Arts Integration for Social-Environmental Transformation of Wetland Communities
Valdivia, Chile
Middlebury College
Hannah Ennis, USA

Summary
The project aimed to gather communities centered around Valdivian wetlands to explore ecologies of care, drawing from arts integration methodologies and embodied practices to reweave pathways towards a greater form of sustainability for social-ecological well-being. While practicing the art of facilitation, a team of eight facilitators hosted a series of movement-based workshops for all ages, schoolchildren through seniors, to learn and reflect through the moving body and create new knowledges together.

Project Description
We are living in a moment of immense climate and societal change, with overlapping systemic issues and wicked problems that present entangled intricacies. Creating a more just and sustainable world requires not just small changes, but fundamental changes in our social-ecological systems. These are transformations. To do this, it is necessary to challenge current ways of thinking, knowing, and communicating. It is necessary to understand each other in new ways to create different paths forward. Developing creative approaches to communication – how we talk about, identify, define communal problems and further how we engage with them and one another in community – was one of the main goals identified in this project.

This workshop series was designed using the principles of arts integration to incorporate movement practices, drawing and written reflection tools, to engage with participants beyond traditional conversation. I learned the majority of these practices and approaches from Lida Winfield and the Middlebury College Dance Department. In creative environments, we are encouraged to try new things, ask questions of each other, and discover answers together. When present in our bodies, we are asked to think on our feet and understand our lived experiences are never separate from the way we move through the world. Workshop spaces, when facilitated with trust and intention, are spaces of imagination where participants can come together to meet, exchange ideas and create new knowledges. The approach of embodiment is known to expand intercultural communication and interdisciplinary problem-solving, and this workshop series departed from traditional hierarchies of conflict management, to reorient participants to one another, deepening the skills of whole-body listening and empathy.

This peacebuilding project aimed to bridge intergenerational connections between communities, bringing people together who were geographically centered around similar conflicts, but may have been fragmented in their viewpoints to the issue itself. I believe we need more spaces where there is no right answer. Where there is not a predetermined value of participants nor expected results, and where we can grant people agency to arrive at answers on their own. Gathering people in an emergent process, without ideas of where it will go is transformational work and cultivating a sense of collective agency over issues is an integral part to peacemaking. To face the climate crisis, we need to reimagine the communal landscape of place and be able to re-envision our own place within it.

Across a series of fifteen workshops with participants of all ages, Valdivian community members embodied social-ecological transformation and explored questions of ways to organize to respond to complex problems and repair harm from environmental crises. We asked questions such as, how should I respond to my community and myself in a time of climate crisis? What can and what should socio-ecological collaboration look like? What is the role of collective agency in transforming our environments? In Valdivia, a growing city, wetlands are often conflicted territories. However the root of the
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problem does not lie in how the land is used, but it is the way in which inhabitants learn to relate to and identify with land itself. Exploring big questions such as these helped to cultivate a sense of place and responsibility over place, ideally enabling participants to act as empowered agents for change in the process of transformation within wetland zones. Embodied movement served as the vehicle to connect us with our environment, express ourselves intentionally, and understand ourselves through all the complexity. It allows for us to explore how my connection to place lives within me, and in fold, I can express myself through my movements, and hear another’s (dis)connection through their movements.

Originally, we had planned to host many of our workshops outside, understanding the connection to people’s specific “home” environments as integral to connecting with the project. However, given Valdivia’s rainy climate due to many days of winter weather, we held a number of the workshops indoors. This shifted our practice to be focused more on perceptions of our environment that we carry within our bodies and our ability to respond to each other in shared spaces.

The host site for this project was Valdivia, Chile, where I had the opportunity to study and live abroad for one year prior to returning with Projects for Peace. Valdivia is built around and upon an extensive wetland ecosystem, and has been a site for some of the largest environmental actions and mobilizations in Chile. The urban wetlands of Valdivia are cherished by the communities who live here, and also have been a focus of long-standing territorial disputes. The main community partner, the Center for Wetlands, is the only wetlands center in the nation, and was born from the collective action response to the environmental devastation from an industrial plant covertly draining toxic chemicals into River Cruces, which flows down directly into Valdivia from the north. This organization epitomizes how conservation, education, and social-ecological thinking can be tools for peacemaking.

The project grew from and was rooted in local relationships and would not have resulted without the support of community partners, especially, the Rio Cruces Center for Wetlands. The workshops were only possible by virtue of the dedication and commitment of an incredible transdisciplinary team of artists, ecologists, scientists, dancers and those in-between, who each brought forth regional knowledges and individual expertise to the work. I am in deepest gratitude to the facilitation team, Ama Salin Moreno, Vald Gallardo, Rob Lovera Borquez, Nahomi Manríquez, Chio Rodríguez, and Nico Proschle, and the main mentor and inspiration for this work, Marcela Márquez-García.

Besides the Project for Peace funds, no other fundraising efforts contributed to this project. However, there remains many opportunities to continue collaborating and working on similar projects that invoke rethinking our relationship to place and transformations in social-ecological systems. This project offered just one pathway in a multitude of other possibilities for deepening creative intelligences for community conflict transformation in the face of anthropogenic climate change.

These workshops were designed to serve as a stepping stone for those working with Social-Transformation Labs (T-Labs) planned for Valdivia’s wetland zones. T-labs are innovative spaces designed to foster collective agency as a means to positively transform a social-ecological system. The Transformation Labs will continue this year in Valdivia’s Angachilla Wetlands and this project aided in training and preparing facilitators, as well as creatively equipping participants for the laboratories to come. The explorations from this project will live on with facilitators who can continue this work in a variety of ways.
Reflection

I understand peace as a process, it is the way in which we strive to live with one another and show up for one another. I understand part of this process is a formation of preparedness. In the wake of major climate catastrophes, peace is part of the process of reparations and justice needed.

I personally, am interested in the art of facilitation, in the careful words of adrienne maree brown not only holding space but holding change. I believe that in this urgent moment of change, it is necessary to create intentional spaces for play, for connection, for communicating beyond the traditional forms of speaking, and for seeing each other. The late activist, Grace Lee Boggs, asks us, “what time is it on the clock of the world?” A question of awakening and orientation to the present, to take note of the global moment we are in. Workshop spaces, dance spaces, transformation labs, spaces of creativity, of gathering, are crucial in the moments when we are existing in many disparate lives. How can we not only come together, but exchange knowledge and thoughts and heart and imagine how we want to live together now and in the future. Activist Rigoberta Menchu says, “this world is not going to change unless we are willing to change ourselves.” I believe that through engaging with each other in new ways, we created small shifts in the ways that we view and conceptualize communication and understanding. By understanding movement as a choice, we explored the simplicity and complexity of how choices impact others. Many educators and artists attended workshops and with them took seeds to bring back to their own practices.

One of the primary obstacles to this work is that we all have bodies. It is uncomfortable work. It is intense work to be embodied, present, and seen by others in a shared space. It is challenging work to hold space for others to be present in themselves. Our bodies hold much more than we are given credit for in our day to day lives. Bodies are complicated and carry all of our life experiences, all of our sorrows and joys. However, the experience of being in a body is what connects us to each other and to greater awareness of our environments. Embodied work requires calculated risk-taking, leaving known comforts, and navigating uncharted waters that lead us to be clear in our intentions and accountable to each other. Designing movement-based workshops asked not for physical fitness of participants, but rather deep, physical presence, and proved to be the biggest ongoing challenge of this project that called for careful attention to details, clarity of intention, and trust.

My project has challenged me to engage with people in ways that spark new ways of thinking, relating, and connecting. With complex intercultural dialogues, I am inspired to use movement more as a primary language for listening and conversing. I am inspired to continue practicing facilitation and learning alternate ways to navigate intricate problems.

Personal Statement

Throughout this project, I so much valued learning from others and collaborating on many different aspects. As a team, we encountered moments that were untranslatable, by virtue of criss-crossing languages, differing cultural references, or varying social contexts of understanding, although from these moments, I take with me the inspiration that beyond the limits of words, our intention and deep listening, our desire for collaboration and connection, acts of care and radical empathy all live in the body and can be expressed and seen in a multitude of ways past what we conceive to be possible.