

(in process)

Jennifer Monson's  
*Bird Brain*

by Ursula Eagly



In Williamsburg Brooklyn, building superintendents release their flocks of pigeons during the day and compete to get the most birds roosting in their cherished rooftop coops by nightfall. Fascinated by the kaleidoscopic patterns of these birds in flight, choreographer Jennifer Monson, 41, started seeing parallels between dance and avian movement. "A bird's sense of navigation is like a dancer's sense of location while improvising. Both have to know where they are, where they're going, and how fast they're going to get there," Monson says. "Birds learn their migratory route through exploration, repetition, and memory—the same process dancers use to learn a dance."

These thoughts evolved into *Bird Brain*, Monson's five-year dance touring project that follows the migratory patterns of animals. She started in 2001, when she and three dancers and a cameraman followed gray whales from Baja California in Mexico to Vancouver Island in Canada. Along the way, the group performed at nature preserves and arts venues. This fall, Monson and her crew will trace the ospreys' journey from Maine to Cuba and Venezuela; in spring 2004 they will follow geese and ducks from the Gulf of Mexico to central Canada. Finally, in the fall of 2005, they'll track the northern wheatear, a small thrush, from Scandinavia to West Africa.

"We're not trying to interpret the animal movement," Monson says. Instead, she uses navigation processes as choreographic structures. For instance, when she learned that animal groups can change formation faster than an individual can process information, Monson began working with her dancers so that they would become as closely attuned to each others' thoughts as birds in a flock or fish in a school.

Eventually, the dancers could sense each other's movement and react instantaneously to each other in their improvisations.

Monson works closely with scientists to accurately track the animals and learn more about their behavior on each migration. "There's a little part of me that wanted to be a biologist," she comments wistfully. As part of the gray whales tour, for instance, Monson organized panel discussions with environmentalists to help raise awareness of the conservation issues essential to *BirdBrain*. "Environmentalists are a lot like artists," she says. "They're just as passionate and underfunded."

Community outreach is major component of each tour. In addition to educating viewers about "their relationship to nature as consumers," Monson wants people to relish their own movement experiences. "I've always experienced the world in a kinetic way. I want to help other people to connect in that way as well."

*Bird Brain* will continue evolving, with each improvisation-based performance developing organically from previous dances. No single event will mark the culmination of the project, since its point is process, not product. Making a break with traditional approaches to choreography, *Bird Brain*'s inventiveness lies in its spontaneity, like a flock of birds bursting into the Brooklyn sky.

For more information, visit:  
[www.birdbraindance.org](http://www.birdbraindance.org)

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## ROSARIO, MEXICO



Dancers Emma Gorou, Alejandra Martorell, Astrud Angarita, and project coordinator Barbara Bryan (from left) enjoy their first meal in Mexico. On the gray whales tour, they drove in a minivan, camped in tents, and cooked under the stars.

**Journal entry:**  
**March 12, 2001**  
**Baja California**

De Baja California Norte a Baja California Sur: Camino de Contrastes: Donde el verdadero color de la naturaleza brilla en contraste con la pobreza y la lucha por sobrevivir estando tan cerca de la falsa riqueza del mas fuerte. Aun así todo es real e inocente, el verde, el movimiento humano y animal.

*From Baja California Norte to Baja California Sur: Road of Contrasts: Where the true color of nature contrasts with poverty and the struggle to survive right next to the false riches of the powerful. Everything—both human and animal movement—is still splendid and innocent.*

"Gray whales are a conservation success story," says Monson. "They were endangered and then were replenished after the Endangered Species Act. . . . The Endangered Species Act really works!"



**Journal entry:****March 16-20<sup>th</sup>, 2001****Guerrero Negro**

El lunes bailamos en la escuela primaria Amado Nervo y la Preparatoria bajo un sol achicharrante y con respuestas bastante opuestas de los estudiantes. Los primeros nos tuvieron como 15 minutos firmando autógrafos. Los segundos se burlaban durante la presentación y solo tres chicas vinieron a decirnos lo padre que estuvo.

*On Monday, we danced at the Amado Nervo primary and secondary schools under a sweltering sun; the students' reactions were decidedly different. The primary students kept us signing autographs for 15 minutes. The secondary students laughed all through the performance, and only three girls came to tell us how great it was.*

Las ballenas son otro cantar. Son enormes. Cuando solo sale el lomo me parecen reptiles, como dinosaurios marinos. Cuando las tocas te quieres ir con ellas a nadar y vivir allí para siempre. Las vimos jugar, darse vuelta para que las barriguitas vean el cielo, parece que hasta las ves reirse. Te miran o parece que te miran. Son enormes. Son hermosísimas. Son delicadas, tranquilas. Son increíbles.

*The whales are another story. They're huge. When only their backs show, they seem like reptiles, like marine dinosaurs. When you touch them, you want to go with them and swim and live there always. We saw them play and flip over so their bellies faced the sky; they almost seemed to be laughing at themselves. They look at you, or it seems like they do. They're huge. They're incredibly beautiful. They're delicate, tranquil. They're incredible.*

Fue difícil salir de allí. Era tan fácil despertar y simplemente estar. Las conversaciones sencillas. Los momentos, todos igualmente placidos desde ir a la letrina hasta mirar las estrellas, caminar en el agua congelada para meternos a las pangas y tocar las ballenas.

*It was difficult to leave there. It was so easy to wake up and simply be there. The simple conversations. The moments are all equally placid, from going to the latrine to looking at the stars, to walking in the chilly water to board the dinghy and touch the whales.*

—Alejandra Martorell (Translated by Susan Jackson)

**GUERRERO NEGRO, MEXICO**

Dancer Ermira Gorou and videographer Ben Speth in Guerrero Negro.

The spatial patterns of her dances are often parallel to those of a flock; the solos and duets that emerge from the group dance are ultimately consumed by ensemble dancing. Monson describes the movement itself as ranging from very subtle responses to our environment "such as the wind slipping across bare skin" to a more metaphoric experience of soaring and using the momentum of spiraling to propel us together through space.

(inprocess)

## RIALTO BEACH, WASHINGTON



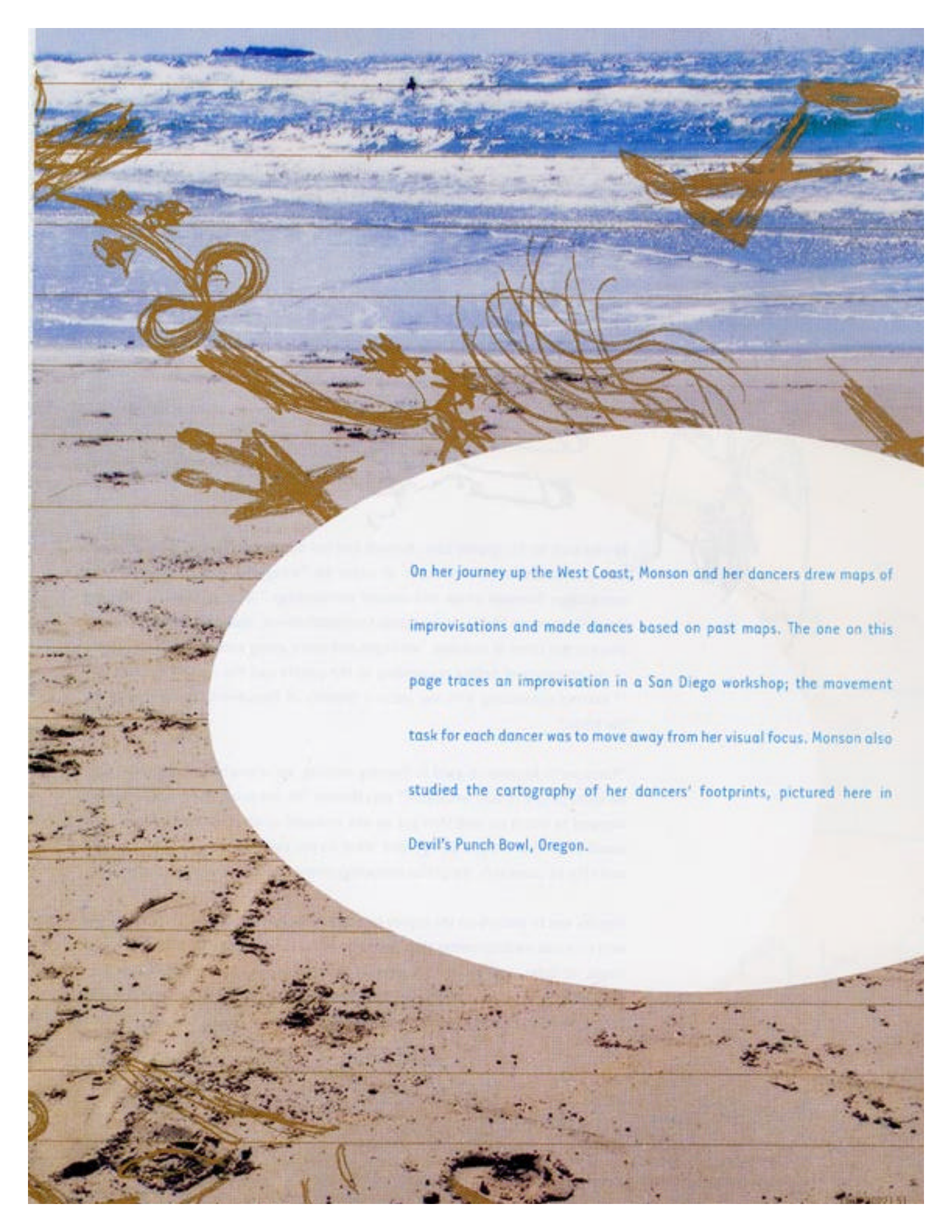
Ermira Goros, Alejandra Martorell, Barbara Bryan, and Astrud Angerita at Rialto Beach, Washington.

**Journal entry:**  
**May 6, 2001**  
**Rialto Beach, Washington**

Sitting on a hunk of driftwood, too much sun in my face. Looking out towards Hole in the Wall tide pools. The tide is almost out all the way out, the sun is dulled by a thin layer of cloud. Every now and then the wind stirs up. Its temperature is brisk. Some seagulls just yammering overhead. On my walk today I thought a lot about Alaska, finding fossils, the deep quiet of that place.

—Jennifer Monson





On her journey up the West Coast, Monson and her dancers drew maps of improvisations and made dances based on past maps. The one on this page traces an improvisation in a San Diego workshop; the movement task for each dancer was to move away from her visual focus. Monson also studied the cartography of her dancers' footprints, pictured here in Devil's Punch Bowl, Oregon.

