

## CQ Unbound

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Students moving and drawing in Eiko's Delicious Movement class, College of East Asian Studies, Wesleyan University, 2009. Eiko says, "Delicious Movement Workshops are designed for all people who love to move or who want to love to move with delicious feelings. The exercises employ images, body articulation, floor work, and mostly slow movement." photo © Wesleyan IT

### **Experiment and Experience**

*A Historian and a Dancer Co-Teach Courses on the Atomic Bomb and Mountaintop Removal Mining*

**by Eiko Otake and William Johnston**

*William Johnston, professor of Japanese history at Wesleyan University, in Middletown, CT, and Eiko Otake, movement artist from Japan and a Wesleyan University Creative Campus Fellow since 2005, have co-taught the course Japan and the Atomic Bomb at Wesleyan three times. This course combines traditional academic work with movement study, meditation, and individual projects, adding experiential and creative elements to the students' understanding of the atomic bombings of Japan. Otake and Johnston also adapted this approach in a new course, Perspectives on Mountaintop Removal Mining, at Wesleyan University during the spring semester of 2013. Both of these courses address profound questions about how we learn about, understand, and deal with massive violence and the resulting human and environmental carnage. The following conversation on their pedagogical experiment took place in writing during the summer of 2013. [E.O. and W.J.]*

## A Perilous Journey: From Atomic Bomb to Mountaintop Removal

**Bill Johnston:** Our first collaboration, a course on the history of the atomic bomb and Japan, was a natural outgrowth from our common interests. Initially the prospect of working with a dancer and integrating body learning excited me. The practice of meditation, which I have engaged with since the 1970s, makes it clear to me that some of our most important learning experiences are physical. When we *really* learn something, we learn it with our bodies. Knowing this, I long felt that my own classroom teaching, with an emphasis on texts and ideas, had something lacking. I wanted to make the learning more visceral.

The Atomic Bomb course came about as a result of serendipity. I had heard that Wesleyan was planning an experimental program to reimagine the role of choreographers on college campuses. Pam Tatge, the director of the Center for the Arts at Wesleyan University, invited me to a lunch to discuss that program. You and I met at that lunch. In no time we discovered a mutual interest in the history of the atomic bombings of Japan. I was intrigued to learn that you had helped create and teach a course at NYU about the atomic bomb.

**Eiko Otake:** As we were walking out of the room, you invited me to co-teach a course on the subject. I was surprised because we didn't know each other, but I didn't hesitate to accept your invitation on the spot. An outsider like myself usually cannot participate in substantial teaching in college classrooms unless invited to do so by an insider. And, you were willing to work with my performance schedule. In talking with you, I also discovered that your research focused largely on the body in illness and on violence—my lifelong themes.

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Born in Japan, **Eiko Otake** is a York-based movement artist with 40+ years, has performed work as Eiko & Koma in theaters, museums, galleries, and outdoor venues. In 2014, Eiko, visiting in Dance and East Asian Studies at Wesleyan University, and Bill Johnston, Japanese historian and photographer, traveled to the still irradiated Fukushima, resulting in the exhibition *A Body in Fukushima*. In early 2016, Eiko will be the subject of the 10th annual Danspace Platform (NYC).

[www.eikoandkoma.org](http://www.eikoandkoma.org)

**William Johnston** received his PhD in history and East Asian languages, both from Harvard. He is professor of History, East Asian Studies, and Science in Society at Wesleyan University. During the 2014-15 year, he was the Edwin O. Reischauer Visiting Professor of Japanese Studies at Harvard University. At present, he is working on a textbook on Japan and the atomic bomb. His photography appeared in numerous exhibitions and publications, including the *New York Times*.  
[www.wesleyan.edu/history/faculty/faculty.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/history/faculty/faculty.html)

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**Bill:** The inception of the course on mountaintop removal mining (MTR) was different. It came from an interest I'd had since the late '90s, when MTR came to my attention because of the way it destroys the mountain ecologies. Few mineral extraction processes are so blatantly destructive. MTR is a complete manifestation of the culture of money that sees natural resources simply as a source of monetary wealth. According to that perspective—which is very much alive right now—the land and the earth in general have no value unless they produce something of monetary value.

Mountaintop removal coal mining follows three main steps: preparation, extraction, and rehabilitation. Preparation requires the bulldozing of roads and the clearing of all the trees on a mine site, usually by pushing them into the valleys and burning them. All of the wood is wasted. Extraction requires the deep drilling of rows of holes into the earth that are then filled with high explosives and detonated. The rubble is scooped up and dumped in the valleys, covering both the intermittent and permanent waterways in them. Once the coal is exposed, it is removed, washed, and shipped to market. When there is no more coal left, the resulting deep holes that once were the sites of mountains are sometimes filled, smoothed over, and planted with grass. Frequently, the sites are simply abandoned. Companies have conducted this kind of mining on an area almost half the size of the state of Connecticut, filling over 2,000 miles of streams in the process. MTR has destroyed more than 500 mountains, as well as many valleys, streams, and communities. It poses a health threat to area residents. As a result of the corporate domination of the federal and state governments that could halt or mediate the practice, it is officially touted as beneficial to the local economies and even the environment, evidence be damned.

When I was invited to become a faculty fellow at Wesleyan's College of the Environment, I decided to teach a course on this subject. I wanted the students to learn how this kind of environmental violence is perpetrated, as well as how the economic, political, and legal structures with their historical backgrounds made this possible. I wanted them to learn about the human costs of this practice and its effect on the lives of individuals and communities.

The idea of teaching a course on mountaintop removal mining was a stretch for both of us, and I was delighted to have you on board.

## The MTR Class Unfolds, Spring of 2013

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**Bill:** We started the first discussion class with two minutes of silence, eyes closed. We then flew over mountaintop removal mining sites on Google Earth while listening to Kathy Mattea singing "Black Waters," "Hello, My Name Is Coal," and "West Virginia Mine Disaster." In our original plan, this class time was assigned as the discussion section in a traditional seminar room. So on

that first day, with large tables imposing a distance between everyone's bodies, we dutifully introduced ourselves and discussed the first set of readings. By a stroke of good fortune it ended up that this was the only time throughout the semester that we sat on chairs with tables between us.

Our movement sections took place in the East Asian Studies Seminar Room. We sat in a circle on the floor on Japanese cushions. In the first class, when students opened their eyes, you, without saying a word, crawled to the center and lay down, closed your eyes, and started to move very gently and slowly, like an amoeba. Then you said softly (and s-l-o-w-l-y), "Ple-a-se come clo-ser so I can al-most touch you." Some of the students seemed a little uncomfortable, but all were curious and inched closer to you. We could see your twitching toes and the soft movement of your chest. In this moment, the hierarchy between students and instructors was broken. The intimacy felt radical. You told them, "Forget your names and be useless." It was like putting them in front of a mirror; the students were invited to reflect on how they are programmed to be useful, purposeful, and productive. Suddenly they were told that their goal was to become useless. I think some of them were more than a little shocked.

**Eiko:** In this second class, before learning each other's names and becoming familiar with each other's personalities, I wanted all of us to have a time and space where we were just nameless, helpless bodies. Humans are less harmful while resting and sleeping. When people stand up and move purposefully, human actions can harm other lives as well as the environment. The atomic bombings and MTR represent some of the worst such human behaviors. In the movement class, I ask pairs of students to take turns looking at each other's body in movement. In such close proximity, they inevitably find beauty in their vulnerability. A student confessed that she was nervous to be seen or to see someone so close. Later she discovered comfort in listening to various supportive responses of fellow students. Movers also reported that they found certain pleasures in being helpless. This doing and seeing is different from showing what one knows or can do. Individuals respond differently to the same prompt—yet in those differences we find deeper commonality. This process makes students into collaborators rather than competitors.

**Bill:** We discovered that it was more intuitive to proceed from discussion right into the movement section. We alternated between discussion and movement, with no set pattern, instead deciding which seemed more appropriate for the individual class. This transformed the entire course.

## Academic, Artistic, and Emotional Rigor

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**Eiko:** As we teach such dire and timely subjects as the atomic bombings and MTR, we need to provide space and time to our students. I don't think we

should skip the stages of being depressed and angry—and we also need time to be lost, to find something students can connect to, to accept human shadows, and to recognize diverse human capacities. Evilness is a part of the grotesque, which we can fight against but which we can also laugh at and dance with.

I believe that in the same way that university professors can embody and practice academic rigor, artists embody and promote artistic and emotional rigor. People engaged in art-making are often tough, thorough, and not afraid to be emotional. Artists press things further, look at both the beauty and the grotesque, and strive to create layers of nuance. In the studio, moving with imagination and with some abstraction is ambiguous, sometimes painfully so. At the same time, I believe one can be rigorous in one's ambiguity.

Those of us who work with movement accept that bodies have limitations. It is humbling. We also accept ambiguity in creating and performing movement. Why step forward and not back? Why move the right arm instead of the left? No answer exists before one starts moving. However, while stepping front, one can commit to it and make that the focus of the world, first for oneself and then for those watching. By continuing to move with utmost resolution, however ambiguous that action is—perhaps even more willfully because one recognizes that ambiguity—one can betray the assumed symmetry and evenness of a body, creating a magnetic place. That place is a navel of the world at a particular time; a place that refuses to be measured as a certain number of miles from an assumed center, but where both actions and thinking of an individual originate. This is artistic rigor in action.

**Bill:** While the content is devastating, finding the human capacity to record the calamities is revealing. In that sense, both the MTR and Atomic Bomb courses are not only about environmental disaster and human suffering but also about human resilience.

**Eiko:** In learning about disasters, we also learn about survival. Survivors are not winners. In their wounds live the dead and the pain. Our imagination and desires are fundamental to our survival.

## Writing Journals

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**Eiko:** When I teach, I assign weekly journal entries. Writing about movement study is challenging for the students. Through journaling, they learn that writing can be a process of discovery rather than expression.

**Bill:** Most of the time students try to imagine what the instructor wants to see in them, which leads them to create a kind of avatar for themselves, rather than to just be themselves. The journals help break down that sense of expectation and allow the students to be intellectually and emotionally honest

in a way they aren't usually encouraged to be. Journaling established an active dialogue between us.

Here at Wesleyan, the structure of the course and the content of the syllabus—including the use of journals as a central method of evaluation—are left to us. Our approach combined history, social theory, environmental and public health science, fiction, music, reportage, and more. By reading several general pieces on environmental justice and the concept of slow violence, the students had some theoretical and conceptual tools to analyze the historical development of MTR. I included books by journalists who had written about MTR. Erik Reese's *Lost Mountain* follows the destruction of a mountain over the course of a year. Another, *Coal River* by Michael Shnayerson, follows the attempts of an environmental lawyer to bring a case to court showing how MTR violated the Clean Water Act. We then read a number of in-depth and current journal articles on the health effects of MTR and its ecological impact. Other classes focused on the human dimensions of MTR through oral histories, fiction, and anthropological and sociological studies. The goal was not only to give the students an in-depth understanding of MTR, but also to give them tools and conceptual approaches to understanding other environmental problems that we all face today.

**Eiko:** While one can neither experience nor understand someone else's pain, can the remembrance of our own pain ignite our imagination? While pain cannot be measured, do memory and imagination give us ways to connect with another person's pain? How does the distance between a person and the subject help one to know, or perhaps keep him or her from knowing? Could the practice of movement enhance our understanding of disaster or pain?

For me, these questions lead to my mantra: distance is malleable. In the Atomic Bomb class, the students read the story of Kyoko Hayashi, who visits the Trinity explosion site in New Mexico fifty years after she was exposed to the atomic bomb at the age of 14. There she discovers that the land was the first atomic bomb victim. The image of her body in the desert, imagining the Trinity blast of July 16, 1945, and remembering the Nagasaki blast of August 9, 1945—both bodies still containing radiation—is striking. When the students received a letter from Hayashi in reply to them, they could not turn away from her handwriting even though they couldn't understand it without my translation. Her letter delivered her living body. In this incident, I saw how distance can be momentarily disrupted by an individual's action, and how that moment creates a lived experience.

## Becoming Mountains

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**Eiko:** When I lead movement, I work a lot on the floor. Standing and moving, people with dance training move differently from others, even when my

prompts do not suggest a dance move. Dancers tend to hold their bodies and heads in certain ways because this is how they were taught. Learned dance moves repeatedly show up in a dancer's body, affecting that person in making movement decisions. By looking at so-called dancers, I am often reminded that bodies are more conservative than minds. When we all lie down, however, people are more or less similar and less stuck being dancers or even humans. There are certain pleasures in not having to always evolve and become smarter. In fact, by "devolving" we see other unfamiliar possibilities and viewpoints. When we lie down, we are closer to inchworms and fallen dead leaves. That closeness is transformative. We feel the earth under the studio floor. Body parts and their relationships to one another are freer than when standing; they have less of a sense of destiny and purpose. Body weight can be supported by many body parts rather than simply by the feet as in standing. Face and hands can be free of greetings.

Seeing a body on the nearby floor, one may notice small details, which can be a revealing experience. When I ask students to be a thing—a marshmallow, a piece of popcorn, a mountain, or a river—it is not that they imitate those shapes. Instead, they become mindful of the movements and textures of those things. It gives them time to think about other beings—their detail and particulars. When one discovers the essence of a thing, one also discovers the differences and commonalities between oneself and that thing. This means that one recognizes both the distance between two existences and, at the same time, that the space they occupy is the same space, the air that the two existences breathe is the same air. In becoming a thing, the distance between you and it, though it does not disappear, changes. This shift gives a strong sensation of discovering and knowing.

One of the exercises I give students is Survey. Lying on the floor, one gently shifts different parts of the body against it. By using one's body weight very lightly and barely pressing into the floor so as to allow movement, one can feel the floor pressing into the various parts of the body, as if the floor is surveying the body. The result is the surprising experience of discovering and examining one's body as a landscape, with its bumps, its softness, and its curves. Details evoke many images while one also learns coordination and focus.

For MTR, I extended the Survey exercise to *be a mountain and then a river*. For one hour, bodies became containers of all that students had learned of mountains—first their formation and then their lives before they were exploded and bulldozed off. Movers exposed their bodies to a much larger sense of time, of which their own lives were a small part. Then they examined, through imagination and body sensations, what happens in mountaintop removal.

In the studio, students learn to see and they learn to draw. I bring in newsprint and charcoal. One half of the students delve into movement study, while the other half draw whatever they see and are attracted to. I instruct the students to use drawing as an extension of seeing, directing their eyes to stay on the moving bodies, not on their paper. In drawing, seeing does not have to arrive at or produce words. When we displayed all the charcoal drawings of bodies, they looked like mountains. The studio had become a mountain range.

## The Last Class: Saying a Good-bye

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**Bill:** During the semester, we had given instructions on how to make public presentations by having the students read aloud in class from reading assignments and their weekly journal entries. We asked each student to own and deliver the sentences, eye-to-eye, mind-to-mind, so that everyone in the room could hear the speaker and feel her commitment. At the end of the course, each student presented a prepared personal statement about mountaintop removal mining addressed to a particular audience the student had determined. Then for the last class, you asked the students to melt down from a sitting position to the floor, which started an exercise in viewing one of my photos of the MTR-affected landscape.

**Eiko:** Meditation posture is designed to be stately. Melting down without obviously changing one's posture is not a natural movement and requires patient negotiation between conflicting directions while resisting momentum. Once the students were on the floor, I directed them, "Please crawl toward the window." At the end of the classroom, we had laid a huge photograph of the MTR site that Bill had shot.

**Bill:** This was a seamless photo, 20 inches high and 15 feet long, consisting of 21 separate high-definition images of a mountaintop removal site: Kayford Mountain, West Virginia. Its clarity was sufficient to allow the viewer to see every tree in the distance and every blade of grass in the foreground.

**Eiko:** When their eyes were only six inches away from your photograph, they could not see the whole composition but instead saw each tree and the pain of its dislocation with its exposure to the violence of MTR. Details are what connect us to a whole.

I wore a simple Japanese robe, lay down, and announced that I was the students' grandmother who was dying. I said, "When and what is dying? At death, what happens to everything that a person witnessed and learned in her lifetime? Will you please, my grandchildren, come to visit me, one person at a time, to mark our being together? Every person whom one meets inevitably departs, and so will this class come to an end." I then said, "Not only am I Eiko, but I am also Eiko Mountain. Is a mountain alive when its top



is blown off? You answered, 'No,' because a living cycle of the mountain is slaughtered together with its water and other lives. But I am not so sure. What happens to the living memories of that mountain? Like a person who still feels the sensations of a limb after it is amputated, can a blown-off mountain remember being a full mountain?" I moved alone for a while, then feebly called each student's name one-by-one. A dance to say good-bye to a grandma mountain.

Every student looked at me straight in the eyes and touched my body with intimacy. Their farewells made me a mountain in Appalachia. I had started the semester as being shapeless and nameless on the floor, and ended the semester rehearsing my dying on the floor, surrounded by young people who now see that my body and theirs extend to other beings through the power of imagination.

I believe in students' potential. After every course, I can believe in that potential more. A teacher can plan and push, but it is the students who come with the appetite to learn. It is the students who transform Bill, Eiko, and the class from an experiment into an experience.

## Excerpts from Student Journals

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...she asked us to imagine how things would be if the person we observed as they moved and slept was no longer there....there was a time when this person did not exist, and there will certainly be a time when they will no longer exist. But, ...here they are, wriggling on the floor. But then also, people not so far away can put an end to our wriggling with a *pika* and a *don* [a term given to the atomic bombing. People saw *pika* (flash) then heard *don* (the sound of the explosion)]. That was the most ridiculous thing... it still is now.

—Erick Sherman

Eiko is the first professor I've ever had who taught while lying on the ground. ...[Seeing this] made me reevaluate the simple assumptions about body posture and positioning that dictate so many parts of the day....As we let our bodies drift on the ground, I felt unfettered from time, unmoored from the persistent march of the hours....my life is a fraction of a millisecond in the context of all of time. I savored the moments of intentional "uselessness".

—Adin S. Vaewsorn

I was surprised to find that partnering with Professor Johnston was not uncomfortable at all....We both made ourselves vulnerable to the other person and gave him a certain amount of trust in doing so. In movement, we were able to forget about time, our teacher-student relationship and our lives outside of that moment and focus on our movements and each other.

— Chino Kim

I became more aware of my movements in an aesthetic sense, unlike mountains, whose uplift and consequent denudation (erosion) occur with no apparent consciousness. Streams follow paths of least resistance, and when they establish themselves across the contours of topography, they gain energy and do their own sort of mountaintop, or mountainside removal. Healthy ecosystems produce beautiful colors, shapes, and visual dynamics in the abiotic and biotic forms they support.

— **Greg Shaheen**

The cutting was painful, and it felt unfair, but the exercise didn't stop. As a tree I thought about my wounds, my absences...new movements began to emerge. I...kept moving, kept living, kept on being as beautiful as I could. Even though my limbs were gone, they still influenced the way I moved and grew.... Suddenly the historical record, rather than being a static record of events that merely happened, became a three-dimensional picture, different battles over representation. These battles were motivated by the same urge I had experienced while doing the exercise. Exploring and understanding this need to be seen the way I wanted really helped me to connect to the historical actors we were reading about.

— **Mark McCloughan**

I continued to draw humans but saw only mountains and valleys and rivers. The distinction between the two fell away, making it easy to see just how much we are products of the mountains and to the extent with which we are intertwined....The belief that we could rip apart the mountains and fill their valleys without in turn destroying ourselves became mere ignorance.

— **Rachel Lindy**

What forms of protest, and resistance, are most effective? ...this connects back to Eiko's movement workshop, because the peak and reach of a mountain can be rooted only in a strong core, and in grounded roots, somewhat like a wave gaining its power mainly from the density of the water behind it.

— **Max S. McCready**

When I found myself close to another person, touching their arm, fingers, hair, I found myself incredibly happy. My eyes were closed and I was acting in a way I don't normally act but I felt so connected to everyone I was doing the exercise with. This feeling goes back to the idea I have continuously been coming back on in this class: interconnectedness. We are all interconnected and affect each other in everything we do.

— **Zia D. Grossman-Vendrillo**

I decomposed and stretched out into the forest around me, where I ended and where the leaves and soil began. Some of the soil I was lying on was made of my own leaves, fallen decades ago, and munched down into tiny

pieces by insects....When did I die as a tree? What about the tree I saw in  
Maine, held to its roots by slivers of flesh, but bent over? When is it dead?  
This exercise blurred those lines for me.

— Jennifer L. Roach

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