

# INFORMED SOURCE

## Resensitizing Ourselves Through Dance

by Mariah Palmer & Sara Mannheimer

“Grief” is a contemporary dance performance conceived of and choreographed by **Mariah Palmer** and **Sara Mannheimer**. The piece evolved from a desire to process the loss of interconnectedness with the land that results from living within an ever more extractive and commodified society. The piece uses movement to process our grief over this loss, and to resensitize ourselves to the feelings and rhythms of the natural world.

The performance engages with the tensions and dualities around land use through costumes, filming location, and choreography. We dyed the fabric for our costumes using St. John’s wort, a plant that can be invasive but is also a valuable herbal treatment for depression. We filmed on an area of land that is partially protected as wilderness and partially open to motorized four-wheeler recreation. And through our concept and choreography we explored feelings of both sadness and joy. In the sections below we discuss each of these aspects of the performance: costumes, location and choreography.

### Costumes

What we grieve, we love. And natural dyeing is one practice that brings us into acute observation with plants and the intricacy of ecosystems. The making of the costumes fostered a deepening relationship with St. John’s wort—a plant that we celebrate for its color and medicinal attributes, but that is considered invasive in Montana, where we live. We became interested in St John’s wort after hearing community concerns that it was spreading too quickly in our area.

We knew there was more to this plant than the anxiety it created. We were aware of St. John’s wort’s beneficial use as



**Local Earth Collective**, *Grief*, 2021. Dance film. Dancers: Dorothy Burns and Dana Terzi. Choreographers: Mariah Palmer and Sara Mannheimer. Photo: Nathan Norby.



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a treatment for depression, and we wondered what more it had to offer. We began to experiment with the color potential and were delighted to discover that it produced a wide range of colors from yellow to light blush and even deep red. This was an exciting discovery because most of the wild plants in Montana produce shades of yellow. Finding reddish tones in our own backyard was thrilling.

We chose silk organza as the fabric for our costumes because it is sheer and lightweight, in contrast to the heavy emotion of grief. The fabric also has a great affinity to natural dyes. The slight color variation in each dress was a beautiful complement to the dancers' range of skin tones and the sun and shadows on the sand. The dresses became a living part of the piece as they interacted with the light, the wind, our bodies and our movements.

#### **Location**

We filmed in the **St. Anthony Sand Dunes**, 10,000 acres of white quartz sand in southeastern Idaho. The Dunes are the traditional land of Shoshone-Bannock and Eastern Shoshone people and are currently overseen by the **U.S. Bureau of Land**



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**Management.** A large portion of the land is managed as a wilderness study area and is an important wintering habitat for elk, moose and deer. However, some areas of the sand dunes are open to off-road vehicles. The juxtaposition between protected wilderness and motorized recreation area gives the



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sand dunes a kind of tension, bringing to mind the uneasy relationship between environmental conservation, human recreation and resource extraction.

We woke up early to film this piece, wanting to catch the rising sun and dance in the quiet of the pre-dawn before the buzz of vehicles took over the land for the day. We witnessed small moments of beauty everywhere: lacy rodent tracks traversing the dunes, the swirling patterns made by grasses blowing around in the sand, clumps of tiny flowers and underbrush that punctuated the smooth expanse of the dunes. Our feet broke the cold surface of the sand and we watched the color of the dunes change from gray to orange to white as the sun rose. Wearing the naturally dyed dresses made us feel like part of the landscape, and when we moved together, we felt like sand moving in the wind. The rhythm of the music seemed to propel the sunrise, reminding us that earth is constantly in motion.

### **Choreography**

While we wanted the choreography to convey grief and helplessness, our movements and our process were also

full of joy, connection and hope. Joy comes from the unique bond that forms between dancers. We shared many tender moments in the studio during rehearsals, processing personal and collective grief as well as celebrating our bodies and each other. We use dance as a nonverbal tool to work through ideas, comment on society and process emotions. Movement can feel like an embodiment of inner thoughts that were previously intangible.

Dancing with our feet grounded on the earth and giving our loving attention to the land is an act of resensitizing ourselves to the inherent spirit of every plant, animal and grain of sand. Through our creative process, we push against the idea that the natural world is inanimate and therefore only valuable for our consumption.

Through exploration of duality, this dance piece encourages a nuanced view of invasive plants, land use and our emotional connection to place. We found that through the creation of this piece we were able to access a subtler form of communication: a place to share our grief and hope in the context of moving with the earth and each other.

You can watch the full film at [localearthcollective.com/grief](https://localearthcollective.com/grief).

### Credits

Film Produced by: Local Earth and Nathan Norby  
Choreographed by: Mariah Palmer and Sara Mannheimer  
Costumes by: Mariah Palmer and Sara Mannheimer  
Dancers: Anna Allen, Sara Mannheimer, Dorothy Burns, Ellie Oakley, Mariah Palmer, Dana Terzi  
Filmed on the traditional land of Shoshone-Bannock and Eastern Shoshone peoples

—*Mariah Palmer (she/her) and Sara Mannheimer (she/her) choreograph and perform as Local Earth Collective. They met in dance class and forged a friendship and creative partnership over post-class tea and conversation. Mariah is a fiber and ceramic artist and a designer has a passion for making art that incorporates natural elements. Sara is an academic and a musician, and brings a musicality, a love for performing and a passion for collaboration. Their dance pieces draw inspiration from nature and explore themes of human connection, inner worlds, and social and environmental justice.*

@sara\_mannheimer | @localearthstudio | @localearthcollective



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