

**MOVING AND RELATIONALITY:
Constellating, Cultural Change, and Amerta Movement**

Margit Galanter

Performance of the Americas

Dr. Zoila Mendoza

June 7, 2021

“I don’t start from oneness. I usually start more from dialogue, ... the main is not the separation itself or oneness itself, but is how the dynamic of the life, the source of life in each being, or in inter-being. In the inter itself. Not only this, but the dynamic of this.”¹

—SUPRAPTO SURYODARMO

In this writing I will focus on movement, and how through its inherent *relatingness* it creates a kind of space for potential, one that can allow for dynamic togetherness, receptive to surroundings, and how this capacity is a potent key for cultural change. I am interested in how particular practices of the intercultural movement form from Java, Indonesia called Amerta Movement can be shared as tools for unsettling the sensorial, land-based and cultural effects and harms of settler-colonialism, and how perspectives in Native American and Indigenous studies can provide key support for this understanding. I will think alongside and with some Native American and Indigenous authors, and how their provocations and perspectives have affected my understanding of movement and relationality, and relationality-in-motion. The paper will center around the view that culture is in a constant process of change, that indigenous knowledge systems here on this land are informed by the array of rich worlding and practices as well as continual historical violence and dispossession enacted through settler-colonialism. Through this process, I hope to enact a movement of relationality by bringing together facets from different places to create a new formation.

Firstly, it is important to state that as a white settler-colonizer, a queer person of Jewish descent living in the U.S. in 2021 in dialogue with scholarship of Native Americas, it has been my

¹ Cohen, Bonnie Bainbridge and Suprpto Suryodarmo, “An Improvised Conversation.” The 26th Annual Body-Mind Centering® Association Conference: Somatics: Exploring Our Roots. Transcribed by Diane Butler and Kate Tarlow Morgan in *Currents: A Journal of the Body-Mind Centering® Association*, Winter 2012.

practice to do so in a way that is not extractive, rather oriented towards a decolonial approach, supporting the vast project to upend supremacy. I do this neither with a sense of belonging nor ownership of these worldviews. Rather, through learning and experiencing the changes in my own perspectives, I will share them in my communities, building real connections with people and place in Native, Non-Native, and mixed contexts. Hopefully through this filter I can offer a contribution to a coalition of fields.

Additionally, it is important to state that there is much literature based in areas of research such as Indonesian studies and dance studies that are more seemingly directly applicable, and indeed these are areas I have been studying. For this paper, however, rather than giving attention to those analyses, I am curious about how certain perspectives presented in Zoila Mendoza's course *Performance of the Americas* and Indigenous Studies can open up a viewpoint that is grounded in relation with context that has not been addressed in the other fields in this way. I am seeking ways to engage with Indigenous knowledge systems with respect, and from what Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) call "grounded normativity:" ethical frameworks provided by place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge, based in deep reciprocity.² Though I will not address land ethics specifically, this is another area I have been exploring in this time, rather here I am exploring the moving potential with place and surroundings.

Part of my work in this orientation to Native American and Indigenous Studies is to develop and understand my positionality, and it is one that is in movement, as I learn more about right relation in research. As Stephani Nohelani Teves (Kanaka Maoli) states in her article

² Coulthard, Glen and Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake, "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 2, June 2016. 253

“The Theorist and the Theorized: Indigenous Critiques of Performance Studies,” it is important for scholars and thinkers to listen to Indigenous critiques, to interact with Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate forms of knowing, to foster a commitment to decolonizing methodologies, and as she notes through citing Goenpul Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreteen-Robinson, to engage with Indigenous analytics, but not claim to produce them.³ As a person who practices and shares movement and performance for the most part on unceded Ohlone land outdoors, it is vitally necessary to think through these complexities and contribute to new forms and forums for right relation. This is also further explored in the writings of Simpson and Coulthard, who invite practices that are “engaged as related comrades in critical co-resistance against the convergence of forces that divide and conquer us and the Earth upon which we depend.”⁴ I am committed to exploring this in relation to the dance practices that I steward and share.

How can movement and performance practice offer approaches that dissolve the dichotomous operations that come with the “territory” of settler colonialism? And in doing so, also enrich the potential sensory and experiential realities of daily life for people in practice, to bring a stronger commitment to reckoning? In Teves’ *Defiant Indigeneity The Politics of Hawaiian Performance*, the author explains how narratives often work in service of hegemonic forces that aim to incorporate “and thus contain, manage, and exploit” indigeneity under the guise of celebrating culture.⁵ Cultural extermination and invisibilizing is pervasive, and

³ Teves, Stephanie Nohelani Teves, “The Theorist and the Theorized: Indigenous Critiques of Performance Studies” *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 62 No. 4, Winter 2018, 136

⁴ Coulthard and Simpson, 249.

⁵ Teves, Stephanie Nohelani, *Defiant Indigeneity: The Politics of Hawaiian Performance*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2018. 3.

sometimes naively enacted, in the examinations of living Native cultural systems, for example in Anthropology and Performance Studies.⁶ It is an unfolding process that takes care and intention.

Amerta Movement

In 2017, I spent several months in Indonesia collaborating and studying with my movement teacher Suprpto Suryodarmo (“Prpto”), inventor of *Joged Amerta*, also known as Amerta Movement. I have worked with him since 2000 both in Indonesia and abroad. In the first month of this trip, in collective, we organized and co-taught a workshop called “The Field of Reciprocity,” in which fourteen people from various international locations gathered with five facilitators to explore Amerta Movement in relation to performance, embodiment, and reciprocity with land. The workshop was organized and facilitated by Sally Dean (U.K.), Lily Kiara (Amsterdam), Julie Nathanielsz (USA), Suprpto (“Prpto”), and myself. It took place in Northern Bali, in a small ocean village called Tejakula, on land that Prpto has been stewarding for over 20 years. Prpto, a movement artist from Solo, Central Java, had connected to this land through the invitation of a colleague and local artist Pak Tusan, a Tejakula native and one a famed first-wave modern Balinese painter. Both Prpto and Pak Tusan have now passed.

In the workshop, Prpto laid out some ways to transform one’s connection with the surroundings and place, to find one’s creative inspiration, and then to apply these aspects into making live art. One of the main practices we worked with he has called *constellating*, in which each mover enlivens their senses with a place, works with the materials present, and creates a living environment to dance with and be a part of. This practice is one I will explore in this paper.

Constellating, Teja Amerta, Bali, Indonesia, 2017

⁶ For more on this, read Teves and Deloria, cited below.

I picked up the large stick, the netting, a ring of metal, and some seaweed. I found them one-by-one, debris on the seashore, receiving them through sensing, and how each piece changed in relation with one another through movement. I placed them around. I remember I was so curious, wondering how to create a sense of space that had porousness, not making a claim to space, that could change through interaction, and in fact through slowly receiving, I could sense the ways we already were in that kind of communication. I was curious about how in my practice with the objects how to relax with this receptivity, so my actions would not overtake or colonize the space where I was. I wrote:

*“A mobility that is rooted
Marking space, dimensional
With open netting as draped support
In flow”*

When one practices constellating in Amerta Movement, it emerges through receiving the surroundings, through sensing the objects, placing them, making choices about where to put them, listening to their changing relation with one another, and including oneself as part of that sensing story. Little by little through this process, there is an experience of being involved that could potentially lead to performance, ritual, or conscious action in daily life. One can feel what is outside and what is inside, how it is changeable, and the atmosphere of each creation.

Prapto was an art maverick, creating a syncretic free movement form that has been evolving for almost fifty years. Amerta Movement continues to be practiced after he passed on in December 2019, and many people —both in Indonesia and internationally— are forming its legacy and continuance. “Joged Amerta” is the term applied to Prapto’s body of shared work, and “Amerta Movement” refers to the multiplicity of practices and ways people have shared it from their own place and approaches, integrating through their own applications. Amerta Movement is rooted in a “garden sense,” that each person finds their own growing in the changing of nature-culture, and that each context, place, and environment affects the ways people grow, move and practice. So, the form looks very different in the ways it is expressed

throughout the world. It is practiced in small pockets throughout Asia, particularly Indonesia, the Americas, Australia, and Europe.



Prapto showing constellating, Tejakula, Bali, 2017

Amerta Movement grew out of Prapto's longtime practices in meditations (the Javanese form *Sumarah* and Vipassana), in movement experiments outdoors in temples and natural environments, in Javanese poetics, and as well through his own creative evolution in sharing these practices with people at home and abroad. Amerta is an intercultural movement dialogue that can be applied to many facets of life, such as performing, teaching, daily life, and movement awareness as a practice. One distinct aspect of Amerta Movement is how one moves in receptivity with the surroundings. At base it is a practice of being in relation.

The Amerta practice contains many layers of approach and techniques, all doable for people from any movement background. It is non-stylized and improvised, working with the surroundings and daily movements. The practice is guided by what unfolds amongst what is present, including the light, history, cultural context, and subtle sensing. The word *Amerta* comes from a Sanskrit *Amrta* referring to nectar or elixir. Javanese language has roots in Sanskrit due to historical and cultural migrations of Hindu imperialism during eras such as the thirteenth century Majapahit, when sultan's courts arrived in Central Java and remain until today. *Kejawen*, or the native animist traditions, live alongside Islam and so many religions today. Indonesia was colonized for 250 years under the Dutch until 1945, and contains over 6000 inhabited islands, and 800 languages. It is a syncretic culture, and one with its own colonizing complex. A quiet seaside village, Tejakula hosts a large German-owned resort and much of the shore is privatized. *Teja Amerta*, the small piece of land where we practice, holds a consecrated temple and is open to the village, so serves as a porous place for local people to spend time by the shore.

Indigenous Scholarship

I am particularly drawn to Native scholars who are embracing and defining the links between the motion of cultural practice and futurity; this resonates with and reflects movement as a phenomenon, and in this case, the Amerta practice. It relates to land and sky as a part of the constellation. In Emily Johnson and Karyn Recollet's, "Kindling and other Radical Relationalities," the Yu'pik choreographer and urban Cree scholar bring forth "radical relationality" as practices of care, as means of worlding, and how in describing land connection,

rather than activating land, “it activates us.”⁷ They further state how beings and things are in a continual process of “becoming and un-becoming, of trans-formation.” They are writing *with* relations beyond territorial acknowledgements, celestially (kinstillatory), land-ing with one another, and with land pedagogy as refuge and creation. This is relationality in motion. From the perspective of Amerta, reciprocity and constellations have qualities of receiving and offering, as well, resonating with some of the ways Johnson and Recollet refer to radical relationality.

The late scholar Carol Edelman Warrior (Alutiiq (Sugpiaq), Dena’ina Athabascan and A’aniih (Gros Ventre) descent) offers motion as a model of sovereignty and resistance.⁸ She references Gerald Vizenor who states that Natives have always been on the move, by chance, necessity, and how “transmotion is a continuous sense of visionary sovereignty.” Warrior explains how motion is not possible without interrelationship, how it implies the dynamics of change and practicing kinship. Similarly, Teves refers to Teresia Teaiwa’s theorizations of Pacific subjectivity, which defy “colonial constructions that keep Native subjectivity a singular and unmoving, exemplifying an articulation of ‘the Native’ that is fluid and complex.”⁹ She states that Pacific indigeneity has always been about movement and that tradition was always a dialogic process, fusing different elements together throughout time.

To add onto these perspectives on motion and relation, Recollet describes the unfolding of cultural life in contemporary urban Indigenous art practices as a remix, as sampling, as the “relentless combination of all things possible” as gestures of decolonial imagining.¹⁰ In

⁷ Johnson, Emily and Karyn Recollet. “Kin-dling and other Radical Relationalities.” *Movement Research Performance Journal: Sovereign Movements: Native Dance and Performance*. 52/53 (2019) 18.

⁸ Warrior, Carol Edelman, “Indigenous Collectives: A Meditation of Fixity and Flexibility.” *American Indian Quarterly* Vol 41 No 4 Fall 2017, 368-392.

⁹ Teves, Defiant Indigeneities, p 160

¹⁰ Recollet, Karyn. “Gesturing Indigenous Futurities through the Remix.” *DRJ* 48/1 April 2016, 91-105.

conversation with Professor Zoila Mendoza, Dr. Mendoza stated that the concept of *bricolage* had supported her research perspective; as an evolution from earlier viewpoints on understanding hybridizing traditional forms, *bricolage* allowed her to see what was actually going on in the cultural context of her performance and dance research in Cuzco Peru.¹¹ Once new forms are put together, she explained, there is a connection of elements made, and through observing them, “it is possible to explain the moment.”

Making art and choreographing always require some kind of collaging, be it in interactions that take place within context, bringing together people for rehearsals, in integrating movements into the bodily and sensorial experience. This aspect of bringing elements together is given awareness, space, and time in the practice *constellating*, as a moving relationality. For example, in guiding students through a practice, Prapto stated: “how do you walk, how do you put? This is also a being, not just material. How do you receive? ...Why? ...When? Not to be pulled by what you choose, and then lose space time. Don’t be sucked by movement. How your awareness still has space? How do you have quality of environment, with windows to connect with outside, in the constellation? ...Our being is the changing constellation.” With this intentionality, this connection is given space for sensorial understanding, and these then can be embodied tools for further conscious relating in motion.

This fact and power of living collage is further explored in the work of Mvskoke scholar Laura Harjo, who, like Recollet, uses the notion of futurity to describe the potentials that can come from rethinking indigeneity as affixed to a stabilized notion of land. She states, “The word *territory* has a very specific meaning related to geopolitical containers within the Western

¹¹ Mendoza, Zoila. Personal Communication, referencing Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge, 1979. April 14, 2021.

spatial imaginary of nation-states. Peoples are relegated to fixed and bound spaces. Futurity can help us rethink such notions. As a key to the making of meaning, resistance, social movements, and imaginaries, futurity moves across and plays out on many potential scales—a regional set of processes, the body, a household, star constellations, soundscapes, or smellscape.”¹² This extending of meaning making to include all manners of environment loosens fixity, invites imagination and creative practice, relates with motion. In fact, Karyn Recollet, an adoptee, explains that so many Indigenous people are already from the conditions of their life, are already living in futurity, through their surviving and thriving in the apocalyptic times of settler-colonialism.¹³ Kim Tallbear puts forth the phrase “spatial narrative of change,” refusing linear notions of time and places, rather orienting towards a web of relations. Constellating may be a companion practice to the lived experiences of Native movements and futurity.

In practicing constellating, one that is receptive while simultaneously agential, engaging in a prefiguration by enacting a world, and bringing the present into presence. It is a model for relationality and movement, and also one that affords performance action and the performers of that action to be in care and openness.

Amerta, Culture, and the Collage

“How giving time, space, place can stimulate each other. Finding a way for one’s own human nature, not fanatic for own way, but open society, interculture.”¹⁴

—SUPRAPTO SURYODARMO

¹² Harjo, Laura. *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2018. 32.

¹³ Recollet, Karyn. “When Future Falls are Imminent: The Moves and Returns of Scoop Choreography of the Fall.” The University of Winnipeg Weweni Indigenous Scholars Speaker Series. November 13, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PzTpAJxHvc>

¹⁴ Suprpto Suryodarmo, Workshop, August 25, 2019. Abeliona, Greece.

Amerta Movement is an intercultural practice. Its roots come from Prapto's improvising outside of the norms of traditional movement and creating his own form. This syncretism was influenced in part by his conversations with people internationally with whom he practices. The work is also based in movement dialogue, that we are *already in communication*. Over the decades, Prapto has developed approaches to how he shares the work that invite intercultural communication, and his workshops most often involve rich dialogue with the communities where they take place, in relation to people and indigenous artistic communities that he has developed over decades, specifically with the intention of non-violence and growing in understanding.¹⁵ The movement practice is an invitation to receive a place, connect, and listen, then after that a quality of greeting, and then from there, through movement finding what one can offer.¹⁶ This provides practical tools for intercultural communication that do not rely on boundaries, territorialism, nor fixity but rather what I am coming to understand as "relationality in motion." Prapto's work specifically works through movement in lessening a sense of "authority of territory" and from this, how to be egalitarian, reparative, in sharing time.¹⁷

This workshop was set up by international artists on foreign land. We worked to interact, learn from, and contribute to the community, and were hosted through Prapto's long term connections and a slow process of building relationships. The truth is, the set-up has elements uncomfortably close to cultural tourism, so it is from there that we were in an inquiry about decolonization. Part of my contribution in this setting was to offer practices for interaction with the village and place, and as an Indonesian-speaker amongst the foreign facilitators, to be a translator for our communications with the community. In the years that I have studied with

¹⁵ Suprpto Suryodarmo, p.c. January 18, 2017, Tejakula, Bali.

¹⁶ Suprpto Suryodarmo, Amerta Teachers Gathering and Open Market, September 16, 2019.

¹⁷ Suprpto Suryodarmo, p.c. January 18, 2017, Tejakula, Bali.

Prapto in Indonesia, I have had to reflect on the asymmetries of being a person from the U.S. in Southeast Asia, coming to learn a practice born in Java, and no matter how much I learn the language, invest in conversation, and offer to local projects, the implicit power imbalances of that dynamic remain. I bring this up to identify the inherent challenge in this project; the more I deeply connect with Indonesia and Amerta, the more I see my own limitations and the challenges that these relations bring. This is a factor in relationality in motion, in the inherent inequities of global motions.

And at the same time, to call forth an idea of movability and futurity is an invitation to also see how these relations grow over time, develop meaning, and can offer new visions for intercultural exchange, with a consciousness of the elements of right relationship. This tension is well articulated in Philip Joseph Deloria's *Playing Indian*, in which the Standing Rock Sioux scholar articulates another facet of the potential challenges in cultural mixing. He explains the potential for cultural practice when liberated from their social moorings can become "as open and unfixed as a sign could be."¹⁸ This is a challenge of postmodern aesthetics, hybridity, and of action not rooted in an ethical relationship with land. Settler-colonialism is both a structural operation, but also something that is practiced, and reflexivity of one's position is but one step in orienting towards upending asymmetrical relations of power. Movement and performance can provide practice in social relations and help to form and constellate the ways we want the world to be. The sensitivities that emerge through constellating can offer a piece in this puzzle. Out of this workshop, constellating, and the conversations at this time, I have been developing and offering practices called *New Landings*, in which I work with groups of people to practice

¹⁸ Deloria, Philip Joseph. *Playing Indian* New Haven: Yale University Press (1998).166.

movement dialogue specifically with the intention of addressing and unsettling settler-colonialism while practicing through movement relations with place.

My experience in writing this paper demonstrates to me a kind of constellating, how there are these pieces of ideas, and when I sit with them, receive them, put them down on the page, see how they live together, new constellative connections emerge that did not exist before. For example, through placing together the ideas around relationality and movement, I have been noticing how this loosening is somehow analogous to the very process I experience sensorially in constellating, a loosening with the fixity, the objectivity of "things" and more into the spaciousness, the motion, and the breathing of all the facets of a body-moving-being. So, I could see how constellating is a kind of practice of futurity that can be shared.

Epilogue: Where this is leading my practice and research

Constellating as relationality in motion leading me to a series of practices where I live on Unceded Ohlone land in what is called West Berkeley. The West Berkeley Ohlone Shellmound has been a place of ceremony and ancestral reverence over the millennia. With the vast heritage region now a private parking lot surrounded by a fence and barbed wire, it is considered one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historical Places, and yet also continues to be a zone of contestation, recently surrounded by fencing by developers. It's an embodiment of dispossession and a denial of sovereignty. What was the bay when surrounded by over 420 Shellmounds, and how can this be honored? After seeing artist Indira Allegra's performance at Lake Merritt a few weeks ago, I imagined the red material that was used for connection in their piece to transduce into weaving, heartbeat, and blood on the sacred Ohlone land. Over the course of a few days by text and then together live, artists Bay Laurel, Jubilee July, and I put together this constellation. These two collaborators are both inspired time-earth creatures and we came up with this expression altogether.



Indira Allegra, Corresponding Sites. Photos by Chani Bockwinkel



Re-constellating with the red web, photo by MG