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# Fragile Edges: Dance as a Provocation for Human-ness

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**Abstract**

This paper reflects on what dance reveals about the notion of "human-ness" at a time when globalization could be understood as defining humanity in terms of bound, isolated bodies that generate capital, are fixed by borders, and recognized through surveillance. Rather than treating humans as a bounded interior essence of a bodied-self, I suggest it emerges at the edge, where sense of self meets otherness. I suggest dance offers conversation at the periphery of self, where perceived othernesses are met (floor, music, another dancer). In dancing, the self becomes most discernible at points of encounter with texture, rhythm, and trajectory. Human-ness, then, is not form/possession but relational. Drawing on Sylvia Wynter's critique of the colonial figure of "Man," within the notion of 'human', and Timothy Morton's concepts of hyperobjects and ecological entanglement, which challenge bounded scales of human perception, I position dance as a practice that unsettles narrow categories of the human. I discuss dance as a method to unearth epistemologies of the edge, articulating humanness as intra-active and ecological, constituted through relation rather than containment. In this framing, the edge of globalization reveals an urgent fragility and the hopeful possibility of other genres of being human: relational, porous, and responding to ecological and historical entanglements. I suggest that dance as a method of moving together discloses an opportunity to reevaluate humanness and consider a definition of 'to be human' that is an action and an ever-emerging practice of being in relation.

**Keywords:** dance; Human; edge; ecological; ballet

## 1. Introduction

I am dancing by the small stream that runs near the train station. It is a natural stream that persists despite being entombed by the concrete of London: running between brick walls and tarmac roads. Stream reflects the seasons, gorged after days it has rained; briefly housing the odd migrating bird. Recently, there was a beautiful live white heron stalking through its waters. Then a white tiger, a large discarded stuffed toy, stranded by the minimal flow of water in the stream until the tiger disappeared after a rainy night's current moved it on. As I often have to walk hurriedly past the stream on the way to the train station, which is a late-morning's-run away from departing trains, I always call out a greeting to stream[1]. Stream is a London-based friend, I am continually interested to see what it is getting up to. Today I am dancing by it as part of my ongoing practice of dancing in the city (Akinleye 2021, 2022). I twirl, extending my arms, tracing a ribbon-like figure eight in the air above my head. The sky is a bright blue after a damp evening the night before, I hear the babble of the water swelled by yesterday's rain. I balance on one leg, leaning into my hip to instigate a step forward, and I catch myself with another turn. This time, as I raise my arms, echoing the previous figure-eight-like movement, I scrape the back of my fingers on a brick wall running alongside stream. I do not realise it straight away, but I

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am bleeding. I have left blood on the wall. When I stop dancing and look at my hand, I see fraying flesh glistening with grey granular sand-like particles that are the resin of brick wall, mixed with blood and skin.

In this paper, Fragile Edges, I want to discuss what it is to be of human-ness, a question I feel is important to continually reconsider as we move deeper into the 21st century's ecological and political landscapes. I am suggesting that dance, as a felt method of physically moving together[2], discloses an opportunity to reevaluate the notion of *human*: leading me to consider dance is a mode of inquiry into human-ness. This is an opportunity, through dance, to consider the activity of 'human-ness' as an ever-emerging physics of relationality. I begin with two heuristics that provide working orientations through which to outline the methodological framing of my work and the later discussion.

## 2. Heuristic One: Relational Paradigm

The philosophical paradigm or worldview I work from is relational. I begin by referring to this relational paradigm, as it is important to understand the philosophy of the discussions that follow, which is a relational wheel where the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological underpin each other (Wilson 2008). For instance, the epistemological (what we know from something) provides the ontology of what it is as much as the ontology (what it is) provides an episteme (Lear et al. 2021), because in the relational paradigm, things do not exist independently of relationship. This emphasis on relationality is clearly stated in the Lakota *Mitákuye Oyás'iŋn—we are all related/all my relations* (Chipps and Chiat 2003; Lakota Language Consortium 2008). I understand this philosophical paradigm through having danced, participating in ceremonial dances on Turtle Island that reveal themselves as physical calligraphies of the intra-connection of the lived experience. I also draw on my Yoruba genealogy through which I have the cellular remembrances, where *Aṣẹ*/*Ashé* acknowledges the continual flow of an interconnected world. Yoruba ceremonial dances, as Lakota dances, mentor and orchestrate understanding of the lived experience and reveal to the dancer connections beyond the other humans dancing with them into a network of all. I am not offering these dances as *evidence*[3] for the viability of this first proposition of a networked universe, '*I am because we are*' (Ubuntu). Rather, I am making the point that even though I am using writing and citing other writing to discuss this, for me, it is through dancing that this philosophy was primarily revealed. However, the relational paradigm underpinning this work is not just gained through dance; it is also discussed in the *intra-action* of quantum physics (Barad 2007) and *transaction* within pragmatism through John Dewey (Dewey and Bentley 1949) or is illustrated through notions of assemblage (DeLanda 1997; Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and, most significantly, the relationality of an intra-connected reality underpinning theoretical frameworks derived from many Afro and Indigenous Elders and worldviews[4] (Kimmerer 2013; Wilson 2008): we are all related in a network where the knower and known are not independent of each other (Dewey and Bentley 1949). Therefore, I am writing from within a relational paradigm: lived experience is to be part of an intra-connected network, a networked reality, *Mitákuye Oyás'iŋn.*

## 3. Heuristic Two—Dance Lives Across the Network

I am standing on the grass watching the small concrete amphitheatre where a university initiation is about to happen[5]. Music is playing, and people in the crowd are soul-line dancing, steps that are reflected in small indicators of movement by the people on the stage. A twitch in the foot at a point in the beat shows me the person fixing the microphone height is also aware of the change in direction the dance calls for at that moment in the music. A moment that the dancers on the grass also answer. I am unfamiliar with the sequence of steps that are being echoed around the grass and stage, but I am moving my hips in time

with the steps. People drop in and out of conversation then, dancing, they catch-up steps, spins, and flourishes which carry meaning because of when they are done, where they are done, and who is doing them. The dance seeps across the crowd, the stage, the grass. You could not say it lived in one body but rather lives across the assemblage of the moment.

The *human*[6] is often conceived as bounded and self-contained, yet through dance, this boundedness begins to loosen. In movement, at the moments where bodies meet and respond to one another and their environments, the experience of the moment is encountered through movement. Dancing, there is no still point or container for establishing self, other than in relation: to the music, other dancers, the floor, the coming and going of air/breath, and so on. Dancing, we catch the rhizome of the vibe (Glissant and Wing 1997; Moten 2003), drop into the groove (DeFrantz 2004), and stimulate the mirror neuron of kinaesthetic empathy (Sheets-Johnstone 1984). Dance travels across the network, creating tangible relations between people and things in order to manifest.

To summarize heuristic one and two: everything is a part of a relational network of entities. We become aware of our presence in it all through emergent, dynamic encounters at our perceived edges, bringing awareness to presence within the assemblage of the moment according to our capacity to envision our connectedness. Dance extends our capacity to perceive the networked reality because it sensually moves across bodies, environments, and spaces, creating narratives and logics through highlighting computations of rhythms and relationships across it all. This leads me to suggest that we can explore and question what human/humanness means in a networked reality through dance knowledges.

## 4. Part One: Human

### *4.1. Choreographing Presence in the Narrative of 'Human'*

I am making a story ballet called *Sycorax's Tempest*[7] as a response to Sylvia Wynter's text, *Afterword: Beyond Miranda's Meaning; Un/silencing the 'Demonic Grounds' of Caliban's 'Woman'* (Wynter 1990), which draws on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In the essay, Wynter uses *The Tempest* to illustrate her proposition of Man1 and Man2 and their impact on the notion of the Human, which I discuss below.

Although Wynter does not explicitly deal with Sycorax in *Afterword: Beyond Miranda's Meaning*, Sycorax is evoked as part of Wynter's discussion of the possibility of Caliban's 'Woman'. Caliban is who he is because he is the child of his mother (Sycorax), and in being so, Caliban embodies a schema of being that is savage, a monster/of a witch. Wynter writes,

> *'Caliban, as an incarnation of a new category of the human, that of the subordinate: "irrational" and "savage" native is now constituted as the lack of the "rational" Prospero, and the now capable-of-rationality-Miranda, by the Otherness of his/its physiognomic "monster" difference…'* (Wynter 1990, p. 358)

I am seduced by Wynter's work because I want to choreographically explore what the connecting/embodied/empathy nature of dance brings to the human/monster/witch contexts of *The Tempest*'s story. I am further drawn to *The Tempest* as a text from 1600 England at a time when who could be Human/Man1 was being weaponized in the West, as Wynter discusses.

Disembodied in *The Tempest* in the 1600s, Sycorax is understood to be an Algerian (Black) woman who has come to form part of the canon of invisible Black women I navigate myself as a Black woman in the quotidian of the Western 21st century. Never present in the play, Sycorax is still the keystone who gives all the rest of the characters their Human/non-Human, rational/savage, non-slave/slave identities (for instance, Caliban is a monster because his mother is Sycorax. Prospero is the master of Caliban and the island because Sycorax is Caliban's mother, Ariel is a slave because of a debt owed to Prospero in relation to Sycorax's previous spell, and so on). Choreographing in conversation with Wynter's text, I

focus on Sycorax in terms of bringing her back from her absence. As I researched the work and the period it was written, I discovered 'Maria', a Black woman who is briefly written about in original documentation from Sir Francis Drake's late-1500 voyages (Marmery n.d.). The documentation is held at the British Library, UK. Maria was a Black woman left pregnant on an island, the premise that underpins Sycorax in *The Tempest*. In the play Prospero describes how a 'hag was hither brought with child, And here was left by the sailors…' Act 1 Scene ii lines 267–268. The sailor's journal in the British Library reads:

> *'Drake tooke… a proper negro wench called Maria, which was afterward gotten with child between the captaine and his men pirates, and sett on a small iland to take her adventure.'* (16th-century manuscript known as the "Anonymous Narrative" located in the British Library's extensive collection of 16th-century maritime manuscripts, London.)[8]

'Maria' was a woman who was captured from another ship by Drake (1540/43–1596) and sailed on his ship, the *Golden Hind*, before being left pregnant on an island as described above. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (first performed in 1611), Sycorax was a pregnant woman left 'alone' on an island. My interest in dance as embodied knowledge was stirred by the physical absence of Sycorax from her own story, *The Tempest*, and the possibility that, of all the characters in the play, she was directly inspired by a real embodied person. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's 'critical fabulation' (Hartman 2008, p. 11), I found myself turning to dance as the method for exploring the embodied reality and physical presence of Sycorax.

Thus, my ballet tells the story of *The Tempest* from the perspective of Sycorax, a mother who wants to oversee the freedom of her child, Caliban, and the island. In my story ballet, Sycorax takes on a responsibility of care for the land and 'spirits' of the land. Sycorax's goal is for Caliban, the spirits, and the land to be free when harmony is restored in Prospero's relationships with his countrymen. The ballet places Sycorax back into her story, both as mother and as a *being* of the island where she is buried. Acknowledging that I come from an Indigenous background, where traditional dances are embodied scripts for how to be with the land, artistically I am drawn to the link between femininity and land to explore dramaturgically. I am aware that the European colonial project has collapsed Indigenous women and Indigenous land as metaphors for each other. In *A Recognition of Being: reconstructing native womanhood,* Kim Anderson (Anderson 2000) describes how both women and land have been treated as *things* that can be possessed, thus objectified, rather than part of the equality a relational networked reality assumes.

> 'The Euro-constructed image of Native women, therefore, mirrors Western attitudes towards the earth. Sadly, this relationship has typically developed within the context of control, conquest, possession, and exploitation.' (Anderson 2000, p. 100).

I am choreographically interested in how ballet can tell broader stories within the familiar narratives that construct a Western vantage point as the view from which the past and future can be understood. In *Sycorax's Tempest*, the tempest storm and subsequent encounters on the island, culminating in Prospero, Miranda, and the shipwrecked characters leaving, are orchestrated by Sycorax with the support of women who have died in the Atlantic Ocean as the 'spirits' of the island. I am particularly interested in what Shakespeare describes, through Prospero, as *spirits,* "Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves;" (Act V Scene i, line 34). I wonder how the Indigenous peoples living on islands *discovered* by Europeans in the 1500s might have appeared to the sailors who encountered them. Shakespeare's *spirits* are closely linked to the island's *untamable magic*: the people and land, the women and land to be tamed. In the *monster* Caliban's monologue describing

how to relate to the island, Caliban says, "Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not" (The Tempest, Act 3, Scene ii).

In the previous two paragraphs, I have attempted to show how *The Tempest* constructs and unevenly distributes the category of the Human across its characters. While during my research for the choreography, I have found that those figures excluded from the Human designation are precisely the ones most likely to be grounded in experiences from 'real' people's lives (Sycorax/Maria). This resonates with Wynter, who asks us to notice how the term *Human* names a historically produced and exclusionary category, one that is invented to organize and withhold rights and agencies.

### *4.2. Dancing Human-Ness*

*The Tempest*, amongst the last of Shakespeare's plays, was written alongside the current affairs of early 1600s England, when the *discovery* of new worlds was how countries in Europe were defining themselves and their power. This discovery of worlds new to Europeans seemed to go hand in hand with sustained attempts to collapse the existing worlds they encountered. I feel[9] Shakespeare was exploring the implications, dislocations, and forgivenesses that needed to be considered in 1611, as stories, rumours, and riches were beginning to seep into England from worlds new. I note to myself that Shakespeare was writing before the following 400 years of colonisation through European expansionism; he seems to have been commenting on the dissonance of relational shift injected into Europe's sense of identity as it realized it was part of a larger world. Thus, my ballet asks *what relationships do we cultivate to hold the fractures of collapse as worlds collide?* This, from the narrative of *The Tempest* as Old World attempts to collide with the New World, as well as from the perspective of the time I am choreographing in now, as capitalism attempts to collapse environmental ecologies. *What preparations does Sycorax help Prospero conjure in order for him to be forgiven (including by her and the island) in order to hold the fractures?* These choreographic stimuli from the 1600 story are questions I see reflected in the present moment, when climate change and ecological disasters could be the legacy of fractured worlds our generation is known for. From my "*I am because we are*" ontology, the political, social, or environmental collapse of the one cannot occur without transforming the whole. As 1600s Europe sought to claim and destroy, its actions demanded a reconfiguration of itself, one that could justify and sustain such violence. It is at this moment of the European Renaissance that Sylvia Wynter suggests *Man1* emerged.

Wynter begins to explain Man1 by explaining the use of *Man*, suggesting that in mainstream Western thinking and Settler mentality, the concept of human and the notion of man are conflated. '…our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western Bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, … overrepresents itself as if it were human itself…' (Wynter 2003, p. 260). Wynter explains that Man is not just a general gender construct but a specific kind of Man (White, straight, able-bodied and not working class). Thus, anyone who does not present as Man (White, straight, able-bodied, and not working class) is also tasked with proving the legitimacy of their being called *human*.

> '…our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earths resources…these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human Struggle.' (Wynter 2003, p. 261).

Man1 came about in the European Renaissance as Europe's expansionist project legitimized itself with the Rational Man as opposed to the irrational savage who could then be treated as less-than-Human. This is illustrated in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* through Prospero, a rational man of books, rightfully ruling and owning Caliban, an irrational monster, by way of his mother Sycorax. Wynter explains that Man2 comes about as a response to

Darwinian and scientific racism frameworks of the Western Enlightenment. Man2 is the evolution of Man1 into a biologized, racialized subject (Gould 1996) of the (Settler) state: a human by way of 'homopolitical, or the political subject of the state' (Wynter 2003, p. 269). As I choreograph for the ballet, I find myself reflecting on the embodiment of Sycorax. Of course, Sycorax does not belong to Wynter's Man1 or Man2; rather, she is produced as the ground against which these genres of the Human come into coherence, her absence structuring their claim to universality. By putting her on the stage physicalized in the dance I am drawing on the mirror neuron, the shared embodied textures of dance to claim her. Dance allows her to be seen within contexts of human-ness because dance can only speak through and across the network of humans-in-world-around.

As I find the physicalized language of dance to express *Sycorax's Tempest*, I reflect on how Man1 and Man2 appeared because of the fragility of the edge of European expansion. Man1 and then Man2 gatekeep the *edge* where Europe was meeting other-than-Europe. I have suggested elsewhere (Akinleye and Kindred 2026, pp. 70–76) that the proliferation of constructing 'centre' as an original authority and 'periphery' in relation only to being a less concentrated and less developed marginal of the centre comes from the insecurities of the European expansionist project. Building on this, Man1 and Man2 attempt to guard the edges of the ethnoclass, citing their assumed humanness as their authority, while calculating humanness on the physical attributes of beings and yet remaining ephemerally disembodied by their eugenic 'perfection'.

My point in this paper is that dance happens at the perceived edges where dancer meets otherness. It embraces the touch point of self with otherness because that is where dance becomes tangibly experienced. I feel dance has always negated a fear of the fragile edge: the fear that draws on the need to guard humanity with Man1 and Man2. Dance invites human-ness to be witnessed; it invites connection, hence the historical regulation and banning of dances (Ehrenreich 2007), particularly Indigenous dances (Trask 1993) and diasporic dances (Thompson 2014). I find dance provokes descriptions of human-ness because dance foregrounds the relational fragility of the edge as nothing to be afraid of; rather dance ratifies and acknowledges the edge of perceived 'self' (individual, state, and so on) with otherness as relational, supple, porous, and fluid.

*Sycorax's Tempest* involves knowledge gained through building choreography in the studio, this is practice-as/is-research that began with the question of how I embody Sycorax through the tactility of choreography. Through dance scores that attend to the *edge*, where bodies meet, yield, and are re-formed, the work has asked how human-ness comes into being through the encounters of dance. What is feared as the fragile edge[10] of humanity becomes, through dance, the very place where human-ness is made in relation. It is precisely because dance engages the edges between self-ness and other-ness, experienced as fragile, that it offers an opportunity to reevaluate what human-ness means beyond the political weaponization of the Human category that Sylvia Wynter describes.

Dancing by the stream, I put my bloody hand to my mouth in the hope of stopping it from bleeding. For a moment, I taste the sand of wall in the metallic of blood. The stream's flow keeps rhythm for me. I look at the blood on the wall and touch the mark, and this begins a new dance, leaning into the wall, balancing weight with wall, moving to the babble of stream, leaving traces of movement as red droplets on pavement and wall. The dance continues.

## 5. Part Two: An Opportunity to Reevaluate Human-ness

As Sylvia Wynter suggests, the figure of Human emerges not as a neutral description of the person but as a historically specific construct that comes to present Man as if it were the Human itself. This overrepresentation is not incidental but bound to the conditions of European expansionism, where encounters with otherness destabilized the assumed

boundaries of the Human. At these edges, where bodies, lands, and worlds met, the category of the Human required reinforcement. Man1 and then Man2 can thus be understood as mechanisms that harden the invitation of a fragile edge, guarding the boundary of Human through political, biological, and epistemic means. This rejects the animacy of the network of *Mitákuye Oyás'iŋn*. Because within the relational paradigm I outlined above (Heuristic One) all parts of the network have animacy because the network is animate. This includes, for instance, the agency of rivers (Macfarlane 2025), forests (Kohn 2013), or fungi (Ostendorf-Rodríguez and González 2023).

In the dance studio in preparation for rehearsals, I explore movement phrases and scores, dancing with the studio wall as a collaborator, finding movement and balance that I can only experience as/with wall. I try to cultivate my physicality to attend to what the encounter asks of me as I am a part of the whole, as wall and I do what I experience as dance. Dancing this attendance is different from writing about it because there are shared physicalities, for instance, of balance and shape of me and wall that are not captured in words. *In Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teaching of plants*, Kimmerer (2013) writes 'English doesn't give us many tools for incorporating respect for animacy. In English, you are either a human or a thing' p. 56. Kimmerer notes, 'The arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be a human.' p. 57. Dance offers a way of inhabiting the edge of my own animacy. Dance, which lives across the network, supports me somatically, asking to notice other animacies. My moving body is then less a boundary to defend and more a generative, fragile site where human-ness is continually formed through relation. My edge is fragile because it is always shifting; within a networked universe, it exists only as a perception of otherness, moving as my capacity to sense the whole expands or contracts.

Following Wynter, the Human seems to be more of a social, political conceptual weapon than a description of a lived experience. In the dance studio, I start with the memory of stream and bricks, sand and blood as I seek to choreograph Sycorax's humanity, drawing on the experience of dancing there by the stream. I have a scab on my knuckles now. I spin in the dance studio, arms making a figure eight as I did by the stream, and I remember myself smeared across the wall as blood and, at the same time, remember the taste of sand as wall became into my mouth. I experience dance as across the network (of my human-ness and things and environment). Dancing unsettles human-ness as contained singularities. I wonder about whether the notion of *human being* can be approached as hyperobject-like[11]. Timothy Morton's concepts of hyperobjects and ecological entanglement are of objects so large that we can only ever encounter them partially and entangled in our lives, such as the sum of all the Styrofoam or plastic bags in the world (Morton 2013, p. 1). Morton discusses hyperobjects as *'profoundly different temporalities than'* the everyday scales we are used to (Morton 2013, p. 1). By suggesting Human as hyperobject-like I am tentatively suggesting the notion of *Human* creates temporalities and dimensions that are profoundly different from the intraconnected lived experience of humanity.

Morton describes how the scale of hyperobjects challenges our perception. For Human to be hyperobject-like, I propose there is no position of complete comprehension from which we fully perceive Human or its impact. Hence, I ponder whether *Human* as a social/political (Wynter) mass on a scale we have no concept of is hyperobject-like, even as we proclaim or attempt to prove that we deserve to be a part of it. I reflect that though I might be included in the notion of Human at times, I am unaware[12] of how the people in other places become temporarily excluded or included in Human, or how the scale of Humans grows/shrinks, and pulses through moments of political, social, and ecological expansion and contraction. I am also unaware of when the debris I initiate or where the ooze of my excretions (bodily fluids, hair, nails) stops being a part of me

(as Human) and/or becomes Human, or how its Human life continues and ends up (my hair may be worn as a wig by someone else to ease them into looking appropriately Human somewhere else). At what point is the blood I left on the wall by the stream no longer become Human and/or stops being Human? The Human Tissue Act (UK) of 2004 regulates a kind of ownership of human tissue and cells, but it does not speak to how they represent or are understood as composing Human. Some places of human blood remain a part of the hyperobject-like entity of Human, such as the royal blood that defines the Tower of London, while other sites of blood from people are not included in the hyperobject-like entity of Human, such as nameless places in towns where Black bodies bled. Similarly, turning 'inward', we seem to be visitors in our 'Human' bodily systems (Tallis 2008). We seem unaware of activities, such as digestion and when and how much bacteria are interacting in our guts. Seemingly, we are only aware of the impact of our presence at specific thresholds of change: when there is unexpected pain in the gut, or when there are thousands of discarded Human clothes washed up on Ghana beaches for instance. Even then, if the pain subsides with painkillers and the beaches stop being in the news there is little sense of Human post the event of briefly recognising it. Human as hyperobject-like (unable to comprehend its own scale) is the notion of Human as distributed to bodies, social structures, temporalities, and historiographies.

Thus, the notion of Human is encountered in fragmented narratives that are attempting to stabilize something (human-ness) that cannot be delimited because human-ness is relational (it is *I am because we are*). The notion of Human is driven by a fear of the fragile edges that indicate connection and thus a responsibility to where those edges appear. Then my dancing is an attempt to '*not be Human*'. Rather, it is an attempt from within the limits of my human-ness to respond to the experience of encounter (floor, music, air, and so on). Dance helps me move at the fragile edge where I sense myself through the rhythmic relationships that blur into each other as I move in and through realizations of relationality. Dance offers a mode of human-ness other than the specific model of Human, historically shaped by a Western need to guard humanity as a property, something that can be possessed, denied, or attributed. Dance offers a mode of encounter, where human(ness) is not a noun but a happening, arising in the movement between bodies/things, in the unstable, fragile, and generative edges of relation.

I start to circle the dance studio, hopping, skipping, and turning in a repeated circle around the room. I ponder, as I circle, moving across entities, environments, and forces, dance inhabits the fragile edges where I am continually formed. Breathing: heavy particles reflected in the light disappear down my nostrils as I catch my breath. In moments of contact, where movement is shared, yielded, and reconfigured, my human-ness is not defined but brought into presence through relation. I stop, move backwards through the dance studio, retrace the steps of the circle I was making, I kneel, slide to the floor, and lie on my back looking up, exhausted, yielding to the floor, feeling the cold, stable sensation where hot skin is cooled by Marley flooring. It is here, at my edges, that human-ness becomes perceptible not as a fixed category but as something that emerges through a dynamic, reciprocal encounter[13].

Danced, I let the notion of Human rest as an impossible entity and hyperobject-like, created by conceptual attempts to retract from the edge of encounter. I consider how we need to start moving with what it means to be relational. My philosophical underpinning assumes relationality dynamically includes responsibility. Responsibility is generated as a component of the relational, emerging from the continual negotiation of presence at the edges of perception that is encounter. If we, as human-nesses, is not a bounded subject but relationally constituted, then responsibility cannot be understood as an internal property of the self. Rather, it emerges within relation itself, as the capacity to remain with the

fragile edges of encounter without attempting to force them into stable or singular forms. Responsibility, then, does not belong to the person as a self-contained subject (who decides whether to accept responsibility or not) but emerges to constitute the relationship, where the fragile edges of encounter are inhabited. Thus, the human-experience, the experiencing human, human-ness[14], involves a presence at the periphery, the threshold point of the fragile edge where transformation is constant in motion (Nail 2019). And in that pulse of encounter with perceived otherness, there also lies an intrinsic sensing of responsibility to what is perceived as other because its perceived otherness *defines* us both.

## 6. Practicing

Due to funding access, I have been sporadically working on the creation of *Sycorax's Tempest* since 2023. There is a throughline of choreographic process which I have been developing and working with[15]. Here, I close by drawing on an example of this choreographic process from a recent 2026 rehearsal of *Sycorax's Tempest* to explain how the work is developing my thinking about the fragile edges of encounter: a duet that is about a description of Sycorax (although this example should not be mistaken for a binary of one and other). First, I am reminded that Sycorax is described as a witch (a non-Human entity). Wynter's discussion of Man1 and Man2 in the notion of Humans brings a perspective to this—the pregnant Algerian woman is far from Man1 Human. My Sycorax ruptures the foundations of *the human* (Jackson 2020) through her persistent presence even as she appears formless in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In the choreography, my empathy is with Sycorax as a mother, who is aware of her responsibility to the land (island). This means I imagine I am not trying to show Sycorax is Human, as a fixed category; rather, she exists in relation, exceeding the desensitized hyperobject-like Human. She is present in humanness, which includes transformation and responsibility: she is danced into being. In this recent set of duet rehearsals[16], creating the choreography, we worked with the text below from Act 1, Scene ii (lines 397 to 404). I changed the gender markers in the text to reflect the idea of Sycorax and the women who have drowned at sea using 'she' pronouns.

> *Full fadom five thy mother lies;*
> *Of her bones are coral made;*
> *Those are pearls that were her eyes;*
> *Nothing of her that doth fade.*
> *But doth suffer a sea-change*
> *Into something rich and strange.*
> *Sea-nymphs hourly ring her knell:*
> *Hark! Now I hear them,—Ding-dong bell*

I wanted the choreography to address how if there were two dancers (a duet), there was a third presence, the sum of the dancers—the *us* of the dancers. This is the edge where one person's dance could not be without the other present. I experienced this somewhat with wall. Moving with wall, dancing near stream I could not hold, stabilize, expand, and so on, outside of their presence[17].

I taught a sequence to the dancers that circles back on itself into a repeat. It could begin thus, at the *beginning* or in the *middle* and cycle round itself numerous times. One dancer starts the sequence at the *beginning*, the other in the *middle*. They can move only within a two-meter box, which means they inevitably impact each other. These encounters change the movement. I teach the sequence, sharing the shape and the internal physiology I am drawing on to move from step to step. The physiology includes the intention of the movement partly because, as discussed above, our sense of our body in space is as much conceptual as it is biological. What I find fascinating over the years I have developed this

choreographic method for my work is how difficult it is to be changed. I always find that at first, dancers strive to complete their part of the sequence no matter what! They pause to allow the other dancer to complete something so they have space for their bit. They also move away from each other, cheating a little beyond the two-meter box. I ask the dancers, *what does it mean to be changed but not lose yourself*? As we work, the dancers start to see the movement opportunities that acquiescing to encounter offers, while also maintaining a sense of flow of the sequence. *The question expands for them, what does it mean to be changed but not lose yourself? How do you frame change, and when do you 'return' to the imperative of your part of the sequence?* We become attentive to how the movement together retells the sequence but does not lose the physiological intention. A dancer cannot lift their leg now because the other dancer is resting on their hip. In these moments, as we work out the movement options, I ask, *where does forgiveness reside in your perception of these changes?* This forgiveness is often of self ("I cannot get that leg extension in now. I have done it wrong"). However, because dance lives across rather than in the bodies of each dancer, a flow of movement with its own logic and language starts to emerge. This is the third entity, the *us-ness* of the duet, of the edge of encounter. We use breath to vitalise the fragility of these moments of edge, to accentuate the shared moment of the choreography. This duet attempts to remain driven by the transformative reflection Shakespeare is describing. I ask the dancers to constantly remain at the asking point of encounter, where their movement is in constant transformation, even after the choreography is set. This reflects the following:

> *Of her bones are coral made;*
> *Those are pearls that were her eyes;*
> *Nothing of her that doth fade.*
> *But doth suffer a sea-change*

I read the last line as Shakespeare offering an irony that counterbalances the beauty of *bones to coral*. For me, human-ness (as opposed to Human) does not *suffer* a sea change. *Nothing doth fade*; *human-ness* is constant in change. Human-ness is defined and comfortable by its presence at the fragile edges where such change is sensed, whereas fixed notion of the Human does *suffer* if it is to become into the beautiful otherness of coral and pearl. In the duet as in human-ness, the dancers have dependence on the us-ness of the dance.

## 7. Closing

I close by emphasizing the importance of responsibility at the fragile edge. I hope to make it clear that I feel encounter is inseparable from responsibility. Responsibility is the ask of the encounter: how can I be with/in this moment? I offer dance as a mode to better understand the encounter, the perceived periphery. This is because dance moves across and through, which means dance brings us into awareness of us-ness. Dance illustrates the wider dependence of *I am because we are*. Our possibility within it all

> '[to] be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animancy of the world, the life that pulses through all things.' (Kimmerer 2013, p. 55)

For me, dance is the grammar of this animacy.

If human-ness is not a stable category but a distributed condition of encounter, then it cannot be secured through definition. It must instead be lived through relation. This requires a reorientation, from fearing the fragile edges that signal connection to taking responsibility from within them. Dance offers a refusal of the stabilization of Human; as I dance, I remain in relation, where encounter is an ongoing condition. To be present at these edges is not to resolve them but to remain accountable to what they

call forth. In this, dance not only illustrates world around us but also allows us to practice being of it. Moving us across and through, dance insists on ways of knowing that are responsive, entangled, and unfinished.

The question is whether the material conditions of human-ness, flesh, blood, and bone, can sustain remaining within this continuance, or whether the hyperobject-like abstraction of the Human shuts down that possibility. Here, through climate change for instance, the Human risks annihilating its own presence in the networked universe. If the Human risks pulling us away from relation, the fragile edge of encounter, dance becomes a counter-practice, one that returns us to the material conditions of human-ness, where flesh, blood, and bone learn how to remain within the continuance of relational life.

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## Notes

1 I have mentioned this stream, named Salmon's Brook, in a number of publications.
2 'together' here indicates the mental and emotional comprehension of 'moving with…', rather than to indicate two or more objects engaging.
3 Also it would be appropriate to discuss these ceremonial dance through writing. They are to be a part of.
4 I do not intend to generalise or universalise the numerous beliefs, philosophies, and cosmologies across African and Indigenous nations and diasporas. Rather, I am suggesting certain assumptions characteristic of Western modernity (especially the separation of humans from nature, subject from object, and mind from body from environment) are less 'universal' than they appear or as the Western lens would often present. Western, un-relational perspectives, are thus revealed as outlier rather than an ontological baseline, thus I offer relationality as having a common conceptional resonance for understanding/respecting the lived experience across many Afro and Indigenous worldviews. However, I am assuming i is only if we normalise or use the Western worldview as a baseline that being different from the Western worldview would make all these beliefs necessarily the same as each other, otherwise. There is a similarity in that they are oppositional to a Western worldview, but this does not make them inherently similar to each other in other respects.
5 Three people are being admitted to the Gamma Alpha Kappa Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma.
6 In this essay, I use *the human* to refer to people, *Human* to refer to Wynter's formulation of a historically constructed and regulated category, and *human-ness* to describe the felt, ethnographic, lived experience of being.
7 Thank you to Texas Christian University, Dance Department, USA, University of Utah, Dance Department, USA and The Royal Ballet Upper School, UK where I have choreographed different sections of the ballet over the last two years.
8 also https://historiamag.com/african-woman-sailed-on-the-golden-hind/ (accessed on 3 April 2026) and https://www.cassidycash.com/maria-on-the-golden-hind-nikki-marmery-ep-285/ (accessed on 3 April 2026).
9 I use the term 'feel' to denote the somatics/felt of my thinking, which includes moving to explore choreographic ideas.
10 Fragile because they are not defined edges, just realizations of perceived otherness, while also being indications of the size and capacity of the intra-connected all.
11 the notion its self being hyperobject-like not humans per se.
12 I use the word unaware because I do not believe I am unaffected by them, as with Hyperobjects in general.
13 Here I describe so moment of dance-based thinking—practice as research. This is preparation and prior to going into the studio to choreograph with the dancers. Thus this is not a description of the choreography but of the dance based practice as research activity.
14 although I am not proposing the word 'Human-ness' to be a neologism, merely a stand-in to temporality express the overall conceptual framing thus far.
15 This is a process I have been developing since 2009 when I created an evening's work called *Truth and Transparency*. A digital archive about this piece was commission by Siobhan Davis Studios and can be found at https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2269916/2284290 (accessed on 3 April 2026).

[16] These rehearsals were carried out with dancers at the Royal Ballet, Upper School, UK where I was a guest as part of their centennial activities (March 2026).

[17] In our book *Dancing Place; scores of the city, scores of the shore* (Akinleye and Kindred 2026, pp. 38–42) Helen Kindred and I discuss this in a technique for moving with we call 'Hovering'.

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