnographer

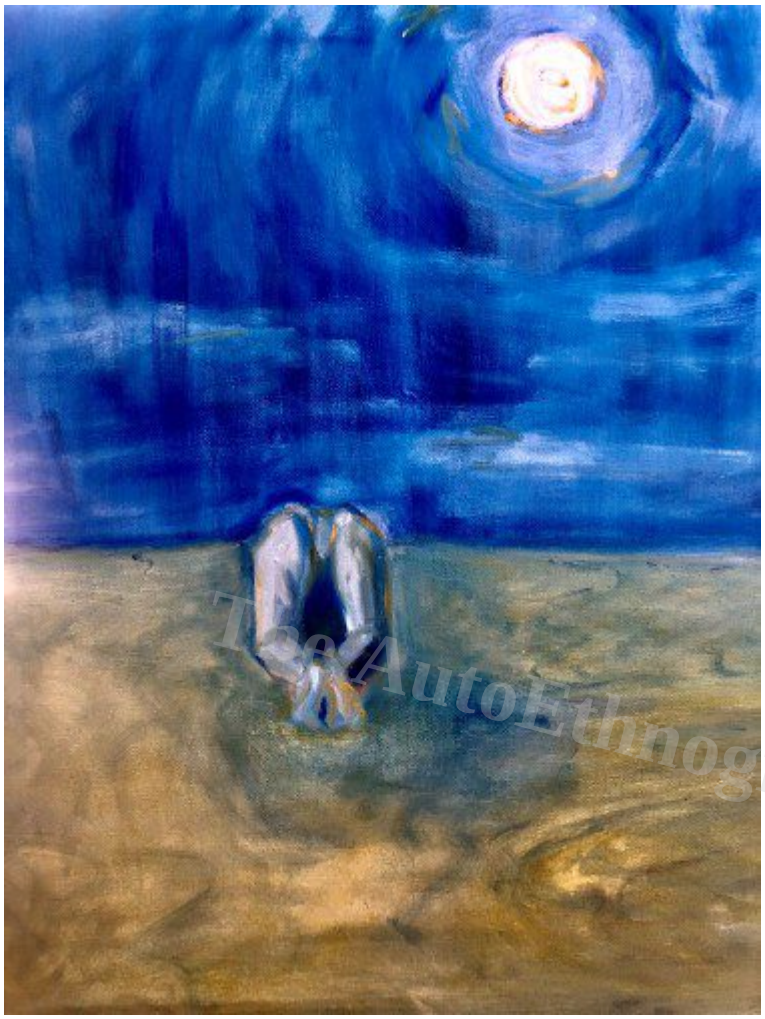
Topophilia and Inner Landscapes: On Being a Body in a Place

Authorâ??s Memo

This multimedia essay explores topophilia and the notion of an â??inner landscape,â?• as well as the creative practice and self-study from which this idea emerged. Over nearly a decade, I have filmed myself improvising movement in the fields of my hometown. What began as artistic exploration has become a form of ethnographic research, a way to explore my physiological and psychological connection to my homeland, and to translate personal experience into a larger idea about the interplay of ecosystems and nervous systems. In this essay, I explore the ideas that emerged from this practice: our increasingly disconnected, tech-oriented culture, how we relate to the places we inhabit, and how these places might shape us in larger ways than we consciously detect.



The Autoethnographer



Planted, 2022. Painting by Rachel Wyman

September 2024 marked 14 years since I moved to New York City, but I spent the whole summer on the other side of the country, in my rural hometown in eastern Washington, thinking about what it means to come from a place.

Close to a decade ago, I started doing something kind of weird that would eventually become a practice. Whenever I would visit home, Iâ??d go out to the wheat fields beyond town, set my phone up on a heavy old tripod, and record myself improvising movement. I didnâ??t know what I was doing; I just wanted to see myself embedded in the landscape I had missed since I left for college. This gradually morphed into an exploration of my â??naturalâ?• movementâ??the way I tend to move when Iâ??m not responding to music or worried about dance technique.

It has taken many years, to realize this practice is more about my relationship to place than it is about dance. I have come to believe that this land has irrevocably shaped me in ways I havenâ??t been conscious of: it has impacted how I operate in my body in the world, and I feel and see this in the way I

move. I have a rhythm, a pace, and qualities of movement that feel good to me, which I always gravitate towards, and it seems that no amount of external influenceâ??by way of living in other places or undergoing years of dance training to make my body move and look a certain wayâ??can fundamentally change this. I can pull my limbs in tight and maneuver forcefully through crowded city streets, and I can try on new ways of moving and posturing in a dance class. But when left to my own devices, I move the way I move.

One idea I picked up as a student of dance/movement therapy is that whatever is happening inside of us, emotionally and psychologically, is reflected in our physicality. I have developed my own little hypothesis, based solely on my long-term practice: there is an intimate connection between our ecosystems and our nervous systems. The environments we inhabit create within each of us a kind of â??inner landscapeâ?• that shapes our individual rhythms and ways of moving and being.

The Autoethnographer

I have never thought of myself an ecological artist, but I think there is a broader ecological idea embedded in this inner landscape hypothesis: we do not â??justâ?• live in places. As Wendell Berry writes, â??[W]e and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one anotherâ?¦our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land.â?•

We are intrinsically connected with the places we inhabit, psychologically and physiologically, whether we realize it or not. My inkling is that becoming aware of this connection is important, both for ecological reasons and for our own well-beingâ??our understanding of ourselves and our sense of belonging, connection, community.

I have been wondering about some of our current individual and collective ills, and I keep coming back to disconnection, and the idea of lost landscapes. I wrote last month that we, as a species, seem to be fairly disconnected from the greater global environment, most clearly evidenced by our climate woesâ??the degradation and loss of external landscapes. But we also seem to be more and more disconnected from the environment of our own bodiesâ??the degradation and loss of inner landscapes.

I recognize the great irony of writing this while staring at my computer screen, hoping you will stare at yours for a while to read it, but we increasingly spend precious hours of our lives in digital spaces. As a society, we are obsessed with technology-fueled â??progressâ?• that removes us from certain physical realities and constraints. We depend on ever-advancing tech to make our lives as frictionless as possible, while transhumanist thinkers look forward to the day when technology completely liberates us from the limitations and problems of being bodies, susceptible to illness, decay, death.

> *â??No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living responsibly in some small part of it. Where we live and who we live there with define the terms of our relationship to the world and to humanity. We thus come again to the paradox that one can become whole only by the responsible acceptance of oneâ??s partiality.â?•* â?? Wendell Berry

Maybe Iâ??m totally wrong or blowing things out of proportion, but it really strikes me that weâ??re collectively working to forget, if not transcend the â??inconvenienceâ?• of being bodied beings, with needs, fallibilities, and limits.

Yet bodyness is the very ground of our being (at least as we have known it since time immemorial). The needs, fallibilities, and limits of our physical lives keep us humbly tethered within the world, with other limited and mortal beings, with nature. What is a person if not a bodyâ??a specific body that issued from other specific bodies, in a specific time and place, with a specific mind and experiences informed by all of the limitations and constraints of being one single, improbable creature?

The Autoethnographer

To return to my little hypothesis, the places we inhabit are one of these factors that shape our specific physical existences. I believe place not only shapes who we consciously understand ourselves to beâ??it shapes us on a cellular, physiological level. Perhaps paying closer attention to and connecting with the places we inhabit might help us better understand and connect with our inner landscapes, our selves.

I donâ??t knowâ??itâ??s just a thought. I know plenty of people feel no affinity for the places they were born or raised, although most people have some place they love, where they feel they belong. And Iâ??m not suggesting that everyone must run out and dance to commune with the places they love. The way each of us relates (or doesnâ??t relate) to place is personal, perhaps just as personal as any relationship with a person. We discover, create, and/or nurture that connection in our own ways.

But I certainly feel I have benefitted from exploring this relationship with place. Years of dancing in dirt and wheat have shown me a connection between my homeland and myself, and seeing this has transformed me. I have gradually come to know something about the â??limitsâ?• that were set by the environment in which I developed, and which characterize my movement and being. My monomaniacal pursuit of dance training has been, in part, an attempt to transcend these limits, to transcend myself so that I can be any kind of dancer I want. I do think there is ultimately a middle way to be found between the relentless pursuit of transcendence from what is, and the unquestioning acceptance of what is. But connecting with place has connected me with the dancer I am, whose dance has been partially shaped by the land I belong to and love.

Credits

Featured image by author

Painting and videos by author

Learn More

New to autoethnography? Visit What Is Autoethnography? How Can I Learn More? to learn about autoethnographic writing and expressive arts. Interested in contributing? Then, view our editorial boardâ??s What Do Editors Look for When Reviewing Evocative Autoethnographic Work?. Accordingly, check out our Submissions page. View Our Team in order to learn about our editorial board. Please see our Work with Us page to learn about volunteering at *The AutoEthnographer*. Visit Scholarships to learn about our annual student scholarship competition

The AutoEthnographer

Category

1. All Content
2. Autoethnographic Art & Multimedia
3. Volume 4, Issue 4 (2024)

Author
rachel-wyman