



Essay

Gather (g)Round

Amalia Sasha Schanke-dancer. Photo: Alice Tomola, 2022

Gather (g)Round

Creating Communal Ecosystems Through Performance and Permaculture

By Ayesha Jordan

It is about 8:30 am with an overcast sky. A groggy Saturday morning, lazy yet filled with the anticipation of what is to begin in roughly 3.5 hours. At noon, a bus will pull into Thalberg Farm, in Skjeberg, Norway, with passengers gathered from the local train station and the campus of the Norwegian Theatre Academy. Others arrive via car. Awaiting them are coffee, tea, and light snacks under the shelter of the barn. This is *Gather (g)Round: In Relation* the second iteration of my larger research-based project, *Gather (g)Round*.

Gather (g)Round is rooted in an accumulation of experiences, ideas, processes, and practices. It covers a broad spectrum of subject matters and issues. It looks at ways of living together and creating communal ecosystems that function with the intent of being regenerative, helpful, holistic, practical, and supportive. This is not an exhaustive list, but the key is through the consideration of time, these broad ‘ideas’ can be broken down into smaller pieces that make up the greater whole.

Leading up to the participants arrival, I and several others, including the owners of the farm, prepared the space for the influx of what will ultimately be around 50 plus people, children included. We have a full day planned, eight hours where participants will be led through talks, walks, rituals, performances, and more. But I am beginning to feel a bit guilty and anxious because the weather is not looking like the sunny spring day that I had imagined – a day made for gardening together and frolicking in the forest and along the riverside. Instead, it was a constant fluctuation between drizzle and rain for six hours with intermittent spats of dryness.

We finished our preparations to the best of our abilities while the bus and cars began their journey down the long driveway leading up to the farm. I sprinted to the sound system under the tent, to play music so it could help set the tone. “Could Heaven Ever Be Like This” by Idris Mohammed, was the opening track. The gathering had begun.

Here we were, gathered together. Most of the people in attendance were classmates and students at my school. The rest were friends and collaborators, along with a handful of strangers and new acquaintances. It took a lot to arrive at this moment. It had actually been years in the making. Looking back, I see it took a decade just to get to this point in my process. Quality (and perspective?) often takes time. Sustainability requires time. The word sustainable has a direct relationship with time. So, we will travel through time, backward and forward, to make sense of this relationship I have with the environment, people and performance.

Who Am I / Self-Preservation

I am human. I am nature. I am a performance-based artist who loves the art of performance. It is my chosen practice, and it took root as I grew in my practice. However, some years ago I found myself in a predicament. There was a glitch in my matrix, so to speak. Having finally found confidence in my artistic abilities, my eyes were simultaneously becoming more open to the changing world around me. My environment shifted from that of a nurtured youth to an independent adult. Responsibility and awareness, both personal and social, became more pertinent than ever. Not only did being an independent artist in New York City feel like an extreme sport, if I wanted to develop work, I was

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reliant on institutions for funding and/or had to fundraise myself to see projects come to fruition. My artistic presence was dependent on hierarchical systems and gatekeepers. This was problematic but it thrust me into considering the myriad ways I could shift the lens and begin new approaches to my practice. Several seeds were planted that played a fundamental role in me arriving at what my research and practice is today, a transformation I call the recreation of my life's garden.

Planting Seeds

Let us jump back in time, to 2013, when I decided to embark on a mission to gather what I will call seeds for skills. I am visiting an imaginary garden store in New York City to pick up seed packets. I gather packs of woodworking, permaculture, and cooperative seeds. I learn what each seed requires before they get planted. They eventually sprout into a woodworking apprenticeship, a permaculture workshop, and a membership at a food cooperative.

What led me to this garden store in the first place was the realization that being a conventional artist would not fulfill my purpose or desires. There was a need to know and do more. For some reason I felt the urge to return to square one. I needed to shift my focus from the distractions of social media and self-promotion, and understand how, as a Black woman in America, to deal with the racialized trauma that we were/are bombarded with daily. I asked myself this question: if the world came tumbling down tomorrow, was I capable of surviving the apocalypse? It sounded extreme but felt important. I wanted to know how to build shelter, grow food, look for potable water, and well, survive the apocalypse. These felt like they should be basic human skills. Thus began the journey to let these planted seeds grow, see what they might blossom into, and what fruit they would produce.

Fast forward to 2018. I have a new woodworking apprenticeship, started a permaculture design course (PDC), and I remain a member at a food cooperative. Then I am sparked by the idea of incorporating these elements into my practice. Insert a plot twist. During this time, I reunited with an old friend/used-to-be lover who became best friend/husband-to-be, Jensen. He is moving to Norway which means I am eventually going to transplant myself.

The Slow Down

Now, it is 2019. My husband is in Norway while I am in New York City. I applied to a research-based master's degree program at the Norwegian Theatre Academy (NTA) in Fredrikstad, Norway. Just after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, I got accepted. This was my opportunity to slow down and take a step back, to take all of those skills, those planted seeds, and see how they could be harvested inside of my practice.

I spent 2020 to 2022 focusing intensely on my research, while placing less focus on performance. Traditionally, I have guided people through spaces, creating environments where they could have embodied experiences, but I was always centered as a performer even when working with collaborators. I recognized a need to challenge this perspective. I wanted to develop something deeper, more cooperative, and relevant to the whole. Something more expansive was trying to grow.

With this ease in tempo, I was able to reconsider my relationship with time and the skills I had begun collecting. Distance and time away from family also heightened my need for community and intimacy. Shifting from the busy *hustle and bustle* culture of New York City to a more relaxed Norway meant I would need to reassess my needs and how to fulfill them in this new terrain.

Prior to defining what *Gather (g)Round* would be, or through time evolve into, I spent a year digging deep, literally and figuratively speaking. One of the first things I realized having relocated

to a new country was that I needed to begin cultivating and nurturing relationships with people and communities. For the sake of my practice and for the sake of my mental health. Additionally, with a desire to better understand the Norwegian landscape and deepen my knowledge, I took another permaculture design course. This enhanced understanding could be directly applied to the work on the farm while also supporting the expansion of my network beyond an art context. It put me in direct contact with those possessing similar passions and appreciation for the land and how we can best support it.

Permaculture and Performance

Permaculture was coined by scientist and ecological designer, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, and is a contraction of the words permanent and agriculture. Permaculture uses a whole systems design approach. It considers water, land, people, animals, buildings, and even economics. It provides a practical framework for approaching design and encourages creativity and flexibility inside of it. The ethics of permaculture are earth care, people care, and fair share.

There are twelve permaculture principles that can be applied to multiple areas of life, not just agriculture. This is why I chose to use them as guideposts for developing performance and immersive experiences. The principles are as follows:

- Observe and interact
- Catch and store energy
- Obtain a yield
- Apply self-regulation and accept feedback
- Use and value renewables
- Produce no waste
- Design from patterns to details
- Integrate don't segregate
- Use small slow solutions
- Use and value diversity
- Use edges and value the marginal
- Creatively use and respond to change.

I should note that permaculture, at least the framework, has been somewhat problematic for me because I am aware that it is primarily a collection of indigenous practices that have been placed in a western context and given a name. There is a danger that the indigenous roots of permaculture could easily get lost in the packaging and dissemination of information.

Researching and deepening my knowledge of indigenous practices is a gateway to a more holistic approach to collaborating with the land. I am only scratching the surface of this exploration. *Braiding Sweetgrass* by scientist, writer, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, became a bible for me over the last two years. Reading her words prepared me to engage the land with expanded consciousness of the beings living in the soil prior to my arrival.

In the Western tradition, there is a recognized hierarchy of beings with, of course, the human being on top—the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation—and the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as

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“the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They’ve been on the earth far longer than we have been and have had time to figure things out. They live both above and below ground, joining Skyworld to the earth. Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away. (Kimmerer 2017, p. 9-10)

This knowledge brought up questions about methods of performance and engagement I would apply based on the permaculture principles in dialogue with indigenous perspectives. I also wanted to consider how both would inform the work of building worlds through communion with others.

How Does Your Garden Grow?

While studying at NTA, I was offered access to my advisor’s family farm. There was finally a solid opportunity to experiment and test out these ideas. As I envisioned the possibilities, I shared that my activities and plans should be collaborative and ideally, purposeful for the family. After several visits to the farm, I focused my permaculture skills on growing food and pollinators.



Talberg Farm. Photo: Ayesha Jordan

Two gardens were designed over the course of two years. One was a circular garden structured around seven large stones that had been placed in the yard years prior. This became an experimental garden. The second garden constructed the following year was a kitchen garden, which is inspired by Nordic symbols to reflect the history of the land. With both gardens, I tried to use as many readily available resources as possible. I collected cardboard around the local town and used materials that were already at the farm.

Incorporating another indigenous lesson, Kimmerer shares:

This is the grammar of animacy. Imagine seeing your grandmother standing at the stove in her apron and then saying of her, “Look, it is making soup. It has gray hair.” We might snicker at such a mistake, but we also recoil from it. In English, we never refer to a member of our family, or indeed to any person, as it. That would be a profound act of disrespect. It robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing. So it is that in Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family. (Kimmerer, 2017, p. 55)

This insight enhanced the level of respect I had for the beings whose homes were being colonized. By observing their current conditions their needs were considered and maintained, as much as possible, throughout the process. On the farm, unused bricks became borders that sheltered displaced beetles and spiders. The earthworms also appeared to continue thriving in this budding, newly diversified landscape. This process felt like a living performance and conversation, highlighting not just my contributions, but the work of the entities involved. Onions, lettuces, sunflowers, and even corn took center stage, with their final bow being called by the harvest. With Kimmerer’s added influence, all these beings became collaborators I cared for as opposed to things I could casually displace, pull, or destroy.

These regular farm visits allowed me to develop a relationship with the family while learning about the farm and the surrounding area’s history. This established a level of trust and eventually, the friendship would be extended between our two families.

Iterative Approaches

Currently, two iterations of *Gather (g)Round* have taken place. The first iteration, *Observe and Interact*, was a three-day event that included two overnights where participants were invited to spend the entire weekend, they could stay for the day, or just a few hours. Its name corresponds with the first permaculture principle: observation and interaction.

This happened in the fall of 2021. The focus was slowing down and being together. I rented a cabin called Tredalen, by the sea in an area called Hvaler, a little south of Fredrikstad. I chose a location accessible by bus so that those without vehicles could make the journey. Throughout this intimate weekend, we cooked and ate together, wrote letters to loved ones, conversed, went for a walk, played games, and split off into smaller groups and conversations.

What I learned from this event is that people enjoy having time to just be together. To talk, eat and even engage with strangers. Sometimes it simply takes having the opportunity to actualize it. This brings up the element of time again. With time, through time, over time we begin to care. We care about the people we are spending time with. The places we frequent. The lands we inhabit which also allows space for radical care.

In the second iteration, *In Relation*, I focused on two permaculture principles: to creatively use and respond to change, and to apply self-regulation and accept feedback. These principles became an integral part of the day not only because they provided a framework, but because the weather forced us to be flexible, listen and activate our intuitive and improvisational skills as it was both wet and cold.

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The fact that people were willing and open to embracing the rain, the walks into the forest, performances, and talks under cloudy wet skies, speaks a lot about what is possible when people commune together with open minds and spirits. A revelation that an attendee shared was that the rain was perfect because Norway was in the midst of a drought. It felt like we were embracing and respecting the unpredictable wonder that the natural world is and allowed ourselves to fully embrace whatever it was offering.

The saying “many hands make light work” was so apropos on this day. Many hands prepared the food that was cooked and served, carried soil, shifted objects, handed out blankets, etc. Everyone was taking care of everyone. The tone of care was strong, and it was a beautiful sight to behold. People often need to care for something before they begin to appreciate it, to experience and understand its value.

Biodiversity: Learning and Nurturing Landscapes

This brings me to another relevant theme, and permaculture tenet: people care. Because of the nature of my performance practice, I have made it a requirement to care for the people who attend, participate in, and contribute to these experiences. This includes self-care.

I have learned the necessity of cultivating and understanding one’s audience. In the same way soil type is considered when planting, it helps to know the landscape you are performing in, and who you are making art for. When you can cultivate that landscape with intention there is a conversation that begins to happen.

For both iterations of *Gather (g)Round*, I made a concerted effort to reach out to people within different cultural and ethnic communities to invite them as collaborators and attendees. During *In Relation*, the aim was to re-introduce, or re-acquaint our bodies to landscapes we have traditionally been connected to, and for others to see our bodies in these landscapes on terms we define. I wanted people to feel safe. To feel secure enough to create new rituals in these landscapes that would encourage and allow us to have healthy relationships with the land. To heal ourselves from the generational trauma attached to the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and land grabbing, and to heal relationships to land that have been negatively affected. Carrying the burdens of enslavement or better said, human trafficking and colonialism has been detrimental to not only our health as Black and Brown people but also our knowledge of the land, the food we used to grow, and the herbs that used to heal us. So much valuable information has been lost, but thankfully, many people are reconnecting to those value and knowledge systems and sharing this information.

All that to say, the relatability of the material and experiences created is very important to me. As a Black woman, seeing myself reflected in the audience provides me with an added layer of safety and comradery, especially when addressing subject matters meant to challenge or question Western concepts whilst in predominantly white spaces. Therefore, I intentionally sought out and extended invitations to Black and Brown people to both iterations. I believe that biodiversity should not only be reflected in landscapes, but also inside institutions and art spaces that have historically excluded the global majority. The earth’s climate and social climate are in direct relation. Communities making up the global majority are those who have suffered the most due to climate change and environmental injustices. This emphasizes the need to not separate humans from nature and disregard our humanity towards each other for the sake of eco-elitism. If we focus on the inclusion of care for all of creation, then we remain connected and interdependent in this web of life.

One very important observation was that I saw myself reflected in this group of attendees. An observation I have made while living in Norway, is that I do not often see many Black and

Brown people out experiencing nature and working in the landscapes in the same way I see white Norwegians. This is specifically in reference to time in nature for leisure activities and growing food. This does not mean it is not happening, but I have yet to come across many people in the spaces I have been in during my two years of living in this country. It is prudent to consider the different relationships Black and Brown people have with land considering their origin stories, why they live in Norway in the first place, and an awareness that it is a luxury for some to spend time in nature and have access to arable land.



In Relation participants. Photo: Ayesha Jordan

It is also important to note that as a Black American artist living and working in Norway, I am aware of the privilege I am granted to sometimes circumvent racist discrimination white Norwegians enforce much more consistently on the local African and Muslim community. My Americanness is of cultural value and the English language furthers our social access. It would be a moral and social travesty to ignore this privilege.

Cooperation is Key

One of the long-term goals of *Gather (g)Round*, is to start and develop a cooperative through each iteration. People gain membership by attending, participating in, or contributing to *Gather (g)Round* events. Through this cooperative, we assemble a creative and functioning ecosystem with the goal of supporting artists, plants and animals, children, elders, and more. The purpose is to encourage collaboration and co-creation while considering open-source methods of making art that can flatten the top-down power structure. Instead of solely depending on money as a system of value, we can consider other means of currency exchange such as time, food, creative contributions, etc. This

could easily be seen as a lofty or naive idea, but I find beauty in making mistakes and failing, as valuable lessons are learned.

A popular permaculture saying is “the problem is the solution”. Individualism seems to be a big problem in relation to the environment. If we loosen the ties we have as a society with being the only one, the best one, the one on top, the one at the center, the one with it all, and share and accept the possibility that most of us could probably still live comfortable lives while also giving others access. There is enough. The cooperative is an experiment that I hope we can shape and form over time.

Growing Relationships

During *In Relation*, the aspects of ecology and plant people, and our relationship to this world we are a part of were embedded in the creative elements, in the talks that were given, the rituals, the time in the forest, and in relation to the rain falling on us as we watched a dancer move in the garden, dramatic and cloudy skies setting the scenography. We closed out the second iteration of *Gather (g) Round* with a sun dance as it finally shone through the clouds after six hours of an eventful bathing session. DJ Nefertiti guided us through our dance journey as we gathered around on the ground. Our feet made rhythms, sending messages to the underworld (earthworms, insects, microbes, mycelium, root systems, spirits, and ancestors) sharing our joy, hoping they could feel it too.

The relationships established along this journey will continue to be cultivated. Ideally, new relationships will blossom through these connections and gatherings, and extend into the future. In the meantime, I would like to favor the word regenerative over sustainable as it pertains to my practice. Regenerative better reflects the actual goals of this process. I would like to be able to continuously adapt with intention, inspired by adrienne maree brown in her book *Emergent Strategy*. She writes, “how do we practice increasing our ease with what is? Change happens. Change is definitely going to happen, no matter what we plan or expect or hope for or set in place. We will adapt to that change, or we will become irrelevant” (brown, 2017, p. 69-70). I wish to be present and open to change so that we are able to re-generate inside of the communal ecosystem we are co-designing with a focus on all aspects of nature, ourselves included, and seek ways to exist mindfully while creating art and new rituals to support us in the years to come. Let’s create safe spaces and opportunities for the younger generations who will need to lead and guide in the future. Let them be a part of these processes now, so they can understand the practices that work and those that may need changing only sustaining those which continue to create and support healthy environments.

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