PERFORMING ECOLOGIES

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ANIMAL REALISM | BREATH AND ATMOSPHERE
DECOLONIAL PERFORMANCE PRACTICES | ECOLOGICAL THINKING AND EMBODIED PRACTICE
INTIMACY AND VIBRANT LANDSCAPES | CHOREOGRAPHIES OF PARTICIPATORY ECOLOGIES
THEATRICAL LANDSCAPES AND CLIMATE CHANGE | AFFECTIVE ECOLOGY IN EMBODYING CHARACTER
PERFORMATIVE INGESTION AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS | VIDEO GAMES AND ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
SITE RESPONSIVE PERFORMANCE AND CLIMATE CHANGE | PUPPETRY AND ECOPSYCHOLOGY
VISUAL NARRATIVE AND THE POST-HUMAN | EMPATHY AND SITE SPECIFIC ART PRACTICE
This edited volume is © the Performance of the Real Research Theme, University of Otago. Authors retain individual copyright over their original intellectual property. Papers re-printed from this volume should acknowledge the original source. All copyrighted materials included in this volume appear on the understanding that permission from the reproduction of these materials has been obtained individually by the author in whose work they appear.

The opinions expressed in this volume are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Performance of the Real Research Theme.

Published by: The Performance of the Real Research Theme, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand
ISSN 2463-6207
ISBN 978-0-473-57527-4
PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL
VOLUME II MAY 2021
PERFORMING ECOLOGIES SPECIAL ISSUE

6 The Air Between Us
Carol Brown

14 Visual Narratives & The Posthuman: Making Interspecies Connections Between Cryptic Creatures and Humans Tangible.
Suus Agnes Claessen

24 Performance and Climate Change: Evoking Theatrical Landscapes to Investigate Climate Change
Linda Hassall

32 COPEing: Participatory Performance Experiments For Taking Care Of...
Christina Houghton

41 Decolonial Performance Practice: Witnessing With an Ethic of Incommensurability
Morgan Johnson

48 The Matter of Fascia: Ecological Thinking Through Embodied Practice
Kerstin Kussmaul

61 Sounding Walks: Evoking Empathy Through Social, Sound and Walking Practices
Caroline McCaw & Vicki Smith

71 Stillness, Touch and Cultivating Intimacy with “Vibrant” Landscapes
Miriam Marler

80 Awkward Texts: Performative Ingestion in the Work of Performance Artist Kristin Prevallet and Poet Juliana Spahr
Robyn Maree Pickens

88 Bird Wings and Puppet Strings: Puppetry, Ecopsychology and Story
Sky River

95 Alexis Wright’s The Swan Book: Narrating Climate Change and Animist Realism
Priyanka Shivadas

102 To Be and Not To Be: the self and the other, twin elements in the affective ecology of embodying a character, (with apologies to William Shakespeare)
Adriann Smith

113 Present in Place: Lively Potentials of Site-Responsive Performance In An Era of Environmental Crisis
Gretel Taylor

122 Balancing Act: Playing Video Game Ecologies
James Tregonning
The current ecological crisis has become a major contention, forming a variety of compelling performances which mediate and serve a complex nexus of political, ethical and social agendas. Indeed, many writers on ecology are increasingly arguing that we have to face the fact that the world is, so to speak, “in the shit”, and that, somehow, we have to learn to live with/in it. In addition to attracting considerable media and scholarly attention this problem has sparked considerable activism and protest worldwide. Significant questions have been raised around how performance – in a broad sense – might contribute to the discussion and work towards a more promising ecological future.

The articles in this special issue were originally presented as papers at the Performing Ecologies conference hosted by the Performance of the Real Theme in Dunedin in November 2018. By drawing together scholars and creative practitioners from a variety of fields and artforms to focus on the subject of ‘performing ecologies’, this interdisciplinary journal edition provokes consideration of the role, importance and impact of performance and creative practice in our ‘learning to live with/in’ this ecological crisis. The papers discuss various ways in which ‘performing ecologies’ enable exploration of alternatives to dichotomies such as human and non-human, or human and nature. Performance forms such as dance, theatre, puppetry, playwriting, music and gaming are discussed in terms of their enabling critique of human exceptionalism and people’s ability to find alternate ways of being and belonging in a more-than-human world.

This special issue is dedicated to Prof Phil Bishop, who was a wonderful keynote panel presenter at the conference that has given rise to this special issue.
Performance of the Real

The Performance the Real Research Theme is a multidisciplinary project that investigates why representations and performances of the real are particularly compelling.

At its core is the study of how performance and performativity, in its many cultural, aesthetic and social forms and discourses represents, critiques, enacts/re-enacts and constructs/reconstructs the real.

This project includes the investigation of the impulses, desires and/or social and political impetuses behind the drive to represent the real.

The team of researchers offers the first project of its kind by comprehending the ethical, relational, political, social or formal issues involved in representing the real.

DIRECTOR

Dr Suzanne Little (Theatre Studies)

STEERING COMMITTEE

Dr Jennifer Cattermole (Music)

Dr Christina Ergler (Geography)

Associate Professor Hilary Halba (Theatre Studies)

Sofia Kalogeropoulou (Dance)

Dr Karyn Paringatai (Te Tumu: School of Māori, Pacific and Indigenous Studies)

Professor Hazel Tucker (Tourism)

Dr Suzanne Wardell (Social Anthropology)

WEBSITE   www.otago.ac.nz/performance-of-the-real/

TWITTER   @performingreal

FACEBOOK   Performance of the Real
THE AIR BETWEEN US

ABSTRACT

A phenomenology of atmospheric experience is often performed in dance tasking, but how might scientific understandings of meteorological change catalyse new dramaturgies of relation between breath and atmosphere drawing attention to our changing climate? In this writing, I discuss the dramaturgy for LungSong, a performance research project that draws together the labour of atmospheric science, place-responsive dance, videography and sound. The meteorological turn in art raises critical questions about the relation between performance and science, particularly in how we address changing architectures of air. Whilst methods and practices of choreography may provide opportunities for freeing the breath, global research into atmospheric change evidences planetary breathing that is in peril. Ground truthing in weather and atmospheric science calibrates the findings of remote instruments such as satellites, with land-based testing such as weather balloons. Specialising in measuring CFCs, Ozone, UV light levels and greenhouse gases, NIWA’s atmospheric research station in Lauder is well known for its ground truth data. In collaboration with scientists at the station, LungSong developed choreographic thinking for reconfiguring relations between ground and sky, human and non-human breathing, corporeal and cosmological systems of breath, in an atmosphere that is shared. Situating the research praxis through intercultural and interdisciplinary research, through partnership with indigenous artists, professional dancers, and scientists, the emergent dramaturgy culminated in an audiowalk, public talk, video installation and rooftop performance.

You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects. You have the individuality of a day, a season, a year, a life – a climate, a wind, a fog, a swarm, a pack (regardless of its regularity). (Deleuze 1987)

Our bodies, suffused with atmospheres, ancestors and chemical compounds produced by sunlight are ‘meteorontological’ (Wallace Art Trust 2018). We are the weather. And yet an apocalypse of the skies threatens the futures of our children. Though life on earth may cease to exist as a result of the warming atmospheric system, the planet will continue long after we have gone (McKenzie 2019). Critically, climate change concerns material agencies that impact on biomass and energy, it erases borders, geological and nanographic time, and accelerates extinction events. Though the era of climate change has mutated systems we are dependent upon beyond 20th century anthropomorphic models, it has been, until relatively recently, outside representation. Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook, in the Foreword to Art and the Anthropocene (Turpin & Davis 2015), describe the current state of depletion, decay, mutation and exhaustion resulting from Climate Chaos as calling for new modes of address. What, we ask ourselves, can the arts do? In particular, how might choreographic thinking, applied through an intercultural and interdisciplinary research project addressing our aerial bloodstream through place-based performance and media, propose new perceptual thresholds for reckoning with the temper(ature) of our times?

LungSong is a multi-modal interdisciplinary collaboration that has emerged through our concerns to confront the question of the sensual address of performance from within a condition of climate emergency. As a creative team of artists, engaged in dialogues with scientists and embodied research with critical sites of atmospheric research data capture, we seek
to open thresholds of perception, to enable movement and the sensation of the movement of breath within our bodies, to be tuned to the critical function of a breathing planet that is in trouble.

Our approach is premised upon an urgent need to embrace “intergenerational accountability for the future” (Fensham et al. 2018).

If much of what happens in our atmosphere is invisible and inaudible, and seems only to be revealed by the quantitative measurements of science, how might an interdisciplinary and intercultural performance work and related activities attune us to the unseen pathologies of the atmospheric system, our relations with and of the world through cultures of breath, both human and non-human? What new modes of address might be catalysed by such an approach? The performance research project LungSong partnered the sky, as home to ancestors, with data from a planet – Gaia – in distress.

Between March 2018 and its premiere in Wanaka for The Colour Festival (6th April 2019), and subsequent performance in Auckland for the EcoWest Festival (13th April), interdisciplinary and intercultural performance research shaped an ecology of relations that underscored LungSong as process and event/s (Scoones 2019; Brown 2019b). This collaborative labour overcame disciplinary differences and methodologies through a shared sense of purpose and values in relation to environment, and the urgent need expressed by the scientists to ‘get the message out’. At the heart of this project, however, was the simple act of breathing.

Where is it?
Inside/outside
Flowing
formless
virtual

unmeasurable
This relation which is never stable
Inhaling
Exhaling
Constantly recomposing
This respiration
This mouth that speaks, that out-pours – voice, moisture, heat – that over-runs itself in language and longing
This incomplete body, this incoherent fragment, joined by the fragments of other voices, the traces of other breaths
This air between us
(Brown 2019).

Scaling between human breathing and planetary breathing, LungSong sought to produce spatial and choreographic relations that attune audience and performers climactically, and corporeally, to our aerial bloodstream. By addressing diverse cultures of breath – indigenous Māori, Eastern and Western – we sought to “make sense of air” (Welton 2018), furthering and complexifying discussions in performance studies on the role of the atmospheric in performance (McCormack 2018). Cultures of breath, I argue, compliment physiological understandings of breath, aligning with a natureculture view of the world. Partnering with indigenous artists and scholars towards an expanded conception of epistemology through its cosmological foundations, we explored how to think, move and connect in atmospheres that carried not just phenomenal potential, but also genealogical and ancestral relations.

For over 30 years, atmospheric research scientists have been collecting data relating to the ozone and the chemistry of the atmosphere at NIWA in Lauder, Central Otago; their models reveal an upward trend of the tropopause height associated with increasing greenhouse gases. In sonifying and visualising this data as material for choreographies, LungSong brought climate change science into conversation with the cultural breaths of artists who sing, move and speak through live and mediated presence of the changes and challenges we are confronting.

2 LungSong was created by Carol Brown (choreographer), Russell Scoones (composer), Tia Reihana (performer and researcher), Nic Faye (videographer), Emilia Rubio (dancer), Maryam Bagheri Nesami (dancer), Jasmin Canuel (dancer) and Neža Jamnikar (dancer). Richard McKenzie (scientist), John Robinson (technician), Richard Querel (scientist) and Wills Dobson (scientist) collaborated with the artists through their residency at NIWA’s weather station in Lauder, Central Otago New Zealand.
Drawing on different ways of knowing – including kaupapa Māori, Practice as Research, feminist eco-sexuality, scientific investigation and technological innovation – LungSong sought to develop relationships and processes that contribute to climate change art (its expression and understanding) through public performance and talks.

LungSong sought to develop connecting, overlapping and dissonant conversations between the ways in which Mātauranga Māori embodies the world and the ways that meteorology and atmospheric science describe it. The research took place at the interface between Māori and non-Māori methods and practices. In respecting the integrity of each knowledge system, the research itself became a host for crossover discussions and encounters that sought an ethics and aesthetics of practice that was reciprocal, respectful and equitable.

LungSong research and development sought to develop a transdisciplinary methodology to contribute towards enhanced, healthy and sustainable relationships with the natural world through artistic research. As ecological performance, it was important that the work evolved in situ, within environments where we could feel the movement of air and be awake to its whakapapa, or ancestral presence. At Rauhoto Marae near Taupo, we initiated tasks such as:

- Walking with the stratosphere across the atea (the ground in front of the whare or meeting house);
- Moving for the length of ha or breath; whole body as a taonga pūoro (indigenous wind instruments usually carved from bone or wood); body as instrument for music and sound; polyphonic chanting; and, being breathed by another through intercorporeal touch and sensing.

Starting with the corporeal experience of breath, we were attentive to the provocation of French feminist eco-philosopher Luce Irigaray, who claims that we have “forgotten to breathe” (Irigaray 1999). The privileging of groundedness, of terrain over atmosphere, has led, according to Irigaray, to the “forgetting of air”. In her critique of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Irigaray suggests that though we all know how to breathe, we neglect to breathe ‘consciously’, connecting our breath with other spheres of human life and political action. For her, the conscious practice of breathing offers a non-hierarchical mode of exchange providing the basis for a non-essentialist politics of sexual difference and environmental awareness.

So, air is an element that we can never fully appropriate. We can simply exist within it, use it to sustain our body and spirit, and share it with others. For this matter, breathing unites us with the others, at the same time that it underlines our individuality; it generates proximity and distancing at
Discourses of dance, in particular since the development of modern dance in the early 20th century in Europe, were founded on the releasing of breath, something I have explored previously in addressing how dance genealogies of presence through intercorporeal transmission transmit archives of breathing practices (Brown 2017). Foregrounding breath as the source, initiator and motivator of movement is a tacit knowledge for most contemporary dancers, and yet, we seldom address our trainings in breath practices within a cultural paradigm. A challenge for the project research was to address different cultures of breath that are founded on ontologies of breath-body-atmosphere relations. This aspect of the research involved workshops and wānanga (learning communities), including a noho marae (gathering), led by different contributors to the project who introduced practices of breath-body-atmosphere relations from their distinct practices, including Wushu (Yin-Chi Lee), Taonga Pūoro (Libby Johns), Patu (Ria Paki) and Somatics (Neža Jamnikar). Documenting these practices through a shared blog, Ao o Hā (the breathing world), Pneûma, Prana and Chi’i were explored for their capacity to enable “bearing the other within me through breath” (Irigaray, cited in Škof & Holmes 2013, p.7). Whilst we sought to acknowledge a diversity of approaches within a global atmosphere of shared air, we were particularly attuned to the Māori understanding of hau, given the research was taking place within Aotearoa New Zealand with artists of Māori and non-Māori descent. In combining artistic, scientific and technological processes, Māori notions of environmental sustainability were the underscore of the project’s purpose.

Māori understandings of hau, the ‘breath or wind of life’, provided a guiding force in the research. For Ann Salmond, hau is a relationality structure between humans and the non-human that is key to understanding a Māori worldview. When I met with Anne Salmond to discuss her research, she reaffirmed to me the importance as a Pākehā scholar not to mistake ha or breath for hau. As she notes, “hau drives the whole world, not just human relations” (Salmond 2017). The concept of hau proposes a ‘middle ground’ where “recursive exchanges, identity takes shape, and shifts” (p.13). Relationships are forged across time, space, and worlds, which are enacted and reinforced through ritual and exchange. Hau is a dynamic liminal space where past, present and future “intermingle and change places” as people, ancestors, and cosmologies meet (p.13). The hau, or wind of life, flows from one to the other and back again in an endless cycle, nurturing, sustaining and transforming all whom it touches. This, according to Salmond in Tears of Rangi, is a core principle of te ao Māori. Salmond explains how this Māori worldview underpinned early encounters with Europeans, and how an ontology of hau structured cross-cultural engagement, and also shaped the grounds upon which communication could take place.

Hau in LungSong provided an image of thought that, as Māori and non-Māori, we sought to honour in the conduct or tikanga of the research. Tia Reihana introduced wairua to our rehearsals on the rooftop of Lopdell House, demonstrating how breath, the movement of air, and a deep activation of her core could fire up the movement pathways and intent of the dancers. Kasina Campbell was a kaitiaki for crossing the ātea of the Ruahoto marae as we explored ‘breathing with the stratosphere’, and Ria Paki trained the performers in how to cut the air with a patu (hand-held weapon carved from stone, bone or wood) drawing on her extensive knowledge of Māori martial arts, at the same time evoking cultural memories of different warfare techniques that Māori used when confronted by the British army during the New Zealand Wars. In this way, cultures of breath, drawing upon somatosensory trainings in contemporary dance, were brought into dialogue with Te Ao Māori cosmological thinking.

An understanding of hau allowed us to address the slow, deep time of the atmosphere, its intergenerational presence, making it both palpable and sense-able. It also raised the important issue of, as Tia Reihana asked in her interview with NIWA scientist Richard McKenzie,
“what does climate change mean for our whānau?” (Scoones 2019). The philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, in responding to the earlier 20th century devastations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki made an appeal to remain ‘exposed’, that is, to endure our encounter with catastrophic loss by allowing ourselves to sense it (Nancy 2015). In LungSong’s audiowalk performance, Living Archives of Breath for the Colour Festival, Tia Reihana encounters the audience who are guided by a soundscape of voices to meet her on a pathway at the edge of Lake Wanaka. Her wero (challenge) as the audience approached was fierce with ihi (presence) and wehi. Slicing through air with wairua, her pūkana was both warning and challenge. Leading the audience down off the path and to a beach strewn with driftwood and lake weed, she paused at the edge of the lake before continuing to walk into the water. Leaving the gathered audience on the beach, the voice of ten year-old Cassidy Scoones speaks of how serious the situation is that we are in. A second performer, Neẑa Jamnikar, is sighted/sited on a pontoon floating on the Lake in the distance and underneath the magnificent maunga (mountain) of Mt. Roy and Black Peak of the Harris Mountains. The two performers move in and out of rhythm with each other and in dialogue with the movement of air, clouds, awa (lake) and maunga. Their gestures call the audience to see-feel the depth of the sky. They signal to maunga and awa, evoking the presence of hau in 360 dimensions. Pointing in different directions, and measuring the air between index fingers, they map the atmosphere to their bodies, quantifying the self. Fingers which extended away from the body are then placed on the tinana (body) as if to measure the sky against the human proportions of hip bones and ribs. In this re-scaling, mapping gesture, the performers propose that we read them as barometers of change, and, that we are deeply entangled with the weather. As receivers and transmitters, their actions become performance indicators of the state we are in. This is reinforced by Cassidy addressing the adult audience:

There no Planet B. This is our world, how and why are we doing this? Just stop and think about his for a moment. Just think how serious this is. If we don’t stop this, then suddenly, you won’t be able to breathe. I know that this is quite a serious thing, and that we should stop this now. (Cassidy Scoones in Living Archive of Breath, Scoones 2019)

Tia plunges churning arms repeatedly into the cold lake water breaking its surface, feeding and cycling oxygen and hydrogen with breath, stimulating more oxygen to flow through particles of water and air. Under the clear blue sky, Cirrus clouds and clouds with wave structures induced by upper level winds in proximity to the mountains become a slowly mutating aerial choreography, and are reflected in the lake surface as a mirrored world (Liley 2019). Audience absorb the experience whilst listening to the sound of a pūrerehua (bull roarer) in the soundscape. Revolutions of air, caught and spun, create vibratile sound waves that whistle and whirr. At the same time, Tia skims the surface of the lake water whilst Neẑa brushes through the air. They revolve in relation, rotating on their axes like planets in dialogue. Their co-presence, in rhythms that fall in and out of unison, create micro-cycles of turbulence that we can identify with larger cycles of weather and planetary forces.

A recalibration of the senses is something that is called for by philosophers and environmentalists, including Karen Barad (through entangled intra-actions between humans and non-humans), Timothy Morton (hyperobjects and ecology and without nature), Donna Haraway (staying with the trouble and becoming cyborg and lichen), Bruno Latour (the science of care) and Luce Irigaray (vegetal thinking). However, beyond and preceding these posthumanist and environmental thinkers, there exists indigenous knowledge of the environment that remains relatively under-acknowledged in discourses on climate change art (Todd 2015).

The term ‘Anthropocene’, as the basis for posthumanist accounts of human-environment relations and climate change, is critiqued by a number of indigenous scholars who see this term as perpetuating white Euro-American thought and the continuing violence of colonialism. This is evidenced in meteorological history where, for instance, Robert FitzRoy (Captain of the HMS
Beagle and former Governor General of New Zealand) is credited as the inventor of the weather forecast as we know it (The Weather Book) (Moore 2015). FitzRoy developed a system for reading changes in temperature and wind and for making storm predictions. He analysed atmospheric data through the use of barometers that were positioned around the globe and telegraphed storm warnings and weather predictions to the Met Office (Moore 2015). FitzRoy lives on in the name of one of the sea areas in the British marine forecasts, a mountain in Patagonia, numerous streets in New Zealand and in New Zealand’s National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA) in Lauder where an IBM supercomputer the ‘FitzRoy’ is named in honour of him.

Feminist geographer Juanita Sundberg takes such accounts of the origins of ‘the weather’ as erasing non-European ontologies and understandings that preceded the discovery of the barometer. She writes, “literature continuously refers to a foundational ontological split between nature and culture as if it is universal” (Sundberg 2013). Indigenous epistemologies, as an alternative, urge scholars to enact the sense of a ‘pluriverse’, in other words, a world that is not ‘universal’ but one in which “many worlds fit” (p.59). This understanding of pluriversal thinking in relation to decolonising the nature/culture binary, forms a foundation for LungSong, as a project which activates movement and multiple modes of voicing to open the sky through intercultural and interdisciplinary practice.

BREATHING

Movement is necessary to bring a decolonising methodology of pluriversal thinking to fruition: “as we humans move, work, play, and narrate with a multiplicity of beings in place, we enact historically contingent and radically distinct worlds/ontologies” (Sundberg 2013, p.39). A methodology of decolonisation through movement aligns closely with experiences of working in intercultural workshops in Aotearoa New Zealand, in particular with Māori performance artists and scholars including Charles Koroneho (tinana/whenua), Louise Potiki-Bryant (whaahua/coming to form) and Jack Gray (Atamira, Mitimiti). First Nations scholar Sarah Hunt (2014) reaffirms the value of dance as a way to negotiate the demands of colonial academic institutions and praxis, as she claims, it is through dance that Indigenous ontologies are brought to life.

CONCLUSION

How might we come to our senses to bring about the kind of action that climate chaos demands? To attune not only to the sensory properties of air, but also to our imbrication within atmospheric conditions? In LungSong, rather than represent the weather, we sought to become climate. Climate, not as an isolated object but as a set of interlinked processes. Breathing, essential to dancing, operated through an expanded awareness and consciousness of planetary breathing (understood within atmospheric research science) and hau (within a Māori worldview) within an inter-generational ‘embodied telling.’

We are all breathing the same air. Through inter-arts, intergenerational and intercultural collaboration, we invited witnessing air, atmospheres, breaths and cosmologies in relation. Breathing at its most elemental level is an exchange of chemicals and particulate matter that happens invisibly. The body is an apparatus that is in constant exchange with atmospheric systems.

Nature courses through us.
We are testing the air.
Being breathed by the planet.
On air.
Releasing breaths.
Engaging in inspiration and expiration.
becoming conscious, more conscious of how we are here.
Sharing a living archive of breaths.

Rather than engage with the Anthropocene as a teleological fact implicating all humans as equally culpable for the current ecological state of the world, how might I as a Pākeha (white European) dance scholar support the ongoing
emergence of non-dominant expressions of ecological imagination through a sustained creative research process in partnership with Māori dancers and scholars? In challenging ourselves to respond to climate change, how might dance, music, and digital design, as modes of address that offer aesthetic, discursive, visual, kinesthetic, vocal and sensual strategies not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, colonialism, political moralism, or psychological depression, have something to offer the pluriverse?

LungSong used digital technologies’ radical potential to alter perceptions of space, time and atmosphere to map between the personal and the planetary scale. Audio recordings of NIWA’s Spectrometer (a device for measuring the sun ray’s hitting particles of air) were edited as part of a soundscape that included Tia’s interview with Richard McKenzie, and listened to on headphones worn by audience-participants as they witnessed the performers. 360 cameras were installed inside the satellite sphere where data is captured from NASA’s passing satellites and two of the performers – Neža and Emilia, engaged in an improvised exchange of breaths holding and releasing their human breath whilst the satellite dish tracked the skies to capture atmospheric data. Drone videography captured the performers emerging from the research station with its advanced computing, to walk across fields of long grass populated by cows whose belching contributes significantly to New Zealand’s methane emissions. In sonifying, capturing through video, and representing scientific research as well as juxtaposing this with the uncanny presence of the performers, we sought to make connections between human breaths and the earth breathing, bridging science, art and technology. This process was triggered by my email correspondence with one of NIWA’s technicians, John Robinson who described Gaia in trouble:

The daily ‘diurnal’ breathing of the Earth (sucking in CO2, exhaling oxygen) occurs on a larger timeframe over a year, up and down, but unfortunately rising each time to a higher level of CO2 as we burn more fossil fuels – more patterns.

(Robinson, email correspondence with Carol Brown 02/11/17)

LungSong coterminously addresses climate change and social change through the sensuous address of the creative and performing arts and design. As we face the devastating effects of climate emergency, we see the role of the arts as essential in telling stories and communicating through voice and gesture the changes and challenges we are confronting. Rescaling big data from climate change science into visual
patterns, avatars and sounds, listening to the voices and movements of artists and scientists who draw upon their experiences and knowledge, respecting stories and cosmological thinking that is older than climate change, and finding space to express the sense of loss that peoples feel in relation to disappearing habitats, LungSong sung into the cracks between disciplinary knowledges and temporal and spatial dimensions to awaken the senses.

LungSong moved between the intimately corporeal experience of breathing (our most vital gesture), and air as substance and atmosphere, our aerial bloodstream. Lungs, voices and respiratory systems became the interface for an engagement with the world and its atmospheric conditions in these ‘strange climes’. LungSong was a gathering and a rallying of performers who created and exchanged breaths in protest and lament, contemplating and confronting climate chaos. Singing a new dialect, a ‘babble’ of syllables and movement, they created their own war and peace ceremonies, uniting in rituals. Shifting between realities, they took on different identities; inhabiting virtual avatars, they became environmental warriors who travelled through solar and data dust clouds. They sang and howled from the edge of the world, and the edges of seven heavens. The echoes of their songs awakened struggling hearts and activated minds.

LungSong combined the sound of the sun, waiata (song) of wind and the movement of breaths. Drawing on ceremony with a punk attitude, fearless and furious, our anger cut the air. This event was a lament, a performance cosmology, a yearning whole body cry. Moving between fact and fiction, illusion and disillusion, the performance dramaturgy of LungSong invited audience to witness and experience the temper(ature) of our times.

REFERENCES


Liley, B. (2019) Email communication with author.


Randerson, J. (2018) Weather as Medium: Towards a Meterological Art. Massachusetts, MIT.


INTRODUCTION

The separation between humans and other life forms is not as significant as is often believed (Smith 2013, Braidotti 2013). While it might be relatively easy to notice similarities and exchanges with companion animals like dogs, what about an earwig? A mushroom? A patch of moss? While an all too familiar sight, could they be any more alien?

Starting from a concern about the possibility of life for humans and other beings, I follow environmental philosophers Rose and Van Dooren (2011), who are concerned with ethical questions about the exclusion of living beings from consideration and protection in times of extinction on a climate-changing planet. While big and beautiful tigers and pandas are used to represent the extinction crisis, they highlight countless of unloved others are silently disappearing into extinction. If we already struggle to find room in the world for the ones we love, what hope remains for the underdogs, the small and cryptic creatures who nevertheless contribute to earth’s ecosystems and biodiversity richness? In reference to insects specifically, Loo and Sellbach highlight how a failure to acknowledge our entanglement with the rest of the earth has consequences for human possibilities for life:

 [...] we can no longer afford to think about ethics in separation from insects, and the big and small edges of sentience they evoke. Insects are
reminders that we are ecologically entangled in ways we often only dimly perceive and are impacting the environment and other species in damaging ways we frequently ignore. At the same time, through our failure to acknowledge these co-affecting relations, we live in a world where we are increasingly vulnerable to unpredictable forces of nature that are indifferent to us, to our gestures of sentiment and feeling. (2015, pp.80-81)

In posthuman dreams, humans (especially western societies) stop seeing themselves as unique and isolated entities removed from the rest of the world, but as fully “integrated with the world in all its manifestations, including nature, technology and other beings” (Pepperell 2003, p.100). The posthuman ethics that I’m concerned with here involves, ideally, the following components to draw together humans and nonhumans, even the cryptic ones. Firstly, an animate recognition of “earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects” (Plumwood 2002, p.176) who are “bound up in relationships of nourishment, care, meaning making” (Van Dooren and Rose 2016, p.91). Secondly, an awareness of the hybridity of existence where beings always live with, within and from one another (Smith 2013). Thirdly, a bodily attentiveness to ourselves and our surroundings, including nonhumans, and finally, an openness to being transformed by them (Braidotti 2013; Plumwood 2002). Notably, these components are not new, as they overlap with animist discourses of many indigenous, oral peoples of the world (Abram 1996). The perspective of affect is helpful here (Singh 2018). As Hustak and Myers (2012) highlight, the term “affective ecologies” calls us to see that nonhumans are not automatons, but responsive and sensing bodies that involve themselves creatively, improvisational, fleetingly in affectively charged, sensory relations – that a bee is not just a victim of trickery by the bee-mimicking orchid, but an agent attracted to colours, smells and beyond. Affect also points to human emotion or empathy (Von Mossner 2017), and opens up what it might mean to care: not just to shelter others, but to be curious and open to others (Hinchliffe 2008).

Yet where to start? As Smith (2011) points out, while attending to our interconnections with the rest of the world opens up ethical possibilities, they are complex, often intangible, not entirely comprehensible, and often unnoticed: we take part in communities with “myriad beings which appear to each other in all kinds of ways, as commensual, as mutualistic, as parasite, as prey, as resources, as co-evolved and evolving beings; [some] rare, some common; some specialized, some generalist; some crucial to the whole community’s survival, some hardly at all” (p.41).

Importantly, “what appears to human beings is not all that appears, that what affects human beings directly is not all that has effects, that what has significance in its appearance to and effects on human beings has different significance for other beings” (Smith 2013, p.24; 2011). As such, all tools for getting a better grasp on connectivity, and for creating settings where new possibilities can emerge, are much needed to enable an ethics that looks further than the charismatic megafauna and that respects a wide range of beings (see also Weston 2004). Here, I turn to visual narrative as a method to (re)situate humans ecologically and nonhumans ethically (Plumwood 2002), and provide possibilities for making even the most cryptic creatures less alien.

**SENSE AND STORY: LINKING CRYPTIC CREATURES AND VISUAL NARRATIVES**

Visual narratives, sense and story. Through stories, readers can be invited into a curiosity about other ways of experiencing the world. Van Dooren and Rose (2012, 2016) even propose ‘storying’ as something that nonhumans do too, as they interpret their surroundings and make sense of them in meaningful sequences. Moreover, Taylor (2014) highlights the role of visual depictions in helping to increase our valuing and understanding of cryptic creatures through inventive and documentary components. What opportunities emerge in their combination? Visual narratives are here considered broadly as expressions that tell a story through images (with or without words). These can manifest in a variety of ways, as part of an historical continuum (e.g. as discussed by McLoud 1994). I mention examples of historical books that blend image...
and text, art and science, and also draw from visual language and art more broadly, while paying particular attention to comics and graphic novels (longer narratives in comics format). These are often characterised by sequences of separate, unmoving images or units referred to as panels, yet also manifest in experimental formats like abstract comics and poetry.

Visual narratives provide particular possibilities for making interspecies connections more tangible, from the macro to the micro. Sense and story feed into one another, for both creators and readers/viewers. To start with, sensory participation and observation can fuel narrative processes, while narratives can also serve as a starting point for noticing them in the first place. As I will show, visual narratives involve hybrid, multi-scalar, patterned and embodied practices that make them suitable for posthuman concerns. Through three interrelated themes – communications, patterns, and hybridity – in relation to narrative techniques and possible engagements with them, I highlight how visual narratives can make visible and (de)familiarise repeating forms, processes and multi-sensory experiences across scales, which can draw human and nonhuman worlds closer together.

I give examples from various artists, and my own narratives exhibited during the Performing Ecologies conference. The latter were sensory experiments in noticing and responding to everyday microcommunities of invertebrates, moss, and fungi. Titled Loving the Unloved, the exhibit presented a range of ‘micro’ comics and explored the processes involved in noticing and taking part in nonhuman life stories, through observations of movements (moult, pollinating, the dispersal of tiny bodies that cling to human boots); revealing patterned shapes under a microscope; providing food and shelter in the nooks and crannies of homes, gardens and insect hotels; and imagining nonverbal interspecies communications that include humans.

(NON)HUMAN COMMUNICATIONS

Heidegger’s claim is compelling: “We – mankind – are a conversation. The being of men is founded in language” (1965, p.277). Understandings of the sensory components of language can help us to move beyond the human-nature divide, and visual narratives provide possibilities to tease them out. In challenging the idea that humans are separate from the rest of the world through their linguistic abilities, Kohn (2013) offers a way to think about human language as one of many ways in which living beings engage in meaning-making and interacting with surroundings. Both humans and nonhumans have the ability to create, interpret and respond to each other’s signs, and such forms of communication happen in embodied, multi-sensory ways. For example, when looking for a mate, slugs can give their slime trails a special taste that other slugs can ‘read’, and if the other slug feels the same way, they can try to find them via the trail (Attenborough 2005), and mosses can emit chemicals that attract springtails (Rosenstiel et al. 2012).

Humans, in turn, make sense of their surroundings beyond linguistic structures, like through spatial orientation (“up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral”; Johnson and Lakoff 1981, p.14), and senses like sounds, smells, and tastes. Such engagements have a wider range of applications than initially apparent: from making sense of other beings, to reading and creating comics (see Hague 2014 for a detailed overview on comics and the senses). Johnson (2008) writes that “[m]eaning traffics in patterns, images, qualities, feelings, and eventually concepts and propositions” (p.9), thereby challenging the priority of language in shaping our thoughts. Moreover, even words can bear traces of our surroundings, as sound can be suggestive of meaning. Onomatopoeia and other expressive words mimic environmental sounds: bang, splash, whoosh, crack, smack, rush, gush, roar, howl, grumble – and are often used in comics. These words remind us of expressive, rhythmical and gestural entities beyond the human, and that our language did not develop in isolation (Abram 1996). As such, possibilities exist for building bridges between human and nonhuman worlds in processes of embodied attentiveness.

Understood (bio)semiotically as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Kohn 2013, p.31).
Nonverbal communications are crucial for gaining knowledge and new perspectives to build ethical relationships upon (Plumwood 2002).

The senses are directly relevant to visual narratives. Looking at conventions in visual language broadly, we can notice how visual expressions combine dynamic and sensory experiences by calling upon a synaesthetic elements. For example, cartoons may visualise off-smells through yellow-greenish waft shapes; sounds may be expressed through wave lines, electricity through zigzags; touch and movement can be suggested through straight or curved lines (e.g. conveying the motion of a finger pressing against a surface). On menus, a spicy taste can be symbolised through a flame; and we associate hot and cold water taps with red and blue colours. Since comics often combine these techniques with expressive words and/or close-up techniques, even invisible things can appear. The wind can become visible through written ‘whoosh’ sounds and movement lines, while close-ups may reveal minute entities in a glance, like imperceptible spores carried on the breeze.

Such techniques have familiarising implications. As Mahmutovic and Nunes (2017) highlight, through juxtaposition and a play with scale – zooming in and out on individual insects and the swarm, in side by side panels – small creatures can be made more visible while readers/viewers can take on several perceptual positions. This happens in Miyazaki’s manga series Nausicaä where we are reminded that humans can experience intimacy through an encounter with an insect, while not losing sight of the bigger picture.

The wider shot gives the viewers a sense of a swarm of indistinguishable copies of the [insect-like] Ohmu. When the Ohmu are drawn as hardly different from the sand, a character says that the entire seaside is buried in the insects. This perspective is contrasted to Nausicaä’s micro encounter with the individual larvae. She is trying to communicate with the baby insect as the means of saving the swarm. We see that the big picture, that is saving the swarm and understanding the larger issue with their behavior, begins with the intimate moment with the small creature. (n.p.)

These oscillations between macro and micro enable different kinds of charisma. Suddenly, the swarm entity becomes an assemblage of individuals whose ‘face’ becomes visible. Drawing from Lorimer (2007), they can appeal to feral charisma (appeal of the ‘yuck’ factor), ecological charisma (a link with more familiar animals), and aesthetic charisma (visually appealing frames). Together they form an encouragement to see connections with organisms that may otherwise seem completely unrelatable (Fern, Nash, and...
Nonverbal sense-making is open to ongoing exploration as our knowledge expands, yet there is simplicity in it, too. In the pictured works (Fig. 1 and 2), I visualise silent conversations between humans, insects, and flowers. The smell that ladybugs emit when threatened deters birds and also smells bad to humans, urging us to move away. Similarly, pincers of earwigs likely function to impress predators and competitors, but can also be effective in intimidating humans (Kleinpaste 2005). Alternatively, we send invitations to them, whether unintended (an uncovered crack in the wall), or intended, by planting flowers which we can appreciate in our own ways. Even the most disparate entities can have shared sensory preferences. In sum, visualising the senses means making nonhuman less silent, and can show that, while there is always more going on than we can grasp, we might already know more than we thought we did.

REPEATING PATTERNS AND FRACTALS

Recognising repeating patterns across scales provides another way to move towards post-anthropocentric thought (Kohn 2013). Patterns in the world can be recognised as forms or shapes like fractals (self-similar patterns repeated across scales), branching patterns, waves, grids, networks, and spirals. They allow us to see connections between otherwise disparate entities, making at once the unfamiliar more familiar, while defamiliarising the things we knew, including humans and cryptic creatures. Yet, noticing patterns is not always obvious. Design, architecture and art all have valuable roles to play here. Visual media can reveal how a magnified body of a small organism such as mould (Fig. 3), can resemble larger phenomena in form, like a flower meadow. Such perceptions have aesthetic implications, as they enable a sense of wonder, curiosity, and beauty; their recognition can bind human and nonhuman worlds together, from branching shapes of tree branches and leaf veins to the paintings of Jackson Pollock (Taylor et al. 2011), or the curvy shapes of larvae, mushrooms and Kandinsky’s biomorphic paintings (Tiernan 2013).

Moreover, patterns involve movements, rhythms, and transformations that happen over various spatial and temporal scales: from seasonal cycles, (insect) metamorphoses, and self-organising processes like whirlpool formations, to unfolding human lives and stories (Kohn 2013; Abram 1996). As Peirce (1931) describes in his semiotic theories, the world can be characterised by “the tendency of all things to take habits” (p.101). Patterns can unite human and biological domains practically, as Kohn (2013) describes for Amazonian communities: the branching river, the route of
the fish that swim in it, the dispersion of rubber trees that grow along the course of the river, and the rubber merchants situated alongside the river, all follow the same branching pattern across different scales. As such, Kohn argues that “form need not stem from the structures we humans impose on the world” and can instead “emerge in the world beyond the human” (p.183), as “a product of constraints of possibility” (pp.159-60).

In turn, rhythmic patterns, like seasonal changes, affect humans and nonhumans in their own ways – like our moods and activities (Abram 2010). An awareness of and desire to involve oneself in life’s patterns is common among indigenous people; for example, the presence of certain insects can indicate the right time of year for harvesting a particular food source (Rose 2005).

Stories and visual language provide further ways to make patterns appear and participate in them. As soon as lines and dots appear on a blank page, it is hard not to see some kind of structure, pattern or figurative representation. Visual symbols like the spiral can make the line between abstract thought, literal representation, and observation, thin: an understanding of a spiral as the unfolding of new life (like the Māori koru) can be directly drawn from vegetative spiral shapes, like the unrolling fern frond (O’Connell and Airey 2005). Similarly, stories provide a way to become involved in patterns, rhythms and dynamisms: they unfold, can be repeatedly read/told, and are open to dynamic and varied versions and understandings. After all, many patterns are ever-shifting and can affect shifts in our perceptions, too (Abram 1996, p.64). Comics provide further possibilities for revealing patterns through representation and arrangement across panels and pages. Experiments in form occur especially in contemporary comics. Perhaps this is no coincidence: might traditional narrative forms, with a clear flow of beginning, middle, and end, Baetens (2018) asks, not always be so suitable for conveying the complexity of multispecies storyworlds?

In the Chilean graphic novel Informe Tunguska (Figueroa and Romo 2009), repeated motifs make similarities in form visible, like branching patterns in the anatomy of a human hand, plant veins, roads, trees or patterns of rock erosion. In their analysis, King and Page (2017) highlight that through juxtaposition within and across panels, and a play with scale that lays side by side successive zoom-outs and zoom-ins, the reader/viewer is constantly ‘tricked’: what first appeared to be a close up of an invertebrate, turns out to be a detail of a pattern on a chair. As such, there are “continual confusion[s]” (p.167) between organisms and representations in design, art, and beyond. In turn, a play with the convention of ‘suspension of disbelief’ (by revealing the artificiality of constructs), can be read as a way of grounding “the visual within the material, and thus to embed culture and the media within the natural, material world and not in any transcendent position above or beyond it” (pp.167-169).

Visual narratives can be understood on multiple levels. For example, while semiotic readings pay attention to visible repeating forms (and their
which can be understood on multiple levels: from the suggestion of an unfolding narrative rhythm, to unfolding ecological processes (Tabulo 2014; Badman 2006). In Bleu (Trondheim 2003) we see a number of blobs and stars against a blue background. At once, we can appreciate the image as a whole and the individual parts it consists of: a(n ecological) system in which larger units are always made up of smaller parts (Sousanis 2015), whether they involve microorganisms, beehives, comics, or human societies. At the same time, we can also read the page as a series of dynamic sequences of events or interacting entities. In Badman’s (2006) reading, the green blob opens its mouth and swallows the star, spits out the star – one absorbs the other. These interactions remind of ecological processes of attraction, repulsion, ingestion, digestion, and transformation, including interactions of humans and stories.

possible ‘tricks’, comics require cognitive efforts from readers/viewers beyond linguistic forms of meaning-making. These efforts can be understood as embodied processes (King and Page 2017). On a basic level, this already starts by understanding time as movement within space on the page. Since pages are often split up into separate, adjacent units, it “often involves a heightened awareness of space, together with our position within it relative to other objects” (p.176). The white space in between the panels (the gutter) is equally meaningful, requiring readers/viewers to interpret silences to make connections. Possible ambiguities in scale and perspective call for extended ways of embodied reasoning, for example by noticing that movement in space can also mean zooming in/out. The reader/viewer can take their time to make connections between scenes and patterns, go back and forth, compare, notice new things, assess and reassess, which

Fig. 5: Mites on a beetle leg and skin mites on a human face. Excerpt from Micro Abstractions, Suus Agnes (2018)
may also involve small actions (flicking pages back and forth, turning the book on an angle, moving the head closer and further away in search for interpretations, scanning the page as one unit, followed by individual readings of the panels, and searching for ways to connect them). Such processes of bodily attentiveness, in turn, are also relevant for grasping our wider surroundings.

HYBRIDITY

Individuals are always plural. The more you zoom in, the more life reveals itself, from the micro species that live inside humans to the fungal networks that support trees. In parallel, visual narratives can be understood as hybrid expressions. Diedrich (2017) proposes that comics are an assemblage or mixture of panels, frames, lines, borders, and gutters (the space in between) that link and separate. Hybridity is revealed and compared by successive panels that zoom in (Fig. 5), and can be thought of in imaginative ways. There is a rich tradition of fantastical hybrid creatures, like those in illuminated manuscripts. Rather than disregarding these as utter fantasies, they can be interpreted as visualisations of experienced entanglements. For example, the medicinal use of plants is expressed through plant/human/animal hybrids in the Palatino herbal manuscript – the plants are ingested by humans and animals.

Hybridity is revealed and compared by successive panels that zoom in (Fig. 5), and can be thought of in imaginative ways. There is a rich tradition of fantastical hybrid creatures, like those in illuminated manuscripts. Rather than disregarding these as utter fantasies, they can be interpreted as visualisations of experienced entanglements. For example, the medicinal use of plants is expressed through plant/human/animal hybrids in the Palatino herbal manuscript – the plants are ingested by humans and animals. Such experiments continue today, albeit often differently motivated. As Taylor (2014) highlights with examples of her own art and that of other artists, depictions of cryptic creatures in contemporary art are often hybrid through a complex “interplay of mythology, science, ethics and aesthetics”, and respond to environmental and social concerns. For example, this can be teased out through creatures and shapes that blur species lines, where it is not clear where one entity begins and the other ends, or where “improbable animals and enhanced humans” (p.132) interact. Baetens (2018) highlights how hybridity in multispecies (story)worlds in comics can be conveyed through artistic styles where the line between figure and background is blurred. Such visual expressions don’t seek to simply document lives, but engage in a “metamorphic interlinking” (Taylor 2014, p.146) and make empathetic connections between humans and nonhumans that are open for audiences to give meaning to.

Alternatively, hybridity can be explored by using assemblage as method (Diedrich 2017), understood here as a heterogeneous visual design (e.g. using diverse drawing styles, and incorporating other types of texts and images, like reports, citations, photographs), with collage or archive-like results (King and Page 2017). This can be understood as yet another way of enacting the multitude of stories that take place all around us. Moreover, Diedrich argues that this can convey transformations and affective experiences. In her analysis of Becoming Bone Sheep, she highlights this graphic narrative as a collage of words, drawings and photographs. At the centre, the reader/viewer is confronted with a hybrid sheep head, partly made from text, and partly a sheep who seemingly looks you in the eye. It gives ‘face’ to a creature otherwise used instrumentally in a farm/clinic/lab for generating knowledge (2017, p.105). At once, the portrayal allows the reader/viewer to be affected, while the experimental, hybrid narrative form enacted the open experiment of the farm/clinic/lab (2017, p.106).

Finally, assemblage was the overall method of my exhibit Loving the Unloved. The exhibition space, originally a storage room, was transformed into a multispecies archive. Illustrations of moulting invertebrates were safely organised and stored away in an old cabinet, a handmade wooden insect hotel was illuminated by a light built into the display table, and other display tables were arranged across the room for small printed comics and original paintings created from a range of textures, including types of paper, card, paints and ink, and a fluid use of colours, lines and blank space. Some works were brightly lit, others hung on the edge of obscurity and required a slow and careful look. Some works included larger-than-life depictions of mosses, insects and mushrooms, others only implied their presence. The eclectic play with display conventions and participations with the world reflected on processes of noticing and creating. They invited a glimpse into the diversity of stories
among humans and microcommunities, while reminding that there is always more to notice.

CONCLUSIONS

Just like the world’s living beings and processes are never final nor fully revealing themselves to our senses, so are narrative interpretations never final; what one person sees, stays hidden to another. Still, in combinations of words, images, panels, and spaces in between, visual narratives can be understood as hybrid practices that draw us into sensory engagements, and reveal that sometimes we already know more than we thought we did, including possibilities for nonverbal communications with nonhumans. Like the workings of an ecological system, comics can reveal the bigger picture and the details all at once. They can make visible the repeating and ever-shapeshifting forms, shapes, and structures of our world and our imaginations. They can lay side by side different perspectives and scales by zooming in and out, allowing readers and viewers to take on several perceptual positions in processes of comparing, contrasting, and reassessing.

Through such combinations of embodied attentiveness, interlinking, and oscillations between perspectives – between one encounter with an insect, and the bigger picture of earthly rhythms and cycles – visual narratives can contribute in processes of familiarisation and making sense of our surroundings, including the beings that usually escape our notice. Just like we need to interpret the white space in between the pictures, we need to attune to silences in nonhuman languages, while leaving space for the untranslatable (Marder 2017). Not only would this open up possibilities for life, but also broaden horizons for intellectual and creative development (Taylor 2014). After all, encounters with visual narratives and nonhumans both are their own kind of ‘micro encounters’ with the world: small, humble, yet bursting with transformative potential.

REFERENCES


Human Understanding. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.


Linda Hassall

PERFORMANCE AND CLIMATE CHANGE: EVOKING THEATRICAL LANDSCAPES TO INVESTIGATE CLIMATE CHANGE

ABSTRACT

Australian landscapes both actual and perceptual can represent and enact space, and as such, can read, politicise and activate ways in which cultural geographies are imagined in contemporary theatre explorations (Carleton 2009). As a practice-led playwright researcher, I investigate theatrical landscapes to explore how cultural and environmental knowledge can effectively emerge through a play text or production. My creative research therefore contributes to debates in ecological and eco-critical fields through an analysis of how disappearing non-human nature may be attributed to cultural construction. The following discussion analyses a devised work which utilises an eco-critical framework to promote climate literacies in audience members –: Dust (Hassall 2015). The play explores and dismantles our Master Narratives – referred to within as ‘miracles’ - by exploring the negative impacts of human behaviour on non-human nature. The theatrical landscape is both physical and psychological, and generates the deconstruction of ideological perceptions of disappearing non-human nature as we know it. Dust aligns climate change themes with eco-critical debates and poses questions pertaining to contemporary custodianship of the landscape, environment and non-human nature. Further, the discussion provides an intersection between playwriting practice, politicised environmental themes and eco-critical dialogues, and identifies how contemporary environmental factors can stimulate climate change discussion in performance paradigms.

Keywords: Performance; Australian Gothic; Climate Change

INTRODUCTION

Theatre productions such as Dust can investigate the encounter between people, place and disappearing natural landscapes and habitats. Performance, therefore, can be a powerful cultural tool in shifting societal perceptions about exacerbated ecological issues (May 2007). As the risks of catastrophic climate change accelerate, there is a growing understanding of the role creative research can play in making sense of the ecological transformations we encounter (Wiseman 2016). As theatre makers, we are able to respond to these issues by posing provocative questions to our audiences around the daily effects of climate change on our global environment. The following discussion analyses Dust through a politicised eco-critical lens. Dust places environmental criticism in a productive relationship with cultural expression. Produced at Metro Arts in Brisbane, Australia in September 2015, Dust played to approximately 500 audience members. With a cast of 18 graduating student performers in their final year showcase, Dust was developed as a reaction to increasing verifications of global warming that predict a 21st century in which we humans will come to terms with our relationship to the non-human world. A synopsis of Dust was outlined in Program Notes 2015, as:

Dust explores a hypothetical future time period – the Days After the Day of The Final Disaster. Set in a wasteland of humankind’s own making, Dust explores the days and years after the day of the cataclysmic disaster that heralded the end of the world.
Delivered from the perspective of a last surviving community eking out an existence in the apocalyptic wasteland, the play explores conflicting positions on the climate change crisis and questions why more wasn’t done to avert The Final Disaster. Posing hypothetical experiences, Dust characters move in and out of time, through the chaos experienced by survivors – DUSTDRINKERS – directly after the disaster to some remote point in the future where human beings – TRIBE – are on the very edge of extinction. Dust provokes dialogues about what might happen if something isn’t done about climate change and poses questions to the audience about the ecological legacy we are leaving to those who come after us.

Switching between questions posed by future generations and stories left behind by us – those of us living in this time of ecological unrest – the play suggests that in these present days, perhaps in these our very last days, in the days leading into the end of days as we know –, we could have done more because we had the knowledge and the opportunity to do so. During this discussion, excerpts from Dust are included to support an eco-critical analysis of the performance text.

ECO-CRITICAL THEATRE

Rosendale (2002), suggests that a growing number of scholars are interested in expanding the purview of eco-critical practice by extending the definition of ‘texts’ beyond the written word. In this instance, eco-criticism is a useful analytical tool for the play as it aims to “expose the mythic underpinnings and consequent repercussions of unsustainable resource extraction and exploitation” (May 2007, p.104). Since colonisation, the unique Australian landscape has always defined our overarching cultural identity. The country’s daunting, mythic presence has exerted power over the cultural psyche of the nation and informed who we are and how we behave. As such, the eco-critical framework applied in Dust poses an alternative reading of the contemporary Australian psyche in an age of mining expansion and consequent habitat depletion. Carducci (2009) explains that a fictional representation of humankind is a primary topic of eco-criticism. Dramatic fiction, therefore, can effectively deal with humankind’s human-kind’s position vis-a-vis the natural world. Eco-critical theatre can investigate the way ecologies and environments can shape dramatic forms and stand at the edge of a vast open field of histories to be re-written, styles to re-discuss, and contexts of theatrical worlds to re-perceive (May 2007, pp.84-103). Place, space, environments and ecologies may be considered from physical, perpetual, psychological and imagined perspectives. Embedded in Romantic traditions of Nature writing, eco-criticism has grown out of the literary analysis of landscape aesthetics (Hassall 2017, p.1).

Eco-critical themes in Dust are explored through TRIBE characters who are living with the environmental legacy we, in, all likelihood, will leave behind. Sceneographic elements focused on evoking a desolate wasteland, devoid of colour or non-human nature, and were achieved this effect predominantly through LED lighting technologies. TRIBE language is depicted as having evolved in conjunction with the formation of the TRIBE communities. The language utilises an alternative grammatical structure, containing its own peculiar rhythms and tones of communication specific to TRIBE, to their behavior and their environment:

A desolate, apocalyptic world where there is nothing of non-human nature and where human beings are living on the edge of extinction in TRIBE communities.

TRIBE MOTHER: These days are your last days, perhaps? Come Hell or High-water. Hell or High-water is comin’. Yes? Yes, it is. So, we is gonna give you a taste. A small taste of Hell and tiny sip of High water. Just in case. Just in case you’se might be interested in seeing what it might be like if you’se continue on. In these disaster days – and you surely might agree’s with me that these are Disaster Days you is livin’ – you is livin’ and breathin’ history. Have you thought ’bout that? We’s want you’se to ponder for a while on how’s you is breathing your last on the edge of the apocalypse in these your days... in the days before
The opening scene above frames the work as an intimate conversation between performer and audience, and represents on one level how the audience is nominated almost as the antagonist of the play. It does so by suggesting that they could have done more to avert the disaster and therefore must take some responsibility in the climate crisis that they predict will unfold. Morton (2008) suggests creative works that examine eco-critical themes focus on a particular place, a particular moment, and a particular people or community in the construction of a fictional world. *Dust* sets up such a relationship between addresser and addressee, and establishes a point of contact between subjective expression (performance) and objective perception (spectatorship) in a space where performer and audience inhabit the same dimension. Audience objectivity is entrenched in the act of viewing the theatre event rather than in the actual experiencing of the events in reality. As such, the relationship acknowledges that the audience engage in the eco-critical inquiry, and on some level, consider the part they may have played in the ecological crisis that future generations must deal with:

*Shaman is the leader of TRIBE. He has spiritual qualities that allow him to address the audience from the future.*

SHAMAN: It was beautiful, yes? When you dust-drinkers could land-speak to the Earth and hear her warnings? No land-dreaming here now. No. None. Nevermore. Land-dreaming lost now under the dust. But you disbelieve. Yes? Don't be stupid blindeyes when we tells you now across time and distance and dust that soon you will turn to look at each other’ look at what you did and did not do... an' you will be... gone... 'Tis true. It is written in The Dust. (Hassall 2015)

The communication of meaning across perceived space and time is central to TRIBE rituals wherein the characters attempt to make sense of why early 21st century humans seemingly ignored the climate crisis. The SHAMAN has the ability to move in and out of time using the stories left behind by TRIBE’S ancestors. TRIBE rituals are enacted through physical choreographic movement sequences, whereby the movements interpret what the SHAMAN has called forth from the dust. The rituals investigate notions of memory and legacy through reminiscences about once vibrant non-human nature and future experiences of the loss of it. As such, there is an interrelationship between eco-critical analysis and theme that utilises theatre’s materiality to negotiate time, space and place, performative expression and audience experience. In doing so, it provokes audiences to consider questions concerning ecological wellbeing of species and spaces:

*BIRDMAN recalls memories of an encounter with BIRDWOMAN. The past and the present overlap.*

BIRDMAN: I saw her. A woman. A very pretty woman. Beautiful even. What struck me was that she was wearing lipstick. Red lipstick.

I saw her looking over the edge into the... into the what? What would you call it? Chasm? Emptiness? Hole? What do you call that sort of space? That space that’s left behind when the earth starts to tear itself open? When place is gone and there is only space. What do you call that?

I was sort of concerned that she might fall in/So I yelled out to her.

LADY! HEY LADY! BE CAREFUL

I didn't go over to her, I just yelled out. Well yes. Yes. I was scared that it might open up more and I’d end up falling into the emptiness. So I yelled out to her. I yelled: ‘Be careful’. And she turned and asked –

BIRDWOMAN: Did you see that?

BIRDMAN: ‘What I said?’

BIRDWOMAN: The bird. The bird that fell out of the sky into the into the into the –

BIRDMAN And I said I hadn't seen any birds for quite some time. She said it was a shame that I hadn't seen it. She said –

BIRDWOMAN: O Shame... what a
shame –

BIRDMAN: She said she thought it must be the last one. The last bird ever. The last bird we’ll ever see. She asked me if I thought that was sad? I said I supposed I did. Before she asked me that I’d never really thought too much about birds, you know? Then she did it. She blew me a kiss. A great big red lip-sticked kiss. I felt that kiss cut through the dust and settle on my lips. Soft like. It had been a long time since anyone had kissed me like that. I was still feeling her kiss when she turned back to the hole and dived... graceful as all get out. Like a bird she was. She spread her arms wide like a bird on the wing and she dived.

(Hassall 2015)

In negotiating time, space, place and performative expression, Dust invites audiences to share in the environmental history unfolding and to acknowledge at least some responsibility in the escalation of the climate crisis.

NON-HUMAN NATURE AS CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION

As theatre and performance makers, we have the unique opportunity to perform our undeniable human predicament about our fragile ecological situatedness (May 2007). Dust enacts disappearing non-human nature as a result of cultural construction. Cultural construction in this instance refers to relevant social understandings that are embedded in wider cultural, political, economic and material contexts and which have impacted on non-human nature from various perspectives. Dust explores the legacy of cultural and industrial interventions in non-human nature’s order. In doing so, the play makes a claim for sustainability awareness and action by promoting climate literacies in audiences. Non-human nature can be considered the protagonist – an active participant in the drama with the exacerbated weather conditions, failing ecosystems, rising sea levels generating the dramatic circumstance. Theatre technologies including non-toxic haze and desolate and/or ferocious soundscapes of weather conditions were utilised to create escalating levels of all-encompassing dust clouds. The human character is at the whim of non-human nature’s response to the sustained mistreatment of her. The apocalyptic landscape – devoid of any natural life except for the last of human life suggests that landscape psychologically impacts on the characters’ sense of themselves in space, time and place. Ultimately, it drives their questioning of us in this time, which in turn drives the narrative:

TRIBE characters enact one of their rituals associated with the Day of the Final Disaster.

TRIBE: The Dust she says:

You loved them carbon emissions. Yeeeeeeeeeesss.

She says:

You Goddamned loved them fossil fuel consumption. Yeeeeeeeeeesss.

She says:

You was addicted to ozonesky depletion

And

Cancerous chemical dependencies

Praise God and Pass the Ammunition... Yeeeeeeeeeesss.

(Hassall 2015)

The play provokes questions concerning our participation in communities, about our willingness to respond to the material, industrial and ecological world and significantly, our willingness to respond to the crisis of cultural production and consumption. In Australia in 2015, The Guardian reported that Australia’s carbon emissions had risen to the point where the Climate Council was calling for massive reductions in the coal mining industry. Dust responds to carbon escalation through ritual chorus behaviours:

SHAMAN: It is written that that big hole in the ozonesky got bigger and bigger, right above your heads. We’s believe you’ve were blindeyes – correct us if we’s wrong – so didn’t see that big space above your heads/and that’s whys you’s did nothin’/cause you’s
PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL

Theatre of this nature can respond to political discourse and as Punter (1982) suggests environmental transactions (as explored in Dust) [can] focus on the “user as much as on the environment itself” (p.3). In doing so, the theatre has the power to question what vision of non-human nature the play or performance authorises and/or makes legitimate, and for what purpose.

The inherently visual nature of performance empowers us to explore politicised history, culture and communities through theatrical behaviors. The visual medium, therefore, offers theatre as point of cultural analysis, for while our messages may be political, theatre offers a way of seeing that sits outside purely political rhetoric (Deluca and Demno 2000). The liveness of the theatrical medium provides us with the unique opportunity of sharing visual stories with an audience and it is the visual live element that encourages the performer/audience relationship. Whilst the dramatic form and theatrical experience can offer political rhetoric as popular culture, it is the inherent ways of seeing human behaviors that can be unique:

A very thirsty man is wading in a pool of putrid water one month after the Day of the Final Disaster.

WATERBEARER: I came upon a pool. What once must have been a pool. You know a swimming pool. In-ground. I knew this because there was a blow-up pool toy spinning in circles on the water at the bottom of the hole. A dolphin. A large blow up dolphin. Spinning. In the days before... before this day... I imagine that a child would have mounted that dolphin in the crystal blue waters of this backyard pool, shrieking with happiness as his brother or maybe his father tried to knock him from the dolphin into the water. It is the dolphin spinning on the thick water that causes me grief. There is barely any water left in that hole. What water sits on the bottom of what I imagine was once a pool is a colour that suggests it will be undrinkable. There is a bloated body. It too is an unthinkable colour. The corpse – perhaps that of the father who would in better times pull his child from the dolphins back – is intermittently nudged by the spinning dolphin. I cannot take my eyes off that dolphin and it is the blow-up dolphin more than anything that makes me curse God. I move into the water and it feels oily and putrid. I try not to interfere with the dolphin as I collect water to boil. To boil and drink. (Hassall 2015)

The monologue explores the moral and ethical implications of a future culture deprived of clean water and asks an audience to consider how far might an individual go to survive. Whilst there are sub-textual elements contained within about species extinction, the dolphin is a dramatic device utilised to enable the characters’ attention to be drawn away from the corpse. The excerpt further questions how human perceptions about the world, about who we are in the world, and about our relationship with popular master narratives including religion, might change after the ultimate climactic event.

Abram and Lien (2011), suggest that agency of works such as this is understood in the performativity of non-human nature. When referring to Dust, it can be suggested that the agency of the work is in the uniqueness of the theatrical exchange whereby the loss of nature takes on “value, prestige and power” (p.3). In Dust, the loss of non-human nature articulates a perceived lack of successful human intervention in the climate crisis. The play’s dramatic through-line, therefore, considers the repercussions of master-narratives relating to human activities that have impacted on the environment, including: green-house gas emission, unsustainable resource extraction, advanced industrialisation, and unsustainable practices.

DISMANTLING MASTER NARRATIVES

A master narrative is a transhistorical narrative
that is deeply embedded in culture and in this discussion refers to human activities that have impacted on our environmental understanding. In the postmodern era, master narratives are being dismantled as accepted sociocultural knowledge is questioned (Lyotard 1984). Thematic analysis of Dust suggests that in the Anthropocene, the master-narratives no longer originate from individual communities as they did in the past, but are packaged by moneymakers who rewrite them focusing on global market economy (Dobrin 2013). Dust suggests that at a time when expanding human endeavours are being identified as the cause of endangering the integrity of all earth’s resources and species, eco-critical performance can expose and dismantle the master narrative ideologies that support business as usual. Dust refers to these practices as miracles and investigates such concepts by questioning the negative impacts that arise:

TRIBE from their position in an almost extinct world of the future.

TRIBE: It was a time of magic?

A time of your magnificence. Yes?

Didn't reckon on them horsemen of your apocalypse ridin' through your lives and takin' away your belief in your God-given glory over all things, did ya? You were surprised. Yes? That that dirty dust devil Drought came in the days after the Day of The Final Disaster. Yes? Your thirst was impossible. Yes?

Your miracles, well... they just got out of hand. Yes, this we know. So sad your miracles, hey? No mind. Never mind. (Hassall 2015)

In an Australian context, the master narrative is closely linked to a national economy that is reliant on coal mining export which continues at the expense of the landscape, the natural habitat, and the Great Barrier Reef. Dust therefore questions our place in the world, and in our participation in Earth’s escalating fragile ecologies. Responding to May’s assertion that it is hubris to believe ‘suffering’ is only a human capacity (2007, 98), the theatrical aesthetic of Dust emerged from patterns of disappearing landmarks, ecological afflictions and human intervention in non-human nature. There is nothing left, and the scenographic environment suggests a hot, desolate wasteland, a world of dust and little else. These patterns then informed a dramatic imaginary wherein the characters attributed human characteristics to the natural world:

SHAMAN: The Earth she sorrowed during your time? Yes? She sorrowed. She bawled her bloody eyes out. Yes? Yes, she did. She was screaming. Yes? But you' se didn' nuthin'. No mind. Never mind... maybe you' se just couldn' t see with ya blindeyes. (Hassall 2015)

Johns-Putra suggests that the impact of human activities on the environment, on species depletion, warming and climate change, will outlast human dimension and historical epochs (2018, p.26). Theatre productions like Dust are becoming popular ways of responding to the Anthropocene – to the unprecedented human impact on the biosphere.

CONCLUSION

At this time in history, climate change predicts we are once again dwarfed by nature, by escalating natural disasters and climate change events. Dust poses a paradoxical relationship between perceptions of what is absent and what is present – between what is past and future, between the climate and disappearing landscapes and geographies (Hassall 2017). Dust places a politicised version of ‘nature memory’ in the sublime position. It sets the memory of the pristine ‘other’ on a pedestal suggesting now is the time to nurture that which is disappearing and, as such, exemplifies how theatrical representation can contextualise eco-critical themes of loss and memory:

A day after The Final Disaster, TREE-GIRL is slowly swinging a rope that hangs from a dead tree.

TREE-GIRL: This is... was my grandmother’s tree. When I was a child I would climb up in its cool green branches and hide from my grandmother... I will think of this tree, my grandmother's tree. I will
think about how I would hide up in its branches, in the summers when I was young and how in those endless summer days of Christmas holidays its branches would be heavy with fruit – mangoes – not them Bowen ones. Them stringy mangoes. Turpentine mangoes. My grandmother would make chutney out of them turpentine mangoes. Chutney, full of chunks of ginger and mangoes and swimming in brown sugar and vinegar. I won't think of chutney. Corn meat and chutney sandwiches. I won't think of sandwiches. I will think of the summers when I was young and believed in the magic of this tree and thought my grandmother would be alive forever. In the summer when I was young I used to think I could live in this tree. In the summer... in the summer near Christmas... when my grandmother wanted me to do things I didn't want to do. I used to pretend that I could live forever and ever in the tree when the school holidays stretched far into the future. I remember how the mangoes would fall to the ground and rot in the shade of the tree's cool green branches. I mustn't think of mangoes. When I was small there was an old swing strung from one of its branches. I recall how my feet would reach higher and higher toward heaven as my grandmother pushed me in the tyre swing. Higher and higher toward the blue sky... I mustn't think of blue sky... I won't. I will think about how loud I would shriek as I flew out into the sky. I must stop thinking of small things like mangoes and eggs and chutney and blue skies. I will focus on the rope. It's all I can see. I am too scared to look past the rope. To look past the rope into the distance and the dust. Soon... I will think about flying toward the sky and wonder if the rope will be strong enough to take my weight as I swing myself out toward the dust. (Hassall 2015)

**Dust** places climate change in the arena of cultural practice, and thereby utilises all aspects of the theatre’s advantage to provide a unique platform to present, represent and engage in discourse around the very real climate and warming issues we have ahead of us. **Dust** achieved its important goal of increasing ‘climate literacy’ and provoking discussion, in students, artists and audiences by asking we consider our responses to working toward sustainable futures. Buckland (2015, p.9) calls this time in which we are making art “an adventure of change” and posits that through making works (like **Dust**), we can use the relationship between art and science to make a better society – that we can take the big abstract ideas of climate change and make them into human stories – our stories.

REFERENCES


COPEING: PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE EXPERIMENTS FOR TAKING CARE OF...

ABSTRACT

Increasingly unstable climate events such as floods and other natural disasters have become part of the grand narratives of the Anthropocene that create distance, fear, anxiety, hysteria and apathy that are part of our everyday lives. In asking how can we-as-humans survive both the real and grand narratives of this epoch, my own survival story of Desperado (memories of our family sailing boat) became an anchor for COPE (Choreographies of Participatory Ecologies). These choreographies, as series of guided performance/survival tours, involved tactics and strategies/mechanisms that contributed to an ecology of participatory practice. The instructional video Lilo Safely drew together actions of rafting, resting and recovery as a way to take care of other, to deconstruct the instrumental way of being-with the planet, encouraging us to include the non-human, the neuro-diverse, into our own stories of surviving with and beyond, through the practice of Rafting-with.

Keywords: Ecological; Performance; Practices; Art; Choreography; Rituals; Dance; Participation; Boats; Oceania; Environmental

Lilo Safely: Instructional Video was developed as part of my research project into participatory performance practice, Choreographies of Participatory Ecologies, that became COPEing – where I enacted survival drills, boat trips and walking performances in Auckland, Dunedin, Prague, Lisbon, and Rarotonga in the Cook Islands. Lilo Safely was also the beginning of the immersive performance, RAFTING, that was held in the Black Box studio at AUT University in Auckland, New Zealand as part of my final PhD examination in November 2017 (Houghton 2017a). The location of the performance was near the source of Te Wai Horotiu, an underground river that runs through the centre of the city of Auckland and thus became significant as a site of imminent danger due to the risk of flooding during heavy rainfall. Lilo Safely demonstrates practical actions that can be taken, using an inflatable lilo, in the face of sea level rise and climate catastrophe (Houghton 2017b). This was played in the Green Room before participants moved into the immersive performance experience of the Black Box studio. The aim of the video was to combine instructions for survival, through taking care of other, that were serious with a humorous undertone. Participants also gathered survival items and costumes that they might need in case of emergency.

COPEING – RAFTING-WITH

The aim of this project was to explore participation in performance as a way to critique instrumental ways of being-in-the-world in relation to environmental issues of the Anthropocene. Drawing on Joanna Zylinska’s minimal ethics, which encourages a life-affirming ethic that includes the biotic and abiotic, I wanted to understand how or if performance practice might assist to challenge the grand narratives of survival that had emerged...

---

surrounding this newly-termed era. The idea was to challenge the instrumental rhetoric that helps to construct these narratives of survival. My tactics attempted to foreground audiences as participants, as co-creators of COPEing Choreographies, that opens to a conceptual and physical agencement of an encounter expressing itself as still-in-formation. The aim of these choreographies is to move towards a release, a letting-go construed as a poetics of non-mastery. The practice is situated within choreographic and participatory performance paradigms that revealed tactics for ways to de-authorise the artist, handing over the work to participants, and the choreography to the affects of place and weather. COPEing Choreographies emerged through the subsequent tactics of rafting, resting, and recovery as a collective practice that aimed to create the experiencing, sensing of survival and disaster, sharing stories of survival (as well as my own) that created new stories/performances for the Anthropocene. Rafting-with emerged from the accumulation of what survived from each survival tour as a continually changing process.

By introducing this research through the key conceptual term still-in-formation, I introduce its agency up front, within the very fabric of this project. The significance of still-in-formation is housed within the term agencement, inherited from artist and philosopher Erin Manning – as used by Delueze and Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus (yet contentiously translated by Brian Massumi to the English word ‘assemblage’), I, as Manning, return to the French use of the term which, according to Manning, “carries within itself a sense of movement and connectibility, of processual agency” (Manning 2016, p.123). As the quote below infers, my research engages a spatial dynamics through choreographic performance art, suggesting that a participatory mode of art practice may offer something still-in-formation as a detour away from instrumental mastery. I describe my practice as an agencement of conceptual frameworks that turn or cleave experience by attempting to refrain from closure, mastery or stasis though multiple iterative events. That is, my participatory practice attempts non-closure through working with others (theorists, artists and colleagues alike) – these assemblages make up my practice of participatory ecologies that is always-already, still-in-formation:

Agencement produces ways of becoming, to invent new modes of existence moves away from subject based identity towards an ecology of practices where ‘agencement speaks to the interstitial arena of experience of the interval, an interval not of category but in the pre-category where that field is still in formation.’ (Manning 2016, pp.123-124)

By exploring fundamental concepts pertaining to ethics, poetics, everyday, survival and choreographic object, I attempt to reveal how these concepts gather or assemble as a belonging so that they perform strategically as enlivened processes, methods, compositions and tactics within my research performance practice. The practice itself brings together somatics and participatory art practice as an interdisciplinary choreographic practice that focuses on performing with others and moving through place. Survival technologies (safety codes and equipment) that are instructional (gestural, spoken, written) and material (survival equipment as protection) offer both costuming and actions that evoke the experience and aesthetics of ‘states of emergency’. COPEing was revealed through acts of taking care
of other in response to my own personal narrative of survival.

The ethical question arising in this research is, how do we (humans) come to live with all forms of life proximate to our everyday lives, construed as poetic release? How might we live among the existing remains of human mastery contained within the narratives of survivalist mastery, yet without control? The practice harbours multiple choreographic tactics through scoring fragments of these survivalist mastery narratives. I located these fragments of dominant (rhetorical) strictures of survival among such genres as tour and guide, drill, instructions, authorship, and commander. These roles and their manifest play tactically assemble, curate and choreograph exchanges through a range of new media and technological recording devices. For example, the instructional survival mode has, through iterative processes, staged innumerable techno-exchanges including the production of said Lilo Safely: Instructional Video, archiving somatic performances for surviving. What is key here is that the work appropriates a master survival discourse produced through generic instructional safety protocols such as those we receive on aeroplanes prior to any flight’s departure, and yet produces innumerable exchanges for being-with (its) immediate everyday surround(s) as choreographed survival aftermath.

WHAKAPAPA (GENEALOGIES) OF PRACTICE

Ka Mua, Ka Muri.6

I embark on this research following the Māori proverb that describes an image of a person walking backwards into the future as a way of being in the world. I forge into the future with my back facing forward, looking back over the past as a way to recognise the present. I thus provide pointers to these in recognition of the origins, genealogies of my whakapapa starting with who I am, where I come from, my connections to land (whenua)7 and family (whānau). My background as an ecologist (with a Masters in Zoology),8 a choreographer (Masters in Creative and Performing Arts),9 and a costume designer, gives me a unique perspective to this research incorporating somatic dance practice, craft and technique, both objective and subjective perspectives to systems in nature as an interdisciplinary practice. Each of these practices use guiding instructions and witnessing (as opposed to observing), and focus on being process-orientated, attuning/listening to external environments, rather than being concerned with the final product (or spectacle). These practices advocate sensing of the body from the inside out, and are useful as choreographic tools for creating performative images of the strange.10 In the context of the ethics of this project, somatic practices that prioritise the slowing of the sensing body as it engages with the immediate environment (both technical and biological) provide a reprieve from the fast-paced nature of our contemporary world. Somatic practices can therefore be seen as an act of recovery in response to instrumental ways of being in the world.

SAILING VESSELS AND RAFTING SURVIVAL

In researching a range of local and international locations and associated stories for performance in relation to environmental issues of water, I embarked on a personal journey regarding my own tūrangawaewae (in Māori terminology, a place to stand, a homeland) and my sense of belonging (or not belonging).11 As a Pākehā descendant of English and Scottish immigrants to New Zealand (1860-1930s), aspects of this...
discovery revealed my relationship to the geographic location of the island nation New Zealand Aotearoa. In this journey of discovering my origins, I found that my early associations with water took me back to childhood memories of sailing on board the boat that my father built, Desperado. I began to think about my memories of boating, the feelings they evoked and how they had affected me. I wondered how the threat of a changing climate would affect the way the sea might be experienced by our children.

Desperado, my waka, was built from an individual kahikatea (New Zealand native tree) selected by my father from the West Coast of the South Island of New Zealand. It was felled from a sustainable forest, laid to dry and then milled into planks that he painstakingly curved and nailed in place by hand over the upturned frame of the boat hull. I now peel back the layers of Desperado’s construction to its origin and sail this journey in the skeletal frame of her hull within which I situate the remains of my father’s memory.

It is therefore not surprising that haunting this research project and its Choreography of Participatory Ecologies has been the figure of the sea holding my envelopes of familiar and familial milieus, specifically the leitmotif of our sailing craft Desperado. As a performance narrative, Desperado works within the realms of ‘boat mastery’ that draw on the protocols of survival that are intrinsic to this boat’s operation and navigation. Desperado’s narrative lives on through multiple performances through storytelling, actions, and the wearing of survival gear borrowed from what we used to wear while sailing (yellow PVC jackets, and hats and sunglasses). The performance archives (such as props, sound and video clips) aimed to encourage reciprocal survival stories from participants, and became a strategy for exploring a sensory experience of survival. Underlying narratives of my experience of Desperado were revealed as a commemoration and memorial through the transformation of sailing gear into that which represented ‘states of emergency.’ As I land at the end of this research, I ask myself how Desperado has become an island. Upon its return to the safety of the harbour, it docks alongside this philosophical jetty, yet holds itself as an artwork with its own autonomy.

These watery memories were located in my body, affecting the sense of where I had come from and where I was going, evoking a bodily experience of being a child at play, in submission to the powers of the ocean in an open way that has no fear: a release from control of our land-based existence. The upturned hull then transformed into an arc within which the narrative of our survival, to live on, might be contained.

RAFTING INTO DARKNESS – ASSEMBLING DIGITAL ARCHIVES

Digital technologies became a mode of producing multiple modes of performance and instruction, as well as mapping multiple scales of survival and disaster footage as archive. These digital archives included the accumulation of stories/experiences of survival (from my performance research) and documentation from previous survival tours. The ability for performance to live beyond the live encounter through video images enabled small intimate experiences of each performance to be shared again in subsequent performances as a haunting, but also as an act of recovery – in the context of the ephemerality of live performance (always acting in the face of its own disappearance; see Phelan (1993) in Schneider, (2011)) and survival with the human race facing the real possibility of its own extinction. Recovering experiences of survival (through instructions and documentation) might enable the possibility to realise that survival (although often a solitary experience) also can remain in a collective memory. I gathered together footage and documentation of my research within the critical framework of investigating how we see disaster and survival through mediated realities. These contributed towards the final archive as the practice rafted-towards the final installation of RAFTING in the Black Box at AUT University.

12 Desperado was a 36-foot (11m) yacht built by my father in the late 1970s in our backyard, in Nelson, a small town at the top of the South Island of New Zealand. The event was a family affair with my mum, two brothers and I helping with sanding and painting. It took three years to build, in the evenings and weekends when Dad wasn’t at work. It was eventually launched in 1981 and it marked the beginning of many sailing adventures around Golden Bay and the Marlborough Sounds.
THE GREEN ROOM

The *Lilo Safely: Instructional Video* works on us somatically in a series of exchanges between its two central ‘props’ (a human being and a yellow lilo), moving from a more formal predetermination for how exchanges are expected to occur across the two choreographic objects, toward exchanges of release that go beyond expectations. The work is set among a black backdrop, hinting at outdoors at night (via sound and impaired vision) – and yet, the scenographic mise-en-scène is also strangely uncanny (*unheimlich*) due to its formal codes of instruction, eliciting an intensive enclosure or interiority. These exchanges across the mastery of instruction (genre) and release of darkness adds a mysterious quality.

The ‘lilo body’ reminds us that we have a body that requires breath to survive, bringing attention to our own body and senses. There is a likeness to the safety video on an aeroplane, and everyone follows my directions. As I assist with the initial blowing up of lilos, I am bordering, in my performance, between the slick survival drill video and the awkwardness of being there in the present dressed in the same way. I see people looking at me for performative gestures or clues to how they should be interacting. This intimate setting is hot and uncomfortable. Here we are together on the threshold between the actual, the performative and the experiential. The video effects each in a way that evokes the somatic affects and choreography of the safety drills we are familiar with, yet with an undertone of ridiculousness. Initially I resist showing people how to blow up the lilos, and leave the room. Later, upon looking at the GoPro footage, I see everyone following the video to a point where they struggle with the blowing tubes and I return to find everyone as I left them. For some iterations, I assist when needed. Other times, there are individuals familiar with the lilos, so they forge ahead, blowing them up and putting on hats and glasses. The experience of this differs for each individual; some find it frustrating and claustrophobic. With uncertainty rising, there is potential for rebellion and anarchy. On the day the kids are there, they all want their own lilo; on other days, some wish to share blowing efforts with others. Some are more successful than others, which I find interesting in relation to ideas of survival of the fittest.

Often, the affective survival in this room ranges between that of the individual and the group, revealing the differences in the way instructions can be interpreted. Participants have the choice to take whatever they feel they might need for the Black Box, such as an extra survival blanket or a head torch. They are asked to leave their belongings behind in an effort to really experience what it might be like to be in a survival scenario. In the final site of the Black Box performance, there exists an attempt for an eerie resonance across the overly formal instruction tenor. Tinged with humour, contrastive colors (or emergency yellow and fatalistic black), body and lilo combine in an envelope of atmospheric temporal, spatial and historical abstraction (or lingering) performing its doubling: enveloping and enveloped within the site of this surviving Black Box.

The *Lilo Safely: Instructional Video* transforms the instruction for safety into a performance archive from what remains (as ruins) long after the action/performance is over. Lepecki’s insight into choreographic re-enactments in the context of the *Lilo Safely* drill reveals as choreography happens in the live encounter as re-enactment without rehearsal. As a result, the choreography becomes a wilding of everyday pedestrian actions and moving bodies through place, following the nature of weather and wayfaring, through dark spaces. It is in the nature of the instructions as modes for re-enactment that are specifically designed as deauthorising as “a singular mode of politicising, time and economies of authorship via the choreographic activation of (the dancers’) bodies as an endlessly creative, transformational archive” (Lepecki 2016, p.141). The final affects of this work lie beyond *Lilo Safely* as the remains (ruins) of the live performance actions. The archive remains, holding creative virtual potential for further performance disasters yet to happen in a co-composition with those that choose to participate. *Lilo Safely* thus becomes integral to the final performance iteration that gathers together archives as choreographic

---

holding together an archival space of the aftermath in the Black Box space for the examination performance.

BLACK BOX

Explore the space and materials in your own terms, Tread carefully, Take your time, Look closely, Stick together, Trust your senses...

As the host, I became responsible for everybody’s welfare in the space. This was evoked in the details of our material experience, which considered the question of what might happen if a huge environmental disaster occurs. The care and responsibility was extended into thinking about this potentiality. I enact my performing body in its role as guide, offering direction and focus points towards survival preparations and initial encounters of the installation. Yet once we enter, the participants are able to engage within the archival construct in a way that allows for a survival with others. I (as do the participants) act as activator of the archival materials; however, my role aims to be minor as I tend to the materials as DJ/VJ of the space, operating an accumulation of states throughout the entire journey in the dark. My improvisations act in response to the instructions for action that have emerged throughout this practice, such as the lilo dance instructions, offering and inviting participants to become operators within the work itself. The space created, although risky, aims to be a safe space for agencement to emerge through the relationships between the archival materials and the live bodies in the space. This space allowed for new choreographies to emerge between people and objects, always remaining, still-in-formation rather than existing in a static space. While at the same time, I recognise that my role as author or choreographer is of minor significance to the experience of others.

The Black Box released the control structures of the survival drill through the transformation of my performance persona from guide to invisible attendant or assembly monitor; all aimed to transition the experience from mastery to release. The props and actions aimed to encourage agencement of bodies, materials and technologies in a posthuman experience. I gave careful consideration to the cues that were given in ‘inviting’ participants via the gestures within

---

14 William Forsythe’s ‘choreographic objects’ alludes to a temporalising of temporal choreographic works-as-ideas organised and organising themselves as alternative sites for acting (Forsythe 2011, p.92).
the props themselves. Thinking this invitation through provided an investigation into the different ways that interaction with the archives could be encouraged, and returned my thoughts to the instructional component of the work. These connections between the instructions, videos, narratives and costumes became an act of choreographing the potential agency of the participant, leaving the final action open to potentialities of all kinds.

In moving towards this minor role as facilitator or assistant (with some know-how), I handed over the work into the hands of the participants. It was here that I had to give my trust to the others. The participants would then be in a position to take-care-of each other, and the space and I would (hopefully) become the receiver of gentle acts of kindness. This is offered as an alternative kind of survival to one of rescue and heroism. As the experience in the Black Box progresses through the immersive encounter, it evokes the handing over, or transferral, from a personal to an agency of the individual participants, who find spaces to locate their own poetic. The handing over that took place reveals the necessity for the work to move from authorial to non-mastery. The underlying narrative of Desperado reveals my autobiographical story of survival as a work of mourning, one that I hand over as a catalyst for release in recognition of life as a force of uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

The participants are able to negotiate how they spend time in the space with minimal pointers that evoke a multiplicity of responses from each of them. There are multiple layers of archive, the documentation of previous performances, the costumes and survival technologies that bring us into the present, and the nostalgic content from the stories and archives directly from Desperado. These multiple layers of meanings are reflected in the varied responses from participants. I see this as an indication of life lived socially or collectively, where we recognise our difference in experiences and embrace them as part of the creation of the final RAFTING. It is these multiple voices and responses echoing through the work that contribute to the ethico-poetics of everyday survival; as we COPE, we create Choreographies of Participatory Ecologies in the relational ecology of each live encounter with-in the archives of this research.

As my research practice coalesces around a body of thought on thought-in-action (choreographics) as a field in formation, the agencement of Manning and William Forsythe leads toward its choreographic object(s). What is an object within the speculative pragmatism of this choreography? This question unfolds in a minor gesture of the ‘choreographic object’ as an aftermath or lingering affect of a work, or an event, that ultimately survives on after (and as) the event in its absence. André Lepecki’s concept of afterlives witnesses a kind of lingering atmospherics, or molecular hanging-on, resonant with Manning’s distributed relations performed through its dark aesthetics-as-poetic release.

Each iteration of RAFTING has its intricate details and revealings. The series began with my family, with children, joining friends on a quiet Sunday afternoon. Later iterations during the week required spontaneous negotiations with conference gatherings and AUT maintenance work. As the week progressed, my performance persona solidified as a confident drill-master, and release into the Black Box became a smooth operation that held the participants on each particular day. My relationship with the work seeped into my every waking moment, as I inhabited the space for the month leading up to the final performance series – the laying out of archives and the memories evoked from this research journey represented the letting go of my father’s world and the transformation into this world of RAFTING.

For me, RAFTING solidified to a certain extent the action of Rafting-with, which has become synonymous with COPEing as the catalyst for new knowledge through practice-led research. Moving-through minor gestures and hauntings of survival allowed us to see, in being-with others, and taking care of other, how we might COPE in times of constantly changing climates. In conclusion, I refer to the concept of the Raft that tethers together performance tactics discovered
in the final performance work (and throughout this research project), drawing together modes of choreographic thinking through creative practice that emerges as the ethico-poetics of this research. This Raft crafted through DIY materials, skills and actions does not prioritise a slick production that has commercial benefits, yet sometimes requires a captain or someone in charge, or at other times could just be floating, drifting with no destination. Yet rafting bodies thinking together in difference, reminds us that participation both active and passive has a part to play in the unfolding of the end of the world as an alternate site for acting.

There is no doubt that the experience of RAFTING made unexpected connections, unknown to me, that can only be known by the individuals who encountered the work. It is these affects of the work that accumulate as residues from watery experiences, settling in our muscle memory. Returning as fleeting sensations that flow in and out of our consciousness, visiting us as we go on to survive in our everyday lives – fragmented, poetically dwelling, enigmatic and forensic, aftermathing lives on: survivre (backwash, fallout, trail, wake). The performances can never be fully recovered from the documents’ and objects’ pre-disaster to post-survival phase; survival lives on without return to what was before; always still-information.

LILO DANCE (FOR ONE OR TWO)

1. Take your lilo into your arms, hold the lilo like a long-lost lover.
2. Slow dance with your lilo, you may do this with a friend.
3. Feel the PVC on your skin, feel the world slow down all around you.
4. Hold the lilo above your head... you are sinking under the surface.
5. Walk slowly in a large circle.
6. Slide the lilo down along your body and lay it down like an injured friend.
7. Lie face down and relax into the suspension of a breath shared.
8. Roll over and over with the lilo.
9. Finish on your back on the lilo and imagine you are floating out to sea.
10. Practice your gentle paddling technique.
11. You have completed your lilo dance.
12. Reach over your body and undo the valves, feel your lilo in a long exhale.
13. When your lilo is completely deflated you may fold it up again and place it back into its package, ready for the next survival drill.

('Lilo Dance', in RAFTING projection video (2017) 10 mins).15

REFERENCES


PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL


DECOLONIAL PERFORMANCE PRACTICE: WITNESSING WITH AN ETHIC OF INCOMMENSURABILITY

Morgan Johnson

INTRODUCTION
In his seminal text, Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said (1994) points out that in the year 1800, Western powers controlled 35% of the earth's surface area (although they claimed more). By 1914, the annual rate they acquired land was 240,000 square miles a year and their combined power covered 85% of the earth (p.6). Although much has changed since 1914, this relatively recent phenomenon in our human history not only inextricably links our current crises of environmental degradation with capitalist, colonial and patriarchal exploitation, but also links issues of social justice with access to, and power over, land. Said argues that,

The main battle in imperialism is over land... when it came to who owned the land... these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative ... The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (p.xiii)

The starting premise of this paper is that our current crisis of environmental degradation is inextricably linked with capitalist, colonial and patriarchal exploitation. If environmental and colonial histories are co-constitutive, then performing ecology needs to attend to structures of power that function to control human relationships to land and the nonhuman world. In this paper, I will explore the act of witnessing another's story in the context of settler colonial Canada through my personal experience as a settler Canadian watching Cree playwright and performer Cliff Cardinal's solo show, Huff, which premiered in 2015 and has since gone on to tour nationally and internationally. How do we witness something outside ourselves in a way that recognises relationship and difference? Drawing on theories of witnessing and incommensurability, I explore what being an ethical witness to another's story in theatre and performance might look like, especially when a play like Huff is situated in Canada's supposed era of Truth and Reconciliation.

Keywords: Decolonial; Witness; Settler-Colonial; Performance; Audience
Ultimately, I will argue for Eve Tuck & K. W. Yang’s (2012) notion of incommensurability, where we are able to locate ourselves within a narrative without undermining the ontologically distinct experience of the other. My discussion in this paper is of my personal experience as a settler audience member: while I interpret Cardinal’s interactions with the audience as if he is addressing a group of people outside of the community of his characters, as this was my experience as witness, I make no claim as to the intentions of Cardinal himself or the experience of other audience members. Depending on their background, audience members, especially Indigenous audience members, undoubtedly had very different experiences witnessing this disturbing and powerful performance, yet I can only speak to my own subjective experience. I refer to the audience as “we,” to leave open the possibility that this experience was, at least in part, shared by some of the audience members in attendance. While this show was performed to a wide variety of audiences, the “we” I refer to in this paper is a settler-audience-witness.

INCOMMENSURABILITY

In the European settlement of what is now called Canada, the creation of treaties between European settlers and Indigenous nations were frequently used to gain official ownership of land for the settler state, with little to no compensation to Indigenous peoples, and were often created under conditions of deceit or coercion (Jai 2014, p.3). For example, the Williams Treaties, which signed over large portions of land in mostly Southern Ontario (where I live and study) from the Mississauga and the Chippewa First Nations to the provincial government, was made at a time when these Indigenous nations were already suffering from the effects of colonisation – poverty, hunger, discrimination, violence, dislocation from land and culture – and white settlers already owned and controlled property all across the land in question. The government was thus able to legalise the theft of this territory by paying $500,000 for the land that they themselves had calculated to be valued at a minimum of $30,000,000 (Surtees 1986, p.19). This is just one of many such examples, as the province of Ontario alone (one of ten provinces in the country, along with three territories) hosts 46 treaties (Ontario).

In the 21st century, these atrocities, whether in Canada or in international settler colonies such as New Zealand, Australia, or the United States, are becoming less acceptable to the mainstream conscience, credit for which goes to decades of activism by Indigenous peoples and their settler allies. Canada is not alone in taking steps towards reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the state to try and remedy some of the past violence. This is surely a step in the right direction, yet reconciliation’s ultimate goal is unclear, as the Mississauga and the Chippewa First Nations have not received their land back or been compensated the $30,000,000 (if accounting for inflation since 1923, this number would be closer to half a billion dollars, according to the Bank of Canada’s inflation calculator). There has therefore been increasing debate about the relationship between reconciliation and decolonisation, and whether or not the former is merely used to placate calls for the latter. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014), drawing on previous work by Taiaiake Alfred (year)?, argues that mainstream discourse on reconciliation (a term that the majority of Canadians find more palatable than the term decolonisation – this is apparent in the fact that reconciliation is now a popular buzzword for Canadian politicians, whereas decolonisation is never mentioned) serves as an apology for past harms and for the continued ramifications that these harms have on Indigenous peoples in Canada but does not challenge current structural power imbalances in any significant way. There has also been recent critique in academia around the use of the word decolonisation, in particular from Eve Tuck & K. W. Yang (2012) in their article ‘Decolonization is not a Metaphor,’ in which they argue that decolonisation must not be made into rhetoric that refers to Indigenous rights in general, but rather must entail actual repatriation of Indigenous land. Instead of a premature reconciliation that serves to alleviate settler guilt but maintain hegemony, Tuck & Yang argue for an ethic of incommensurability, where difference is fostered instead of sacrificed in the name of inclusivity. Dylan Robinson (2016) expands on this idea in his essay ‘Welcoming Sovereignty,’
where he puts theories of incommensurability into practice by requesting that non-Indigenous readers skip a certain section in the middle of his paper, thereby carving out a rare space for Indigenous sovereignty within an academic work. As settler audiences, perhaps we can work to hold space for distinct cultural differences, even (or especially) when it means decentering and excluding ourselves from certain spaces or conversations. As intergenerational beneficiaries of colonisation this is not a familiar concept for us; yet, as these authors point out, decolonisation is and should be unsettling. Stepping back in this case is distinct from inaction and apathy; it is first and foremost about actively listening and responding to the expressed needs of Indigenous communities.

Incommensurability, as outlined by Tuck & Yang or Robinson, must be understood as distinct from recognition, which entails publicly acknowledging and respecting cultural distinction and implementing policy that upholds this. Glen Coulthard (2007) follows Frantz Fanon’s (1952) critique of Hegel’s politics of recognition by arguing that recognition is almost always implemented by the colonisers and so will ultimately be used to benefit them. This sort of recognition assumes that a ‘privileged’ group (the coloniser, or settler-colonial state) should generously offer the ‘gift’ of recognition to an underprivileged group. While in the past a lack of recognition, or a mis-recognition, has caused harm to marginalised groups, this current type of philanthropic recognition reifies the hierarchy that is causing marginalisation in the first place (Coulthard 2007, p.6).

How does the act of witnessing another’s story manifest around ideas of decolonisation in the settler colonial state of Canada? How do we witness something outside ourselves in a way that recognises relationship and difference? How can we actively avoid the proliferation of liberal discourse that, through claiming multiculturalism as a Canadian identity, collapses difference and so strategically works to assimilate sovereign peoples?

HUFF

In the past 30-50 years, there has been a surge of theatre and performance works from Indigenous practitioners across Canada and Turtle Island (see Appleford 2005; Carter 2016; Nolan 2015; Nolan & Knowles 2016; Osawabine & Hengen 2009; Reder & Morra 2010). Cliff Cardinal’s solo show Huff is one of the many recent works contributing to this resurgence of Indigenous languages, practices, communities and traditions which Indigenous writers have claimed as a crucial aspect of decolonisation (Nolan 2015; Recollet 2015; Simpson 2011; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Huff premiered in 2015 at Native Earth Performing Arts, the longest running Indigenous professional theatre company in Canada, currently in its 37th season, and continued in the following two years to tour across the country, as well as to Australia and England. I saw the show in Toronto, where I live, during its first run at Native Earth. The play follows the story of the childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood of a boy named Wind and his younger brother Huff. Growing up on a reserve in rural Ontario, they struggle with the ramifications of past and ongoing colonialism. Their access to, and relationship with, the land has been severed with the forced removal to reservations, the removal of children to residential schools or white foster families and the outlawing of cultural practices and languages. The characters we meet include Wind, his little brother Huff, his older brother Charles, his dad and his new girlfriend, his Kohkum (grandmother), his dog Angelina, their teacher and peers, a Skunk, and the embodiment of Smell (all played by Cardinal), almost all of whom are battling with issues of abuse, alcoholism and suicide. The narrative, relayed to us by an older Wind, begins shortly after Wind’s mother has committed suicide and his dad has moved in with another woman. Wind and Huff skip school, siphon gasoline, get sprayed by Skunk and accidentally start a forest fire. We realise near the end of the play that they are both targets of sexual abuse by their older brother Charles who has Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (Cardinal 2017). Cardinal and director Karin Randoja depicted these awful events with a dark and disturbing wit, making the audience laugh and then abruptly stop laughing within seconds, causing us immediately to wonder what we ever found so funny.
At many points throughout the show, the audience is directly referenced by the characters: at the start of the play Wind muses that we are an imaginary friend he has hallucinated due to his oxygen-starved brain, and later on Huff considers our relation to the two boys:

WIND: That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard
Wanna know why?
HUFF: Why?
WIND: Because no one cares about us
HUFF points to the audience
HUFF: What about them?
WIND: Them?
They’re not even real.
HUFF: Yes they are.
WIND: No they’re not

(Cardinal 2017, pp.49-50)

The fact that Wind and Huff are being heard – that they have witnesses – is therefore an important part of their story. But what sort of witnesses were we?

THE PLASTIC BAG

The show opened with Wind speaking to us from within a clear plastic bag duct taped around his head. When he told us that one can survive for about six minutes this way before suffocating, I began to realise the possibility that the actor in front of me didn’t have invisible holes poked into this bag so that he can breathe, rather, he simply hadn’t reached the six-minute mark yet. When Wind, panicking about his attempted suicide, asked us, the audience, to take this bag off his head someone quickly obliged and, thankfully, the main character was saved. At the end of the play the same audience member followed her initial instructions and refused to give the bag back to him when he asked for it and so again, thankfully, he was saved. Wind, however, simply pulled out another plastic bag from his pocket and repeated the suicide attempt. The audience, it turns out, was not an all-powerful source that could swoop in to save him, no matter how much we might have wanted to. It is interesting to note that the stage directions specify what the actor playing Wind should do whether or not the audience member gives the bag back. In both cases the actor is directed to refuse the audience and take out his own plastic bag hidden in his pocket. Through these interactions between spectator and subject, Cardinal has created a relationship where the audience bears witness to this character’s story but is not allowed to take on the role of an all-powerful outside cure come to save his community, regardless of how badly we might want to play the hero. As Dian Million (2014) remarks in her book Therapeutic Nations, Indigenous peoples’ rights to self-determination “were not derived from any state or western power,” which, for me, was represented in Cardinal’s play by the audience, “nor could they be granted by them” (p.128). What does it do to an audience when we can’t help?

TOMATOES AND CATHARSIS

According to Augusto Boal’s interpretation of the function of catharsis, famously developed by the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, an audience should vicariously live through the drama on stage, find an emotional release through empathising with a character, and then reach a point of equilibrium with which they leave the theatre. As critics such as Bertolt Brecht or Augusto Boal argue, this structure, which has thousands of variations today, effectively depoliticises audiences by satiating in the theatre any possible drive for action in the world outside of the theatre (Boal 1985, pp.46-7). For example, in Huff, imagine the audience was able to ‘save’ the character Wind by withholding the plastic bag. We would empathise with Wind’s struggle and then feel catharsis at his victorious survival that we generously guided him through. We might leave feeling a sense of closure and release that reassures us that whatever atrocities our ancestors may have committed against Indigenous nations is now in the past. If we are not able to help, however, then the real work starts as we leave the theatre. Dissatisfied with the lack of narrative closure, we are pushed to harness our energy towards an actual transformation of our society. This option is Brecht’s (1978) alternative to Aristotelian catharsis.
Boal builds off Brecht, going one step further: the spectator actually becomes part of the action and is able to fully shape the outcome of the narrative (p.122). Cardinal’s Huff was a mixture of Brecht and Boal’s structures – as an audience member, I felt invited to shape the narrative by having been given a choice over whether or not I wish to save the character Wind; yet I stepped into this role only to be denied the power to create any change that easily. We were invited to be part of the story but we did not get to decide the narrative; we were instead reminded that we must continually work against ongoing colonisation in our own communities after the show has finished. In this way, Cardinal brilliantly asserted an ethic of incommensurability within one brief interaction. As an audience member, I was filled with a desire to help while simultaneously being reminded of my limited place in this particular narrative.

I came into the theatre ready to be the good Aristotelian audience member that my acting conservatory training had taught me to be; notebook and pencil in hand, ready to take some astute notes as a passive observer. Yet the only notes on my page by the end of the performance were those made by the performer himself; when the lights came up my white lined paper was speckled in tomato juice, which flew off Cardinal as he high-fived audience members while covered in crushed tomatoes. These tomatoes had recently been used for the characters Wind and Huff to both battle skunk smell and (again startlingly demanding an end to our laughter) jokingly re-enact their mother’s recent suicide. For the rest of the play, the tomatoes (now invoking images of blood, guts, or a heart) were left squished all over the floor, a visceral reminder of the death that is rarely discussed in Wind’s family.

These tomatoes became an affective force that permeated the walls of the Aki Studio at Native Earth, refusing by their persistent red spots to let us return to our homes the same way we had left them. The name of the studio, aki, is an Ojibwe word, which Anishinaabe writer and poet Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) defines as “land – place, power, relation,” specifying that “it is the opposite of land as commodity” (p.254). In Cree, the word for land is similar: askîy (Arcand 2019, pp.159). The floor of the set which the tomatoes seeped into resembled tree roots that linked two backdrop paintings of trees, reminding us of askîy, aki, of the ecology that this theatre is located on and is a part of. While Cardinal’s characters never talk self-consciously about the relation between ecological devastation and colonisation, this play was nonetheless deeply rooted in questions of the land. As Simpson reminds us, land is not just defined by trees, grass or water; land is inextricable from the political, historical and social processes that humans rely on it for. Similarly, the haunting power of Huff and Wind’s recently deceased mother, a central character to the narrative who is never portrayed onstage, becomes glaringly evident through the hypervisibility of the red tomato chasm that was left running through the stage, through the family, the community and the settler colonial country, representing the loss of Indigenous women’s rights and lives through colonisation. As Dian Million (2014) points out, in opposition to the enforcement of Western patriarchy that was part of Canada’s colonisation of Indigenous people, Indigenous women have traditional roles as “the heart of the nation” (p.127). In the last third of his play, Cardinal showed us this matriarchal heart, now squished all over the floor, representing not just the mother character or the loss of over 1,200 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada (see Dean 2015; Martin & Walia 2018; Razack 2016) but also the loss of the land itself through colonial theft, degradation and pollution. Once the comparison was made between the mother’s blood and the crushed tomatoes, they could not be disassociated from each other. The tiny red spots that fell on my paper also would have appeared on many audience members’ programs, skin, or clothing, tying us all to this story, to this ecology, from our witness of it.

WITNESSING

Looking around at the audience by the end of the performance of Huff, I wondered what sort of witness each person imagined themselves to be. While so many Indigenous scholars are doing the vital decolonial work of contributing to Indigenous resurgence through the arts, how, as settlers, can we best respond when we are asked to be witness as well as when we create and perform our own work? Julie Salverson (2006) draws on
ethics philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to discuss the role of being an ethical witness to another’s story in theatre and performance, asking how to witness something outside ourselves in a way that recognises relationship and difference but calls the witness into an obligation to that which they witness. Rejecting a totalising, assimilationist philosophy of inclusion, we must “declare that I can never know (and thus erase through my assuming to know) the Other; I can only respond, attend, and remain willing to hear beyond my own conceptions” (p.147). How does witnessing allow for recognition of responsibility in ourselves? Salverson describes two difficulties in bearing witness. The first is when we romanticise the pain and suffering we witness and thus allow a tragic circumstance to be the singular defining characteristic of a person. “What this looks like in practice,” Salverson cautions, “is either an almost hysterical adoration of the victim, or a self-congratulatory finger pointing at the oppressor” (p.149). The second difficulty for the witness occurs when we are afraid of engaging in an unethical way and so decide that disengagement is safest; we are unproductively paralysed by the fear of accidentally causing harm. Instead we must find a balance between our desire to help and our paralysis of guilt, what Salverson calls “putting ourselves in the picture or making the picture about ourselves” (pp.150-151).

As an audience, were we romanticising and othering the suffering that was portrayed by Cardinal in Huff? Or were we so consumed by debilitating guilt that we let this guilt become the main subject of the story? Although we could not change the course of the narrative during Huff, we were heavily implicated in the events unfolding. In her recent talk at York University, entitled ‘Activism, Archives and Performance’ and presented by the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean, feminist theatre scholar Diana Taylor (2018) was asked how identity politics and positioning of oneself come into play when we are watching or telling a story that is not solely our own.1 Taylor argued that we are all part of the story of destruction and/or theft of land, but we have to understand who we are in that story. Some of us may be victims and some may be beneficiaries, but we are all still part of the story. That shared fact does not invisibilise our differences; by following an ethic of incommensurability, it might in fact make them productively more pronounced.

CONCLUSION

In witnessing a story like Huff, we may find ourselves caught on an ethical teeter totter, hopelessly trying to balance between paralysis and romanticisation, overcome by the ceaseless violence of imperialism that haunted the story and that is a part of each of our identities. Following Taylor, we might begin by figuring out who we are in relation to this story and this land and honouring what is incommensurable about these relationships. A group of settler Canadians watching Huff may be tempted to sit back in the comfortable seat of detached but sympathetic observer and I'm sure there were audience members of Huff who chose to do so. Another option is to take the role of a witness who recognises themselves in the story – not to parallel our own circumstance with those of Wind and Huff, but to place ourselves in the historical context that created this story. In this way, our very presence on the land that the theatre sits on implicated us as active witness-participants in the narrative: we were part of the same theatrical ecology.

REFERENCES


---

1 Taylor’s talk centered on the performance artist and activist Regina José Galindo’s 2013 piece, Tierra, where Galindo stood in a field for an hour and a half while a bulldozer cut up the land around her.


Fanon (1952)


Kerstin Kussmaul  

**THE MATTER OF FASCIA: ECOLOGICAL THINKING THROUGH EMBODIED PRACTICE**

**ABSTRACT**

Fascia, the connective tissue permeating every structure in the body, is described in physiology and referenced in dance practices, but could it provide a material strata for enhanced ecological thinking? Triangulating Karen Barad’s ‘Intra-actions’ (2012), Timothy Morton’s ‘Queer Ecology’ (2010), and somatic-critical dance practice lead to an image of thought that enacts fascia as a connector, not just of tissues but also the human body with its environment. In this paper, poetic reflections on practice-led movement research and articles/interviews by Morton and Barad that were folded into found poems are brought into relationship. By employing keywords of these three poems, I substitute a vague notion of ‘Umwelt’ with the multitude of selves speaking through fascia. The romantic desire for ‘Nature’ is unmasked as homesickness inscribed in fascia. In accessing fascia through movement and writing, its systemic nature becomes tangible, felt. Fascia becomes a model for an ‘ecological habitat’. 

*Keywords:* Fascia; Other; Queer; Karen Barad; Tim Morton; Environment

What is the agency of the one who registers the imprints of the other? This is not the agency of the ego, and neither is it the agency of one who is presumed to know. (Butler 2004)

**INTRODUCTION**

The *matter of fascia* enquires into what fascia may contribute towards material thinking in relation to ecology, and more specifically, to self and other. This paper argues how the spatial dimension of fasicular experience, in conjunction with Karen Barad’s and Tim Morton’s queering of phenomena (Barad 2012) and environment (Morton 2010), rethink the embodied experience of our habitats; allowing for a human to be at-home while acknowledging difference and multiplicities within us and around us.

In this research, somatic-critical dance practice as a method of inquiry that combines physiology, movement and touch improvisation – or in other words a somatic movement inquiry – was complemented with free writing and group discussion. A result of the inquiry was the place-based, participative performance *the matter of fascia* (whenever the performance event is referenced, it is written italicised and in lowercase), which took place at Lake Rototoa, South Head, Aotearoa/New Zealand in February 2019.

Somatic movement methods draw on a sensori-motor inquiry exploring and validating individual experience, enhancing awareness and enabling behavioural changes (Eddy 2016, p.14) and more generally learning through movement and touch. Research on fascia was conducted through practice-led research methods using a study group's collective and individual somatic improvisations, their written and verbal reflection on embodied fascia inquiry and recent physiological fascia research. The study group consisted of seven dancers with a strong somatic background. In eleven meetings of about three to five hours length, we researched fascia with a somatic methodology: as a primer, a verbal introduction to a fascial topic set the tone. Movement and touch-based scores – improvisation rules that afford certain ideas
and disregard other aspects, in order to become specific about what ‘works’ and what doesn’t – led us to our research findings, which then were shared and discussed in the group. For example, we used a rope to explore the pull aspect of myofascia, eventually leading to explore spatial relationships. A video assisted in reflecting the process at a later point in time.

This paper triangulates this practice-led somatic research with philosopher and quantum field physicist Karen Barad’s ‘intra-action’ (2012) and the concept of ‘Queer Ecology’ by ecological theorist Tim Morton (2010), to explore the notion of nature and environment through the lens of fascia. Barad and Morton offer a conceptual frame for this research that speaks to the findings and helps me to articulate their relevance to contemporary issues of performing ecology. While Barad uses diffraction to look closely at relationships, how matter creates meaning, and how we might address otherness, Morton looks at ecology through a much wider lens, questioning the notion of environment, and similarly like Barad, emphasising relationship and otherness. Both call what they do ‘queering’: either dealing with “ultra-queer atoms” (Barad 2012, p.80) or the dissolution of nature into a queer ecology (Morton 2010, p.279). Queering means here to both distance themselves from the habitual thinking of self/other; and of self/environment.

All three poems used here are found poems that I created drawing from Barad’s and Morton’s texts, and from the fascia study group writings. These were obtained by adapting Goldberg’s idea of freewriting (1986), which I used to connect non-judgmental writing to a fascia movement practice. Using Alys Longley’s smudge skittle cards (2018) to sample and use fragments of the original texts, the poems do not attempt to capture the complete thought world of their authors. Instead, they look at related key words and ideas that may assist in unfolding a material thinking process through fascia by using part sentences and key words of the texts. Consequently, I call the poems found poems, consisting of existing – found – text, in an assemblage with my personal associations to the original texts.

**FASCIA AS INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT**

What is fascia? A broad definition for fascia is “all collagenous fibrous connective tissues that can be seen as elements of a body-wide tensional force transmission network” (Schleip & Baker 2015, p.3). It is present almost everywhere in the body. Its shape, size and texture varies depending on the location in the body, on the specific function and on the applied local forces. A structural way of describing fascia is to call it the “organ of form” (Varela, Frankh 1987, p.73), as the tissue that defines a body’s shape. Untrained fascia
looks like wire wool, entangled and disorganised; stretched and trained fascia is organised in elastic diamond shapes. Fascia organises the entirety of our organism to move. When we talk of fascia in function, not as structure, it makes sense to speak of myofascia: muscle and fascia are closely connected in movement.

A characteristic trait of fascia is that it is a thing in between – what is between two organs or muscles, or anywhere else in between. Fascia is a structural transition. In movement-based research, one stumbles upon the paradox when a thing in between other things becomes a thing in itself and ceases to be a transition. Inbetweenness promotes ambiguity and both-and, it allows for fluidity between things. As something in-between, it differentiates and connects at the same time. It creates relationships of distance, place and becoming. So does fascia.

The study group’s somatic writings on fascia express some of these aspects in this collage of a found poem:

**Ground substance**

Floating compression, tensegrities and triangles.

Fascia talks to me as ‘we’, as the others inside me:

“We have friends that know you better than you”

A relief not to be human.

Surface and inside, also a lot of emptiness, in-between

Flocking water molecules create an environment inside us –

In this ocean there is a knowing about other beings’ perceptual range

The haptic intimacy of fluids asks:

What is the nature of contact?

Purpose is embedded in the relational matrix.

---

Fascia’s appearance as inbetween-state can be used as material metaphor, and as somatic narrator to inquire artistic and educational processes from an alternative cognitive view (Kussmaul, n.d.).

From a subjective viewpoint of being one thing next to the in-between, fascia tells of the ‘other’; eventually, otherness rises, another quality of the in-between-thing. This otherness has risen in freewriting sessions after working with fascia. In these sessions the somatic-based writings follow a non-judgmental open stream of words, letting fascia speak of its experience. Fascia here often transforms into languages other than the mother tongue of the writer, or becomes graphic instead of letter-based, as the example in Figure 2 shows.

In other instances, fascia emerged speaking as ‘we’, as a collection of others speaking to a self, bringing in unconscious aspects of the experience. It can create multitudes, as dance teacher Sibylle Starkbaum (2017) describes: “fascial life creates a social web, a sense of ‘we’ – and is nourished only by people’s physical presence. It creates a sense of boundaries, difference at the same time”.

What the in-between-ness evokes – a sense of otherness, multitudes, difference and connection, boundaries – is relevant for both Barad and Morton, as they articulate through the queering of their thinking. The otherness as expressed through the reflection of myofascia through graphics or through use of foreign languages point to another aspect both Barad and Morton attend to, the nonhuman, or inhuman, respectively. More on this later.

Fascia is a structure connecting and
communicating through the whole body, and through modulating fascial tone, informs haptically about our surroundings. Modulating fascial tone can be done through changing the relationship (the amount of surrendering) to gravity. This modulation has spatial implications, in how the space within us and around us is being perceived. Strictly speaking both muscle and fascia is engaged when modulating the tone, so it is accurate to speak of myofascial tone.

For an experiential understanding, I propose this short exercise:

Close your eyes. Rest your arms somewhere – a table, armrest, floor... Let your arms be as heavy as possible (which equals low myofascia tone). Sense what your arm is touching without looking: Temperature, materiality, structure, weight, size, the relationship of the touched object to other objects. Also notice how much information you are receiving about yourself, such as position in space, breath, what else you touch etc.

Now raise the myofascia tone, make your arm light, without losing touch to where your arm rested. Attend again to your surroundings now – do you still receive the same (amount of) information? And how about what is revealed about yourself now?  

In the experience of study group and in class with many groups of dancers and non-dancers, most will answer that a low myofascia tone feeds more information about what is beyond our physical boundaries, and high myofascial tone feeds more information about what is happening in ourselves. Fascia informs us about our surrounding by haptic sensation, composed of tactile and weight-related input. The higher the myofascia tone, the less prominent the feed from our surroundings becomes, and internally, muscular perception becomes predominant. This corresponds to the observation of dancer and contact improvisation cofounder Nita Little who coined this relation in an email conversation with the author (1/9/2016): “muscle tells us about ourselves, fascia about our environment”. Myofascia tone consequently becomes a mediator of our understanding of self within the environment. What and how we perceive, we are able to modulate through myofascia tone, and there seems to be a direct inverse relationship between the sensory feed of self and that of environment.

The physiological underpinning for this observation are found in the numerous free nerve endings in fascia, which lead to the anterior insular cortex. This is an area of the brain that is thought to be related to self-recognition, to the awareness of environment, and to the integration of feelings related to the body (Schleip & Jäger 2012). The numerous free nerve endings in fascia leads us thus to this interesting part of the brain and potentially suggests that fascia might also be related to these functions (Schleip & Jäger 2012, p. 91). At this time, physiology might not be able to fully explain the phenomena of myofascia tone and the perception of self/other. But physiology points to fascia as very relevant to homeostasis, the ongoing self-regulatory chemical and physical dynamics to maintain fairly constant conditions within the body. The current physiological and somatic research support the thought that homeostasis, interoception and the fascial sensorium are closely linked, and that spatial experience plays a role within this dynamic.

Fascia’s function leads beyond what is visible in fascia’s matter at first sight. As a sensorium, and with the ability to connect us to other, points to fascia as both matter and agent – and matter is agential, according to Barad (Kleinman 2012, p.80), creating affordances for interpersonal relationships. Gravity being a non-human agent, and myofascial’s modulation of gravity, it finds the non-human in us. It oscillates between a liquid becoming and reaching beyond an individual’s body, evoking ambivalences, otherness, touch and questions of boundaries. Fascia realises the paradox of what is an internal environment, swimming in its own ocean within us.

‘INTRA-ACTIONS’ BY KAREN BARAD

Materialising relation

I relate therefore I am. I did not pre-exist.  

---

I materialized in intra-action, within our entanglements and became part of a phenomenon.

Separate from you only within this phenomenon.

Now you and me are spacetime-matterings.

Agential cuts let them emerge and dissolve.

We get our hands dirty in matter (which is not mere stuff)

Physics is an enquiry into the nature of touch.

What if nature herself is queer?

(and not the bedrock of dichotomy embedding a morality of exclusion)

Entangled, indeterminate, fluid identities, full of atomic critters.

We are balancing on slippery ground.

Questions become a practice of engagement. Enabling responses of other (the inhuman), response-ability

Infinitive intimacy touching the nature of touch.

Cuts and entanglements.

What if fascia response-ables the inhuman?

Barad is relevant for my practice-led research on fascia because many of her aspects of agential realism – such as the other, the inhuman, the focus on relationship, differentiating and connecting, have emerged in my fascia research, and as they have emerged together, my hypothesis is that the phenomena of fascia is related to Barad’s image of thought as a whole. Her focus on the relational nature in phenomena draws also other dance artists to her work.

Barad unhinges the subject-object relationship, or to speak in broader terms, undoes cause and effect with her image of thought called agential realism. She does so by claiming an entangled world that becomes diffracted by these agential cuts. These cuts create individuals – instead of individuals creating cuts, as one might assume, and the diffractions create spacetimematterings (Kleinman 2012, p.77). They are not only substance, but also agents creating mattering, or meaning, entangled in and through their creation.

The idea of intra-actions emphasises how we enact temporary individuals. These are ongoingly reconfigured, an enactment. This is queering – a non-linear, non-binary coupling of events, a constant ontological becoming, and altering, and dismissing. Difference arises as a consequence of becoming of individuals. Mattering of matter.
becomes a “congealing of agency” (Kleinman 2012, p.80). Everything rises, exists, falls through relationship, intention, of entangled matters, including oneself. In an agential cut some things arise but something else may not become detectable. Instead of being inter-related, we are one entangled phenomena without subject/object divide. This lack of separation sounds messy, and Barad accordingly speaks of “getting our hands dirty” (Kleinman 2012, p.77).

How does Barad’s thought world relate to fascia? Agential cuts come into existence through creation of relationship. This is how the agential realism refers to fascia in function, as a connector and diffractor, as an enabler of relationship. Fascia as human matter of what in previous anatomy history was considered unimportant filling material – or what Barad calls “mere stuff” (Kleinman 2019, p.80). But it now comes into view as relationship creator, and starts to matter. Fascia is a prime example of how matter is an agent. It entangles us with our surroundings, the surrounding being the liquid life in us and how the sensation extends into the world around us.

‘QUEER ECOLOGY’ BY TIM MORTON

LIQUID LIFE

strange strangers: look around you!
a queer monument of othernesses
Nature is a process, not a product
fragmental and prosaic.
Non-totalizable, openended interrelations
that blur boundaries (also between life forms)
defying boundaries between inside and outside
mesh and entanglements
Others are under our skin
the spatial intimacy
a threshold rather than boundary
creating desires
We are a collective coexistence

but not a holistic community
What if we value intimacy with strangers
over holistic belonging?

(Found poem by Kerstin Kussmaul based on Morton’s ‘Queer Ecology’ (2010))

Tim Morton’s (2010) queering comes from a biological viewpoint, by laying out how dissolution of the binary can be argued through a variety of examples. His nonessentialist argument is for example based on the intermingling of DNA/RNA across species, how in DNA viral code cannot be distinguished from genuine code (p.274), or how “heterosexual production is a late addition to an ocean of asexual division” (p.276).

Morton argues that the notion of inside-outside is at the heart of “thinking the environment as a closed, metaphysical system – Nature” (p.274). Instead, he suggests, we should rethink environment as something that permeates us, that “confounds boundaries” (p.275), and as Barad speaks of entanglements and queer atoms, Morton considers the un-boundaried, un-comprising and unlimited notion of “queer mesh” (p.278).

The conceptual separation of inside and outside is not supported, and thus his track of thinking aligns with the ambivalence of fascia – how fascia both relays information from surroundings and internal proceedings, and these are not opposites, but along a scale of myofascia tone modulation. The boundary between inside and outside in fascia’s experience is equally blurry.

The ‘Queer Ecology’ that Morton proposes complements fascia’s conversation with Barad’s ‘Intra-agency’ by the systemic aspect of ecological thinking. System characteristics are for example part interdependence, a purpose that is not inscribed in the parts, but in the whole, the tendency of systems to create self-stability, the focus on relationship and context, among other attributes. Morton warns to think of ecology as nature as a closed system that is based on an inside/outside perspective, and instead maintains that “interdependence implies differences that cannot be totalized” (p.278). Morton does not expand in further detail how his view of
ecology is different from organicism, or systems thinking. The question remains if Morton equals nature with systems thinking as a holistic, or organicistic world view; versus systemic thinking as methodology. In the context of this paper, Morton’s contribution lies in the warning of the binary of inside/outside thinking, which would lead to a holistic view that ultimately negates our differences, or multiplicities. Binary thinking emphasises community – a congregation of inner sameness versus outer difference. For Morton, the concept of nature, and even more so the concept of wilderness, is a symbol for some pristine other, for the longing of union, in order to become part of a community. But Morton advocates collectivity instead of holistic community. Collectivity allows an appreciation of difference within and without, and thus of co-existence.

Fascia’s functionality is expressed as systemic as well. Fascia works as a tensile net made of a design principle called “floating compression”, as named by Kenneth Snelson (2012, p.71) or as tensegrity: a word creation by Buckminster Fuller based on tension and integrity (ibid). It means there are areas of compression in an ocean of tension (tonus). Fascia works as a complex system: synergetic, interconnected, and functionally complex. A change in one fascia-immersed body part can affect other body parts instantly, even over long distance. As a floating compression, fascia is swimming in its ocean of liquid crystals and becomes a biochemical and nervous transmitter, as part of the systems of communication and transformation that permeate the body. The fascia cell communicates constantly with its surroundings, the extracellular matrix, affecting, supporting and sustaining each other. Below is an image of a tensegrity icosahedron. It shows some of the tensegric, systemic attributes of fascia. As a model and thus only depicting certain aspects, it appears segregated from the surrounding. However, tensegrity models are scaleable - bigger tensegrity models can create an environment for smaller ones.

INTERFACING INTRA-ACTION AND QUEER ECOLOGY WITH SOMATIC-CRITICAL FASCIA RESEARCH

Morton and Barad undo the classic view of nature by arguing the multiplicities of phenomena in nature, which is everything but binary when looking closely. Barad, as quantum field physicist, uses material examples of atoms and other small things, whereas Morton uses biological arguments for ecological thinking. They both blur the boundaries between the human and non-human (Morton) or inhuman (Barad) and unhinge the traditionally narrated nature/culture dichotomy with counter-arguments. This undoing of binary thinking concerns sexuality and life forms, puzzling our understanding of individual relating to groups, and thus also of what constitutes identity.

Barad’s intra-agency helps to understand the entanglement of matter and meaning in fascia. Her argument of subjective involvement provides a theoretical backdrop for somatic-critical research, which is the use of corporeal, individual, emergent intelligence as a source for creating knowledge. Morton’s systemic viewpoint...
complements Barad in regards to myofascia, seen as a complex synergetic system. His notion of environment attends to myofascia’s internal environment.

THE NOTION OF ENVIRONMENT IN FASCIA

The internal environment that fascia creates in our bodies is mirrored in Morton’s notion of environment which is not separate from us and affects us directly. Environment is inscribed in fascia: fascia is environment – in our bodies it is constituted by a whole lot of ‘nothing’ and liquid, with a little bit of ‘something’ that does the wrapping, encapsulating, permeating, connecting and differentiating. Myofascia’s ability to modulate tone and thus work with gravity tells us about our environment, both internal and external. The fascial system shapes how we communicate with our surroundings, and it internally communicates about our wellbeing, through calibrating measures of homeostasis. Is the idea of an internal environment a paradox? Etymologically speaking it isn’t: the word ‘environment’ in the 18th century meant “the aggregate of the conditions in which a person or thing lives” (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.). Conditioning is a word we use for bodily practices, for social and cultural environments, not just outdoor weather conditions. It refers to both within the body and outside. Dance conditioning is a subject taught in dance; training strength, balance, and flexibility (Franklin 2004). A body creates the conditions in which to live in, within itself and through permeation with its surroundings. Fascia conditions, independently of any perceived or constructed boundaries of inside – and outside – beyond dichotomies. To think of fascia as a system includes considering both structure and function. The structure is a system within a body, but the function – the ability to inform beyond of what one perceives as bodily boundaries – creates a system with what is surrounding, touching it and being touched. Fascia attends to an in-between, not to an either-or, but to a both-and.

In this example, the dancer in the matter of fascia negotiates her weight which includes slow transitions of leaning in relationship to her environment (see fig. 5). While having to employ a rather low myofascia tone, she still needs to work out verticality against collapsing while still being ready anytime for a cling wrap that may break.

Fig. 6: Mesh and entanglements. Leah Carrrell in the matter of fascia. February 2019, Lake Rotota South Head. Photo: Hamish MacDonald.
FROM DIFFERENTIATING TO CONNECTING TO BECOMING

In somatic movement, learning to differentiate precedes integrating and connecting body parts or systems in movement. This is a result of specific attention and intention to perception and movement. Body parts or systems are then able to relate to each other and to the body as a whole. Fascia, or myofascia, is one of these corporeal systems, one that enables haptic perception of the surrounding world and letting fascia speak to and of each other. Similarly, Barad’s agential cuts create individuals as becomings in an entangled world – agential cuts create difference, and in due course relationships of becoming.

ENTANGLED FASCIA

The image of fascia as wire-wool associates with Barad’s entanglement phenomena. Fascia, originally considered by anatomists as filling or stuff was just matter before physiologists discovered the functional agency of fascia as continuous web, communicator and relationship enabler. In this sense fascia speaks of how matter is mattering, how it is agent and matter at the same time. This relates to Barad’s idea of spacetime matterings – fascia as substances of doing, and more specifically, of creating relationships by diffracting, modulating myofascia tone.

A plastic substance, fascia’s form and appearance follows the demands of its use in movement over longer periods of time. The use shapes fascia’s substance, or matter, over time depending on how the agential cuts are being made. Matter is not a static given. Form follows function. Results are not one and for all – fascia is plastic and will respond to change. Healthy fascia responds at any stage in life to the asks in movement and touch. Matter and meaning are intricately involved with each other.

OTHERNESS/INHUMAN/MULTIPLICITIES

Both somatic-based movement work with fascia and intra-agency pursue ontological questions of the in-between, of becoming, relationship, and multiplicities, which lead to acknowledge otherness and difference within us.

Barad emphasises the processual nature of phenomena by introducing responsibility. It is an invitation for the other, a welcoming that leads towards a “response-ability” (Kleinman 2012, p.81). It creates affordances, a step-by step becoming. Barad emphasises how otherness is part of us. She speaks not of the non-human (which would create another binary), but of the inhuman: the inhuman critters of multiplicities, of appearing impossibilities.

When fascia arises to speak – riding the wave of just below the surface of consciousness that freewriting is – we offer the in-human and the multiplicities to emerge, such as in this participant's writing in a fascia research workshop of the author's (2016) in which a slightly humorous tone of the in-human appears:

Slime slime, long I feel and loose... all my tendons have stretched themselves. I am water I am elastic, because I am you are. I hold you together like the cheese holds the sandwich, am I in all living beings, only in humans or also in animals? Am I in plants. Am I a plant.

Fig. 7: Vivian Medina: The woman without face in the matter of fascia. February 2019, Lake Rotota, South Head. Photos: Hamish MacDonald.
Connected to the in-human is the otherness, which becomes visible through speaking in foreign tongues in the freewriting, or in the image as discussed above (see fig. 5). This otherness also may going to a preverbal state, as captured in this writing excerpt of another participant of the same fascia research workshop (2016): “Wrapped in vibration, Shrouded by trembling, / In nothing / That I do not want to permeate / In silence / I rest in silence / Having lost my thoughts.”

In order to give the in-human and the others in us a voice, could we practice multiplicity, otherness and queer thinking through working with fascia in touch and movement, and letting it speak of its experience? This might become a material recognition of the inhuman within us, a start of allowing othernesses and multiplicities to reside in us. An example for the multitudes is this freewriting of a participant in one of another fascia research workshop of the author (2018): “Together with water we fasten the many. The manyness in our manifesto”. Fascia may assist in unravelling thingness. Accessing fascia in movement and touch experiences, again, the “both-and”, the otherness, the slightly conspicuous, an intimacy that is not bound to humanness.

There is a difference in Barad’s and Morton’s thinking: Morton (2010) speaks of the “open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur boundaries at practically any level” (p.275). His solution to deal with other-nesses, with the non-human is to widen the circles of involvement, to never close them. He expands his scale of thinking with non-totalisable, open-ended interrelations, as in the poem, or when he negates worlds, which have horizons (2010, p.278); we are part of a never to be finished mess or mesh. Barad, on the other side, thinks “there is always something that drops out” (Kleinman 2012, p.81), questioning if it makes sense to continuously “widen the bounds of conclusion” (ibid). She wonders if the answer is instead to look inside us, to find the abysms and the othernesses within us. If physics is an enquiry into the nature of touch, as stated in the poem, it may be a start to inquire within us physically, within our materiality of fascia for example, in a somatic inquiry. “What if knowledge in general has an irremediably local dimension?” (Ophir, Shapin 1991, p.4).

THE RELUCTANCE OF INTERFERING

When Barad (2012, p.77) speak of getting hands dirty, it is an image describing the impossibility of being separate from the world around us, or from what we are invested to observe and study. It taps into theories that call the ‘subject’ into question.

The question of the subject has been explored in-depth by feminist, artist and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger in the book The Matrixial Borderspace (2006). Ettinger speaks of before individuation realises itself, and of the time when this process starts and comes into being, and thus of the question of subjectivity as in how we can not be separate from our agential cuts. She draws a haunting sketch of the not-yet-but-almost-becoming, how becoming involves an ambivalence (of not to be determined), an emergent phenomenon rising against the background of the undisclosed matrix, the womb. Both matter and matrix trace etymologically to mater, the mother (matrix, n.d.).

SAVING PENGUINS

Coming back to the subject/object divide, I would like to use the nature/culture divide as an example. This thinking of not being part of nature permeates many paradigms. Nature videographers, for example, are supposed not to interfere. This is considered “a cardinal rule”, says cameraman Doug Allen as quoted in a The Guardian online article of journalist Aamna Mohdin (2018). She reports of public discussions that ask if it was justified for David Attenborough’s team of camera operators to save a group of trapped penguins in a ravine by building a ramp. She quotes Mike Gunton, producer of the BBC series for which the penguin intervention took place, who said interfering might mean “changing the dynamics of the natural system or you might be depriving something of its food” n.p). But Gunton also says he thinks it was justifiable to intervene in this particular case as the camera crew did not upset the penguins; nor interfered with a predator chasing. This argument doesn’t hold up to closer scrutiny, if one follows the non-interference position among nature videographers. It looks like an attempt to have it both ways: Is making a colony of penguins
survive who otherwise would not have been able to, not interfering? Is it possible that the delight in the bipedal and humanlike aspects of penguins influenced Gunton’s judgment – would he have done the same with a group of snakes in a pit? The situation becomes more curious when one looks at the opening video still that is connected to the article: it shows a camera man in bright red clothes in a white snowy landscape standing behind a major camera equipment on a hill. On the flats, behind the man is a penguin colony of several hundred birds which looks back in the direction of the man with the camera. The penguins clearly have taken notice of the human. How can one argue that being seen by wild animals does not mean interfering? Who decides when interfering starts? We simply don’t know the consequences, but we cannot pretend that we don’t get our hands dirty, as both Barad and Morton argue – we are always involved when we are present.

The position of not/interfering stems from the viewpoint of seeing the human as not being part of nature, or in this case, wildlife. I can not interfere with what I am part of. We yearn for untouched nature, untouched by humans, that is. To claim not to be interfering is to deny one’s own presence. What might nature filming look like when a film team considers itself as part of what is happening at the place they are visiting?

THE INVOLVEMENT OF PLACE IN THE MATTER OF FASCIA

the matter of fascia took place on a farm in the fragile ecosystem of dune lakes in South Head, in and water, pasture, and in pine forest. The audience was introduced to the interwoven human and the natural history, acknowledging the history of involvement that was already present. Through an account of place, a relationship with between audience and place could begin. The performance was set up in improvised scores that allowed the performers to adapt to the constantly changing conditions of the place. We did not try to fit the place into the performance, but rather asked the place what it had to say about fascia. As far as possible, we used materials from the site – such as dinghies present on the lake, a sculpture made out of kanuka trees sourced from the bush on site.

Cling wrap was used for the ‘frog activation score’. If performers moved slow enough, the frogs in the lake would start to croak, as they were not concerned with human movement anymore. The frogs thus became a measure for the quality of the slow-motion score. We accepted our presence as an alteration of the situation; at the same time we entered a dialogue, finding a role of co-existing, acknowledging the multiple others, materialising as flora and fauna.

We did not explicitly follow a ‘leave no trace’ policy – another expression of the nature/culture divide, or seeing the human as separate from the surroundings. This did not mean we left traces: rather, we attended to the place by sensing its quality of sounds, visuals, smells and other impressions over extended periods of time. With a respectful approach to the in-human, a leave no trace policy need not be addressed. By assuming ourselves as part of the ecosystem, we did not deny our presence but would not alter any aspect of the land and water permanently.

FASCIA’S EARTH

If we cannot interfere with what we are part of, as
just discussed, we can deduce that we can only yearn for (or desire, in Morton words) of what we are not part of. To feel separated from our surroundings thus can lead to feeling homesick, in a wider sense.

In the five elements in the phenomenology of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), each body system is attributed to a certain element. Fascia and muscle are the bodily structure that articulate the earth element – everything that grounds us, makes us feel to belong, and express our being and living in relation to the earth that we stand on. In movement practice, the belonging of myofascia to earth is ingrained in the modulation of myofascia tone; it relates directly to the experience of gravity, and thus the ground beneath us. Maybe we could think of gravity as the first relationship we develop in utero, within the buoyancy of the amniotic sac.

Earth is a symbol for home. Following TCM practitioner Dianne Connelly (1993), “all sickness is homesickness”. Myofascia is part of the earth element and thus also related to home, or feeling to lack thereof. Homesickness and a sense of belonging are mutually exclusive. Is the yearning for untouched nature not another way of expressing homesickness? Of a relationship to earth as other, and also of within us, gone wrong or missing? And might fascia then become part of an agency to heal our relationship to the earth? In tensegrity design, cause and effect can switch places. Myofascia can be a victim of things gone wrong in our relationship to the earth, which may express itself as myofascia pain or other symptoms. As cause and effect are interchangeable, myofascia can also instigate healing. An appreciation of myofascia, a tender attention, a physical considering of ambiguities, multiplicities, helps us to understand the stranger within us, giving myofascia response-ability. To find the earth in manifold expressions will help to heal our relationships, to the human and to the inhuman. We create response-ability by working functionally with myofascia.

In the matter of fascia, the response-ability expressed itself by the audience staying on after the performance – they did not disperse, and instead kept engaging with each other and the site. Some chose to swim in the lake, despite wind and rain, immersing themselves in touch with their surroundings.

Having a sense of belonging is where touching other or self is safe and creates relationships. It allows intimacy with strangers, with the in-human within us and around us. Somatic myofascial work models the fabric of connection and belonging. Instead of environment, I propose to think and use the word ‘habitat’: a sense of how we create the world in which we belong, and how the world creates us. A felt sense of what is in us, touch us and around us, and in the blurry field in-between all of these, a spatial intimacy fostered by fascia.

REFERENCES


SOUNDING WALKS: EVOKING EMPATHY THROUGH SOCIAL, SOUND AND WALKING PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

Sounding is a group of artworks first developed in 2017 that investigate the connections between anthropogenic noise pollution and marine mammals. Developed in collaboration with marine biologists, zoologists and archaeologists at Otago University, the work shares recordings of endemic and migratory whales and dolphins living off the coast of Aotearoa New Zealand in a range of installed and ambulatory environments. Although the southern oceans surrounding New Zealand are usually relatively quiet – and home to growing populations of Southern right whales – a 2016 government oil and gas exploration tender of the oceanic area surrounding New Zealand (covering over 500,000 square kilometres) threatens significant increase in noise pollution through seismic exploration. Sounding is the name given to the work when it is installed in a static exhibition space – a blue-lit oceanic environment using ceiling suspended clear vinyl umbrellas as acoustic mirrors to create personal sound zones, set amid surround sound ocean noises. Marine mammals use echolocation – reflected sound – to navigate, communicate and find food. In the installation, visitors physically immerse themselves in exhibition space and listen to a range of mammals communicating. Sounding Walks uses the ubiquitous umbrella as a human reference for protection while walking. Walkers take one of our electronically-enabled umbrellas for a guided walk around a pre-determined public space and move in and out of ‘oceans’. Like whales and dolphins, these ‘oceans’ are discovered through listening as the umbrellas respond and trigger sound files embedded in their handles. Parallels are made to the digital networks (such as wifi) that also surround us – like an ocean. We cannot see these networks but we access them to communicate, usually using devices rather than sound.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the artist project Sounding Walks, developed by three digital artists in collaboration with marine biologists, zoologists and archaeologists at Otago University. Together, a group of walkers undertake a 60-minute journey through public space, carrying technologically-augmented umbrellas that respond to ‘wi-fi oceans’. When an ocean is encountered, Sounding Walks umbrellas play soundtracks of scientists talking about whales and the acoustic ecologies of marine landscapes off the shores of Otago, New Zealand, and recordings of endemic and migratory whales and dolphins communicating. The work draws together different types of knowing: it creates personal audio spaces through listening, and social space through the act of walking together through space. It encourages conversation between people, landscapes and whales. Sounding Walks is considered as an example of site-specific social art practice, identifying the ocean and its mammals as a part of our shared local context. Through a combination of known and imagined environments, Sounding Walks creates an opportunity to empathise with the more-than-human, and helps us understand our potential relationship with whales as a species we can know without needing to see.

Keywords: Listening; More-Than-Human Sociality; Walking Art
This paper is based on the *Sounding* experiment, comprising an ecological weaving of walking, writing, and our social, participatory art practice. It both describes a particular iteration of *Sounding Walks*, and uses explicit relationships between writing and social and listening experiences to imply connections we hope are relevant and useful to the themes of the artworks. Anecdotally, both artworks have been described by visitors as deeply engaging, immersive and encourage reflection. Although no formal data has been collected, we see the walking experiences as both time-based performances of facts and ideas, and performative expressions that include whales, time scales and technological relationships. Through employing sound as the primary medium as well as the subject of the works, the experience of *Sounding Walks* moves beyond science communication, and towards a participatory ecological art practice which references both specific sites and species, and implicates our own roles and behaviours.

1. LOOSENING, AND LISTENING

Whales are really acoustic animals rather than visual animals, and that is because underwater you’d be lucky to get 50 metres visibility, and so vision isn’t all that much use….the vast bulk of their communication is done with sound. (Slooten, *Sounding Walks* recording, 2017)

As we start out from Allen Hall Theatre, a participating audience of ten hold onto their umbrellas. It is raining cats and dogs, as they say, so the umbrellas – as well as an integral part of this artwork – will play a suitably protective role today.

Here we begin by listening to an introduction – our first wi-fi ocean – spoken calmly by collaborating marine zoologist Professor Liz Slooten. Her voice is emitted from our umbrellas through technology embedded in our umbrella handles – grey bulbs that resemble the timpanic bulla or earbone of a whale.1 The technology is responding to a radio transmitter, discretely located nearby. As mentioned, the work *Sounding Walks*2 is part of a larger set of *Sounding* artworks, all linking technology, sound files, umbrellas – and whales. The works each involve collaborative practices and ideas that form knots, connecting these four unlikely components. Donna Haraway is another biologist whose work considers our human entanglement in knots with non-humans, including technosocial situations, animals and ecologies, and *Sounding Walks* may be usefully considered using Haraway’s entanglements to help unpick the experience of the work that we have come together to experience.

Haraway insists on a recursive relationship between technical and social organisation, where every new iteration of this relationship provides opportunities for alternative architecture to emerge. Within these emerging spaces are opportunities for action and empowerment. These relationships make room for “temporalities, scales, materialities, relationalities between people and our constitutive partners, which always include other people and other critters, animal and not, in doing worlds, in worlding” (Gane & Haraway, 2006). The notion of ‘worlding’ is first used by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927), referring to a dynamic interplay or network of associations between possibilities, locations, places and things. It has been employed by many authors since its initial introduction for a variety of purposes and blends of material and semiotic relations. But it is Haraway’s re-definition of the term that we are particularly referring to in this case. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway (2008) suggests that this network of associations requires that we forget previous categories and come together in a new ‘composition’. “To get ‘in the presence of’ demands work, speculative invention and ontological risks. No one knows how to do that in advance of coming together” (Haraway 2008, 83). In this way, each new iteration of *Sounding Walks* affords a dynamic and new composition. The sound tracks played through the umbrellas may be the same, and the species they reference are too, but the contextual environment and the knowledge and

---

1 Timpanic bullae are the hollow bony structure enclosing parts of the middle and inner ear. All vertebrate animals include an ‘ear bone’.

2 *Sounding Walks* is a sound walk developed by two artists, Caro McCaw and Vicki Smith, with creative technologist Andrew Hornblow, working with three scientists at Otago University: Professors Liz Slooten and Steve Dawson and Dr Will Rayment.
sensibilities of each walker bring new dynamics and new possibilities to the work. Embedded in Haraway’s definition (alternatively known as “autre-modialisation” (2008) and “Terrapolis” (2016)) is the implication of our own embedded responsibility. For example Haraway suggests that the “Thou shall not kill” commandment should read, “Thou shalt not make kill able” (Haraway 2008, p.82). She identifies living responsibly as our capacity “to respond in relentless historical, nonteleological, multispecies contingency” (ibid.). It is within this open and hopeful sense of contingency that Sounding Walks is both a response to our own conversations with scientists, and a sharing of these as a response-ability, drawing together knowledge and practice.

I will walk us through Sounding Walks as it was co-performed on November 21 2018, to consider three knots: the New Zealand settler landscape and territories that don’t end at the beach; the scale of a whale and cetaceous time as a metaphor for becoming-with; and the noise of our information and things as a call to action. These knots, their tying, loosening and retying, will help us consider our own empathy and accountability in the more-than-human situation encountered through this art walk, an albeit curious form of worlding, in which knowledge is performative, embodied and connected (Bear & Eden 2008).

The use of walking practices in art is not new, and is usually considered to have begun in Western art history nearly a hundred years ago with Dada artists in 1921 (Solnit 2001). In the 1960s artists such as Situationist Guy Debord employed walking as a way of crossing urban spaces in critical ways, that brought the walkers’ awareness to the ’psychogeographical’ effects of being in movement, an “unconventional methodology of awareness and letting go” (Mendolicchio 2019). Just as Debord sought new psychological effects in these walks through Paris, environmental artists such as Richard Long used walking art practices to respect and connect conceptually and relationally to non-urban landscapes in which both walkers and landscapes were affected by each other. Our paths, and where the earth meets our feet, for Long, opened up a mode though which to question, challenge or emphasise our place in a physical environment (Mendolicchio 2019). Contemporary U.K. artist Simon Pope calls upon “participatory and dialogic art to invent ways that all things human and non-human alike, can take part in hybrid social worlds, collectives, assemblages, ecologies, publics, communities, however we choose to define them” (Pope 2015, pp.ii-iii). Whether in urban or rural landscapes artist engagement with lands by walking through them, alone or with a group, seeks social engagement beyond the scopic preference of seeing landscapes. Walking art practices, although in this case identified within art contexts, reach out to other ideas and practices developed across social sciences and humanities that are committed to concepts of place, memory, imagination, improvisation and intervention (Pink 2015).

2. A SENSE OF SELF

Our first knot ties us to settler notions of landscapes. This walk begins outside Allen Hall Theatre, one of Otago University’s older stone buildings, originally opened in 1914 as the University’s first student union hall, replicating English tradition in both architecture and use (Otago Connection 2017). New Zealand was colonised and settled by Britain in the mid-late 19th century at a time when British landscapes were undergoing a reimagining. Brought with the settlers by ship to our shores, these perspectives of landscapes reflected ideals of Romanticism, including an extending of the world’s
boundaries. Images reflecting monumental European-styled architecture and Romantic idealised landscapes continue to both shape and limit our experiences of this nation state, and provide content for many visual representations of New Zealand. Romantic ideals coincided with the emergence of British domestic tourism, and so perhaps it is not surprising to see them still utilised and employed to sell these New Zealand landscapes to British (and other international) visitors. These dominant European histories are tenacious. However, looking at landscapes as a dominant way to identify our sense of belonging in these lands is limiting. Aside from the clearly Eurocentric perspective, taking no account of the deeply social relations with lands of indigenous Māori, this scopic approach to ‘seeing is believing’ is restrictive, partial and relentlessly human-centric. As noted above, whales are not really visual animals. On Sounding Walks, we engage through listening, a first and simple step towards empathising with the marine mammals we are walking with and better understanding their acoustic environment.

As the seagull flies we are not far from the ocean, a kilometer perhaps, and when the University was first built the original estuarine harbour basin would have been much closer. Even when considered using an economic framework, New Zealand’s territories do not start and finish at the beach; our Economic Exclusion Zone extends 200 nautical miles offshore, and this oceanic territory includes numerous endemic and migratory cetaceous species. Here, in this very colonial University setting, we are reminded of forebears who arrived by ship, and among those earliest were hunters of whales. Otago Harbour, still so close, was a calving ground for the Southern right whale.

Walking, according to Andrea Phillips, can be used a tool for the loosening of these knots. “Superficially, walking connects us as an audience. We are also connected by a desire to loosen our affiliations, in each of our disciplines, with monumentalism. These

---

6 This is drawn from an earlier paper, McCaw (2015), Representing Landscapes: Understanding the Role of Art and Design in Mediating a Culture of Seeing New Zealand Landscapes.
connections, this transdisciplinarity, produces conceptual movements that seek to undermine the static terms of representation that dog us all” (Phillips 2005, p.509). In this work, walking and listening seeks to loosen the knot that ties us to understanding ourselves through primarily visual means. Haraway describes “interspecies knots” of connection and experience (Haraway 2008, p.36). Listening to and about whales reminds us that we don’t need to see whales to know about them, connect and relate with them.

We head out from the shelter of the theatre and up the street, the rain persistent. Around the corner of the next stone building, and through a courtyard, we encounter a second wi-fi ocean, triggering audio in our umbrellas, and, asynchronously, each umbrella starts to talk to us. Walkers slow as they focus on the story being told. They start to separate from each other, and the immediate huddle of uncertainty the group first demonstrated has turned into a more focused and introspective individual experience of listening. Our immediate surroundings fade from focus as we are drawn into an underwater world, that of the whales we are hearing about.

For right whales living in Boston Harbour, about 50-70% of the time they can’t hear the other right whales that are in the area. So a ship comes into the area and it masks the whale noise. And of course whales use sound, to find food, to find each other, to communicate... so it’s a little bit like taking sight from a human being, it’s their primary sense. Chris Clarke says even their sense of self or consciousness is probably based on sound rather than on vision. So while humans are very, very strongly visually-oriented, whales and dolphins are very strongly sound-oriented... they need sound for every different life function. So ... if you make a lot of noise in an area, say, airguns that are used for finding oil and gas, whales will literally leave the area, and, or maybe, shut up, while the noise is happening, and they won’t start making sound again until after the airguns stop. (Slooten, Sounding Walks recording 2017)

3. THE SCALE OF A WHALE AND CETACEOUS TIME, BECOMING-WITH

---

The soundtrack changes, and we are no longer listening to a scientist, but the sounds of humpback whales singing local dialects, and a haunting blue whale calf calling to their mother, finally fading out. The rain a persistent drumming on our umbrellas, our bodies protruding beyond the shelter of the umbrella and the paved path we follow. We re-emerge to find our group paused in front of another old stone building, the site of the University’s geology museum. We peer into a window that barely rises above ground level, allowing light into a basement room.

I stop and talk about this room to the group of walkers, not as an expert but as a former Sounding Walker who had previously been at this juncture, in another Sounding Walk iteration. This basement window allows us to peek into a collection of fossils, and my second-hand talk describes this room’s relationship to another nearby place, some 100km north, and inland, where many of the pelagic fossils held within the museum were found. Previously all this land was undersea, and long ago rumblings of the Alpine fault that created New Zealand’s South Island lifted up, to leave early whale creatures marooned. The remains of these animals allow those with expertise to better understand the evolutionary division of whales into two suborders: Odontoceti (those that have teeth) and Mysticeti (which have baleen plates that filter food).

At this point I introduce one of our walkers, Professor Liz Slooten, whose research expertise focuses on marine mammals and their conservation, including work with students on the impacts of fishing, tourism, mining and noise in the marine environment. She generally agrees with my lay-person’s description of these fossils, adds a little detail and invites walkers to ask her questions about anything they encounter or consider on our walk today. Her expertise is woven into the conversation, and Liz has joined us on most of our walks so far, engaging and hugely generous, usually walking with her dog, and tossing a stick as we encounter our oceans.

While we critique the kind of looking at landscapes that has centred Romantic representation in New Zealand landscapes’ popular culture, archeological looking presents another kind of knowing or worlding. Imprinted in the earth-once-sea is a gentle reminder that earth and ocean are not so separate, and can be imagined as a practice of dynamic co-composition. Forms of life, forms of responsibility and forms of deterritorialisation are drawn together through this window, aligning with the thoughts of geologist Kathryn Yusoff (2013). These fossils are “a material form that provokes thought to travel along the cusp of a geologic corporeality, that is at once geologic, biologic and social in its composition” (Yusoff, p.779). When we designate humans as beings capable of geomorphic earth-changing force, we become implicated in geologic time, and responsible for geologic futures too. Ontological and ethical considerations are inseparable. In Haraway’s terms, living responsibly involves acknowledging our response-ability, beyond our own species’ times and spaces.

We move along and seek shelter from the rain under a stone and tile archway. I stand at one end, and I share with our group that the space we fill, from one edge of the archway to the other, is around the length of an adult Southern right whale, around 14 metres, or – two steps closer – a sperm whale at 12 metres. If we could see whales in this context, comprehend their size and presence and the harm human noise has on them, I ask the small group, would we continue industrial activity that causes them to suffer? Together, our imaginations fill the space between us with the body of a whale.

Our umbrellas start to talk to us; this time it is a man talking:

I’ve done research all around the world really, but it was only recently that I discovered how important the habitat just off the Otago coast is. We’d

---

8 Around the north Otago town of Duntroon, there are many sites rich in cetacean fossils, mostly from the Pliocene (~5-2 million years ago, mya) and Miocene epochs (~25-5 mya). Between 1993 and 2014, Otago University Geology professor R. Ewan Fordyce, with colleagues and doctoral students (Kohler, Jenkins, Grebneff and Boessenecker) discovered and excavated fossils that filled gaps in evolutionary knowledge (the new genus and species Tohoraata raekohao) including the first records of the family Eomysticetida in the Southern Hemisphere. More details are available at http://www.otago.ac.nz/geology/research/paleontology/tohoraata.html
had a few clues before because we’d had a few opportunistic sightings of interesting whale and dolphin species off the Otago coast...

... I really wanted to go and have a look and see what we could find out there, and so I set up a system of surveys to go and have a look over the Otago canyons. We used the University of Otago’s research vessel, Polaris 2, and we did visual surveys and acoustic surveys just off the Otago Peninsula. Just a voyage of discovery really, just to see what we could find. And I was blown away when we got out there. We did a series of eight surveys over the course of a year, and every time we went out to deep water, we found sperm whales. Sperm whales are the largest of the toothed whales, these really enormous majestic animals that live in these deep habitats feeding on squid in particular. And every time we went out to the thousand metre line, we would see or hear sperm whales out there. I was so excited; I’ve worked with sperm whales around the world, the Gulf of Mexico, the Tropical Pacific, lots of work in Kaikoura, but we had this population just on our doorstep. I didn’t realise they would be there, so finding them out there was super exciting. We found a range of other species out there too, lots of dolphins: dusky dolphins, bottlenosed dolphins, a reasonably unusual species called a Southern right whale dolphin, we saw other species of whales, lots of pilot whales, we saw humpback whales out there. But the most exciting thing we saw out there was the Shepherd’s beaked whale. The Shepherd’s beaked whale is one of the least known cetacean species in the world, there are a handful of sightings from anywhere... In our eight surveys to the Otago Canyons we saw Shepherd’s beaked whales three times, this was really exciting... we saw them in summer and winter, and this suggests that they might be resident out there... so this appears to be a hotspot for Shepherd’s beaked whales. ... This is super, super exciting, I was just blown away by what was out there... this made it really clear that this is a habitat that we really need to protect. We don’t know much about it, we are just starting to understand what is out there, and it’s really important that we protect this. (Rayment, Sounding Walks recording 2017)

Will Rayment’s words end with the clicking of sperm whales echo-locating. Their percussive notes blend with the pattering of rain and a dripping pipe nearby.

In both scenarios we – umbrella-ed listeners – are dwarfed by the scope of these stories, discoveries across vast spans of time and deep ocean canyons, both far away and yet close by. What is becoming clearer is that whales do not need us to discover them, and yet they are thoroughly present in this formation and enactment of the “messy business of living together” (Hinchcliff & Whatmore 2006, in Hobson 2007, p.257). Performed through multiple places and times, this ecology is fluid and we are floating in its ocean, in Whatmore’s terms, “heterogenous entanglements of social life” (2002, p.3) – hybrid geographies that are always contextual and relational, forming and reforming each other through our encounters.

Donna Haraway chooses to use the term
becoming-with’, which she identifies as a kind of respect: “To knot companion and species together in an encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the word of becoming with, where who and what are is precisely what is at stake … Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect” (Haraway 2008, p.19). ‘Becoming-with’ involves becoming more aware of the multi-dimensional relationships we humans are capable of and implicated within. For Haraway, this “… demands work, speculative invention, and ontological risks. No one knows how to do that in advance of coming together in composition” (Haraway 2008, p83).

This particular knot involves sharing space – 12 metres apart – and we form roughly the amount of space a sperm whale inhabits; 1000 metres deep, not so far from the beach, and sperm whales share a habitat with many other whales and dolphins. This knot also reaches back into time, when land and sea met with different boundaries and whales meet us here, as fossilised messages. These knots are loosened through the stories told, those discovered marine mammals become stories conjoined with our own.

We move on, this time stopping outside a large concrete building. I clap. One, two, slow, loud claps. The concrete surfaces reflect the sounds. This is how echolocation works, the same process we heard in our last ocean as sperm whales searched for food. CLAP … [clap] CLAP … [clap].

Sarah Pink developed the term ‘sensory ethnography’ to define a “reflexive and experiential process through which academic and applied understanding, knowing and knowledge are produced” (Pink 2015, pp.4-5). Pink considers walking in both scholarly and arts practices as a potentially rich medium for sensory ethnographic representation. Emplaced and active participation occurs when we start to consider all our senses, and with others. In this case, we are engaging in an experiential performance-based sound walk, and through even simple actions such as clapping and listening, we are sharing the construction of knowledge and meaning in space and in time. We are sending and receiving signals drawing upon both material sites and invisible energies, and using these to better understand whales and the process of echolocation. In Pink’s terms, these are ways in which we can embed a “process of learning through participation and shared experience, thus offering participants an embodied way of knowing that [can go] beyond what we were told verbally” (Pink 2015, p.184). Pink suggests that a “sensory ethnographic place” is unique to each participant: “it is constituted through the practices of, and occupied by, the consumers of ethnography” (Pink 2015, p.185).

4. THE NOISE OF INFORMATION AND THINGS

We continue through the rain and into a nearby building: the Information Services Building and the Link. Rather sodden now, we walk into the large open vestibule in the University’s Central library, where our third and final ocean begins to play. This context gives us a pause from the rain and helps us connect our technology and the flow of information that we swim in daily. Information, like whales, we know without seeing. More-than-human ontologies make room for machines and plants, for animals and oceans.

Sounding Walks umbrellas use PICAXE technology, simple Microchip PIC devices, with pre-programmed embedded systems that can be coded directly from a computer, to communicate with our radio network and play MP3 files. The device in the umbrella handle responds to 433 megahertz (MHz) radio frequency, emitted from our portable ‘ocean’ transmitters, triggering the pre-programmed sound files. The technology is fairly simple and employs ubiquitous hardware (umbrellas) and common radio frequencies – 433 MHz is the same audio frequency used by garage door remotes. While earlier Sounding Walks prototypes employed free wi-fi networks, our current use of the term ‘wi-fi oceans’ is a misnomer. These oceans are not triggered by wireless internet networks, but radio transmission in a local area network. We continue to employ the term to draw connections between wireless networks that are bounded in space, invisible communication networks in which we are participants, actively connecting and communicating through these

9 See http://www.picaxe.com/What-is-PICAXE/
social communication spaces surrounding us. These, we suggest, are a form of social space that surrounds us, like oceans surrounding our marine mammals. Our wi-fi oceans can be considered, in Ian Bogost’s terms (2011), as a microhabitat (in terms of media ecology) with “the value of the specialized media being less important than the variety and its application” (Bogost 2011, in Shafer 2014, p.258). Rather than augmenting wilderness, we are wilding urban space through the knots created with technology, hardware, software, sounds and species.

The amount of shipping noise is doubling every decade, and if you are looking for drives, like what is causing that, well its globalisation... if you go into a shop these days, whether it’s a supermarket, or you may be buying some furniture or a mattress, you are more likely to encounter products from other parts of the world than from New Zealand, and those products are being shipped backwards and forwards across the oceans, and that is making a heap of noise for whales and dolphins to have to put up with. You have to really go out of your way, go to a farmers market, or search around and find a local product, to limit your contribution to this. (Slooten, Sounding Walks recording 2017)

Our engagement through Sounding Walks, and with each other, demonstrate “acoustic and sonorous entanglements” (Springgay and Truman 2018, p.48). With our entanglement comes responsibility. Beneath our ubiquitous umbrellas we are simultaneously protected and exposed, curious and implicated. Through walking, Rebecca Solnit suggests, the mind and body and world are aligned. However, on these seismic shores we cannot rest. As Springgay and Truman suggest, “as an ethico-political tending, walking demands that we respond beyond systems of management, containment, and concealment, to think-with the affective entanglements of which we are all part” (Springgay and Truman 2018, p.48). Reflecting Haraway’s earlier call for responsibility, our final conversations lead us to consider our own choices and consumption of imported food, clothing and goods. We are reminded in this network of associations that we are able to reassemble our ways in a new ‘composition’. The sound of the rain drumming on the roof is persistent and encompassing, like the oceans that surround us.

A Sounding Walk can occur almost anywhere. Transformation of space occurs through a combination of narrative, collectivity, and the loosening of space. Where there are markers of space, including the walkers ourselves, we can create the scale of a whale. Sites in the local urban landscape can evoke time, and we can continue to open time, geologic, human and cetaceous time through conversation. When we walk together, we enter into a practice of co-composition: with our environment, with each other, and by bringing whales ‘with’ us, an assemblage of tensions that takes shape and shape us. The work opens new opportunities in Haraway’s terms, for different sorts of power relationships to unfold, that require us to urgently listen, speak and act.

REFERENCES


PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL


https://polonistyka.uj.edu.pl/documents/41623/3701ab24-8247-49e2-a8fb-303b69f7dic2
Stillness, Touch and Cultivating Intimacy with ‘Vibrant’ Landscapes

ABSTRACT

Somatic listening includes that which takes place through all of our senses and perceptual processes. This form of deep listening can offer a way to establish a sense of deep connection or intimacy with others or the world. As Morton (2010) points out, intimacy is a much-needed investment for the critique and reconceptualisation of ‘Nature’, in order to “encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things” (Bennett 2009, p.viii). How might we seek an alternative to dichotomies such as human and non-human? Can body-based practices such as deep listening facilitate meaningful and intimate connections with “vibrant life”, “dull matter” (Bennett 2009), and everything in between? In this article, from a dance practitioner perspective, I posit deep somatic listening through touch and in stillness can contribute to Bennett’s notion of “decentralis[ing our] human position in a world made of vibrant matter” (Kramer 2012), and to wider debates about our current global ecological crisis.

Keywords: Somatic Listening; Vibrant Matter; Stillness; Touch; Ecological Dance

Somatic listening is that which takes place through all of our senses and perceptual processes. This form of deep embodied listening offers a way to establish a sense of connection or intimacy with another person or an environment. The term somatics – coined by Thomas Hanna – refers to the experience within and of the body from a first-person perspective. It is an “immediate, proprioception – a sensory mode that provides unique data” (Hanna, in Fortin 2002, p.128). Somatic movement practices offer a framework for ‘tuning in’ to this kind of information and exploring its potential for movement or, conversely, stillness (for more on somatic movement practices, see Batson & Schwartz 2007; Beavers 2008; Eddy 2002, 2009; Fortin 2002; Skinner et al. 1979; Whatley Alexander & Garrett 2009; Williamson 2009, among others). In this paper, I posit that listening through somatic capacities, such as skin’s tactile sense (touch) and proprioceptive information found in stillness, can lead to a deeper sense of connectivity and intimacy.

Morton (2010) points out that intimacy is a much needed investment for the critique and reconceptualisation of the notion of ‘Nature’, and he describes it as an entity always out of reach—a pristine distant picture that is untouchable. From a dance practitioner perspective, I suggest that the practice of somatic listening through the skin’s tactile sensing, as well as listening to proprioceptive information, can deepen our connections with what Jane Bennett (2009) calls “vibrant life” and “dull matter”. Like others, I argue that we need to “loosen the borders of the dichotomy” – to use Becca Wood’s (2018) terms, and support Bennett’s notion of “decentralis[ing our] human position in a world made of vibrant matter” (Kramer 2012). Thus, this paper contributes to wider debates about the value of body-based practices for exploring critical ecological thinking in our current global ecological crisis. Two separate examples of deep embodied listening are offered as examples as part of an evolving ecological somatic movement practice that aims to strengthen connectivity with the author’s local land and water-scapes. Hence this paper discusses the practice of engaging with non-human elements of outdoor environments, drawing on the author’s previous
PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL


Viewing the body as a site for unique knowledge (Cancienne & Snowber 2003; Frosch 1999; Markula 2006; Pakes 2009; Sklar 2000; Ylönen 2003), and finding value in outdoor-based improvised/somatic dance practice, the work discussed here has developed out of a dance-ethnographic/practice led mixed-method research project (Marler 2014). The practices and research discussed are inspired by the author’s time in Japan studying Body Weather (BW) with dancer-actor Min Tanaka in 2007. The details of Body Weather are discussed elsewhere, but it does share roots with the avant-garde practice and philosophy of butoh and post WW2 Japan. The BW experience, among other things, brought the author to appreciate a wider perspective of dance from her background in codified technique. Partner and group collaboration, sensorial information, improvised, and often, pedestrian movement, engaging with the outdoors, and contemplation were tenets of the BW experience (Marler 2014). The research position highlighted a Pākehā Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ) perspective and explored the issue of translation of cultural practice between global contexts.

For this paper, the focus will be on the interception of stillness and touch that has come about through this experience of BW practice in Japan, yet has been steeped in the context of where the author resides and dances now – in Ōtepoti/Dunedin, Aotearoa/NZ. In addition, the author’s perspective is shaped by her current trainings and practice of Contact Improvisation dance, acrobatic yoga and traditional Thai massage which all share contact and touch as a strong tenet. Somatic listening practices can be a rich source of information about connectivity and collaboration, and these skills of interconnection can be used for engaging with all kinds of ‘vibrant matter’, from human to non-human, such as flora and fauna as well as man-made structures.

Although in stillness the body seemingly lacks movement and may initially be seen as void of information, this lack of action can in fact hold great potential for connection and creativity to arise. Somatic dance authors Batson and Schwartz (2007) have discussed how micro-level responses in the body such as blood flow, heartbeat, breath and proprioception all come to the fore of our awareness in stillness. Without gross motor movements, space opens up for noticing minute changes within the body. Organs expand and process matter, joints adjust to weight shifts, muscles release or tense in order to maintain postural alignment. All of this can be sensed in the body when gross-motor movements are at rest and the process of neurological integration comes into play (Batson & Swartz 2007). In fact, current research on motor learning shows that finding a balance between rest and action, or ‘distributing practice’, is more beneficial as a pedagogical strategy than, for example, solely training gross-

THE POTENTIALITY OF STILLNESS

Bring yourself to a partner.

Find a comfortable position and allow your body to settle into that position.

Find a place to rest, a place to be, a place of stillness in your body.

Take a breath, and notice if your body releases into gravity a little.

Notice how your body is in contact with your partner. What does that contact feel like? Where can you feel that contact?

Notice your whole body and its relation with your partner’s body.

Can you sense the texture, temperature and density of your partner through your point of contact?

Sink into your partner; do not merely rest on top of the surface. Find a way in; find a way to connect; listen to their body through yours.

Use your skin, use your breath, your muscles, bones and organs.

Take the time and listen to that unfolds...

---

1 val uses lower case letters for their name and them/they/their pronouns. These choices are therefore reflected in the grammar of this article.
motor pathways for dance technique (Batson & Schwartz 2009). Visualisation, rest and other strategies are used for balancing activity with non-action and result in positive effects on dance technique, general wellbeing, personal authority and creative practice (Batson & Schwartz 2009).

Creative practices employ conceptualisations of stillness within specific cultural contexts. For example, Nihon buyo dancer Tomie Hahn, describes the Japanese concept of *ma* to be liminal space, ‘negative’ or ‘open’ space-time that is not considered to be empty, but rather as “expansive and full of energy” (2007, p.53). The notion of *ma* is employed by artists “as a vehicle to arouse a contemplative state, an awareness of expansive space and time” (Hahn 2007, p53). In other words, stillness in this sense holds the creative potential for connectivity and relationship to grow. Here in Aotearoa/New Zealand, in Te Ao Māori/ the Māori Worldview, the notion of Te Kore/the nothingness, void or potentiality, is far from dull (McCallum 2018). It is considered a potent space between from which the new can arise. Māori creation stories depict this transformation from nothingness to the world of light – Te Ao Mārama– and coming into being, highlighting the integral nature of emptiness, stillness and potentiality in the very meaning of existence according to a Te Ao Māori Worldview. Another interpretation is that Te Kore is about a state of chaos which has always existed and which contains “unlimited potential for being” (Barlow 1994, p.55). According to Māori Marsden, Te Kore is “the realm between non-being and being: that is the realm of potential being” (Marsden 1992). In the dance world, Moana Nepia (2012) addresses this in his discussion of artistic practice involving dance, video, installation and creative writing where he balances rest with athletic movement as one way of engaging Te Kore in choreographic practice. Nepia illustrates how these concepts can be woven into the fabric of contemporary creative movement practice in an Aotearoa/New Zealand-specific context.

My experience working with val smith, queer artist, recent Arts Laureate recipient and current PhD student at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), drew on this notion of potentiality. The 2015 Dunedin-based iteration of *Duotones* was a collaborative project in which val collaborated with six artists independently within a limited time-frame. I was struck by a sense that this artist had no agenda for the outcome of the work other than an openness to explore the potentialities of the collaborative process itself. On social media, val described the methodology as “a series of one-to-one investigations around the notion of collaborative practice...we are developing ideas and methods of working that relate to ideas of performance and performance-
making” (smith 2015). As one of the artists val approached, I found we shared an interest in Contact Improvisation dance, sensory awareness and partner work. These shared understandings of practice became the starting point from where our creative process began. We began working indoors in partners with the notion of a receptive body that is open to being moved by another, and we moved outdoors for the final performance event. We found that processes that were familiar to us such as working with one another’s bodies somatically, could be translated to working with non-human matter such as the Boiler Point rocks near Port Chalmers. Contact Improvisation’s Rolling Point of Contact, the notion of weight sharing, and the BW ‘manipulations’ all come to mind when reviewing the collaborative process.

During the final sessions, val and I often found ourselves in stillness as we worked with the Boiler Point rocks that run along the Careys Bay waterline (see image). Translating tenets from partner work to partnering the landscape gave me insight into the particularities of the Boiler Point site in which we worked. Often in stillness or slowly moving, the landscape informed my movement responses. Sensory information could be felt somatically as elements of the place such as sounds, textures, smells, and sights enacted around me. With val’s prompt, I began to question how I might be moved by the rocks, rather than actively move over them. Adopting a receptive body that drew on my somatic capacities was one approach to addressing this question. Allowing time by consciously moving slowly, and resting or pausing between movements was my approach. In stillness in particular, I grew to understand how the rocks were cold, chiselled in texture, rounded and uneven. Their density and solidity resonated in my body. I found that with time, my body softened to the topography of the place, and I experienced the details of the rock's form growing louder in volume the longer I worked. A sense of spaciousness grew in my body, and my imagination was triggered into action by this process.

SENSING ‘VIBRANT MATTER’ THROUGH TOUCH

Now begin to move together with your partner, slowly, find a shared direction or pathway, in any direction.

Stay with your partner, connected in partnership, don’t break the contact.

Notice your lungs, your structure, bones and muscles, your weight in relation to your partner pouring as you move from one place of contact into another.

Your skin surface interfacing with
your partner, clothing brushing past, pressure of the weight.

Listen with your skin to your partner as you move, with your kinaesthetic and proprioceptive knowledge.

Trust your body's innate wisdom.

Tactile sensing is another key component that I find has the possibility to facilitate meaningful and intimate connection with 'vibrant matter' (Bennett 2009). The body's largest organ is the skin, and sensing from this large organ at the surface of our physical structure is a form of deep somatic listening that is tactile. Although listening to the world through the skin is part of our daily living, focusing deeply on this sense independently can counter our ocular-centric lifestyle. Unique from our other bodily senses, touch is so obviously a shared sense since it is our interface between our own body and others. Touch can enliven our body's senses, bring us greater orientation, and allow us to relate more deeply in the world. It is a kinaesthetic sensing that can generate a deep embodied understanding of the soma (Bannon & Holt 2011). As Bannon & Holt state, touch has the potential to "heighten our awareness of our lived body, of our 'self' as part of the world, and informs and forms our work as communicating artists" (2011, p.216).

Being in contact with bodies and /or 'vibrant matter' as a dancer allows us to practice our bodily attentiveness, which dancer Paula Kramer (2012) notes is a fundamental tool for dancers in order “to negotiate the physical and spatial challenges at hand” (p.85). She notes that when dancing outdoors particularly, one must negotiate uneven topography, weather, animals, buildings, darkness, thorns, and other people. It is a process completely different from negotiating an indoor studio space or a theatre venue that opens up scope for connecting with the broad variety of ‘matter’ present at any given site. Dancing at Boiler Point involved honing into the tactile sense as a way of listening to the land and sea-scapes through the body's capacities. My process is a way of 'tuning in' to elements of the landscape through my skin enabling me to make sense of my relationship to the rocks that I moved over. Moving from the sense of the skin requires me to slow down as I sense in non-visual and non-dominant ways in order to orientate myself (Marler 2014). Texture, temperature, density, moisture and finding balance on uneven ground all come into play when working with the sense of touch in outdoor environments.

In a previous outdoor dance work, Aramoana: Pathway to the Sea (2014, see image below), I noted that,

Cultivating sensitivity and sensorial responsiveness to the surroundings is a mapping of my 'internal' somatic landscape with the 'external' surroundings. It has become a method for situating and integrating self within place. With time and practice the landscape resonates within me; I can sense the place within my body. (Marler 2014, pp.102-103)

Paula Kramer (2012) and others such as Stuart Grant & Tess de Quincy (2006) and Taylor (2010) speak of the molecular change in our bodies when we allow a permeability in relation to other-than-human matter. For example, Grant and de Quincey describe the process of a somatic and improvised Body Weather (BW) dancer as,

All the time mapping, measuring, naming, finding sense, analysing elements of the place...With time, abiding in the dwelling with sustained attunement, she finds the place in her body, her body is the place. The place leaves its footprints, its residues, in her flesh, vibrates her, making her something else. Someone she wasn't. (2006, p.256)

These authors implicitly suggest that a deeper sense of connectivity and intimacy between self and place can be generated through outdoor somatic dance practices, and the process is a lot to do with engaging the senses. I would argue that tactile information sensed through our skin is key to this work, as it is our immediate contact with 'vibrant matter'. Skin provides information about our surroundings that informs the way that we orientate and move through, or with, the landscape in somatic dance practice. Tactile sensing, along with the use of stillness, through a somatic lens can act to slow down our perception...
of materiality and reveal movement processes and decision-making (Buckwalter 2010). Deep listening skills learnt from both Body Weather and Contact Improvisation can act to quieten us and allow for a more sensitive, attentive attuning to the world.

MEETING MATTER IN AOTEAROA

Now find a rock to work with.

Find a place in the rock where your body seems to want to go; where the rock will accept your body.

Place or balance yourself there. It might be a crevice, a ridge, a hollow in the landscape of your rock.

Let the rock hold you. Now hone in on the rock, close your eyes. What is particular about this very rock?

Where is it in contact with your body? How does it feel in your body? Notice the surface of your body in contact with the stone. Does the stone feel cold? How about the pressure? Is it heavy or light?

What does its surface feel like? The texture. Can you sense the density of this particular stone? What is it saying to you? What do you need from it?

When you feel connected, slowly begin to move together with the stone. Share your touch, your weight, with the stone. How can you move together? Can you partner it, like you partnered a person before?

Kramer (2012) points out that the relationship between the performing body and nature often tends to pull towards either seeking a romantic ‘enlightenment’, to use her words, or the manipulation of nature for one’s own purposes. She argues for an alternative perspective, “one that glorifies neither human nor nature and allows for both to inform each other” (p.83, original italics). Deep listening practices such as those mentioned in this article can perhaps offer such a viewpoint. It may be a way for dancing bodies and ‘vibrant matter’ to materially relate in order to generate understanding, or even intimacy. However, it seems important to find what Gretel Taylor (2010) calls a meeting with one’s whole identity with a place, rather than erasing part of ourselves. Indeed, there is a recent critique in somatic dance scholarship that argues for a bringing back of the macro-perspective to the first-person experience of the body to include how the social, cultural and political are woven within individual somatic information (see Eddy 2002; Grau 2011; Green 2002, 2007; Reed 1998). This means acknowledging cultures and identities within landscapes and bodies.

For me, as a Pākehā/New Zealand European dancer, dancing the landscape unearths issues of colonialism and biculturalism that still need to be addressed in this country. I have spoken of “the need to engage my own identity respectfully with the environment” (Marler 2015, p.32), and, importantly, in relation to a Te Ao Māori worldview. However, my experience resonates with Herron Smith (2010) and Brown’s (1998) research that implies tensions between connection and dislocation that Pākehā can experience. Deep somatic listening practice can reveal “connections and disconnections to self and homeland” (Marler 2015, p.38). However, I still question the implications of practicing in terms of the current (post)colonial era which I

Fig. 3: Aramoana pathway to the sea. (still from the video). Director of Photography: Rachael Patching
feel needs further attention in my own creative practice. The trajectory of Pākehā identity within the Aotearoa performing arts scene does need further scholarly attention, as does my own thinking and practice in this area.

Working with the rocks at Boiler Point or Aramoana begs for the social and political histories and contexts of these sites to be included in discussion. Both areas are man-made structures that have been created with the port industry as its primary concern. Work to create the Aramoana mole began in 1884 as a barrier against tidal sand drifting into the harbour channel (Davis 2009), and Boiler Point lies at the end of the recently developed multipurpose wharf extension estimated to cost approximately $23 million (Hartley 2018). This project included eleven concrete pours to encapsulate reinforced steel, consisting of about 300 cubic metres of concrete weighing 720 tonnes and filling 60 truckloads (Hartley 2018). These two sites are clear instances of how human manipulation of non-human matter plays out in contemporary Aotearoa/NZ. There is a dissonance between practicing deep somatic listening, which is to do with cultivating intimacy, and the industrial development of the sites.

How can body-based artists such as myself “encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things” (Bennett 2010, p.viii)? I would like to think that this kind of embodied sensate work might help us to engage more meaningfully with the world in the state of our current worldly climate. Dull matter can become ‘vibrant matter’ when the time and space are taken for vibrancy to reveal itself, and somatic body-based practices are one way of achieving this. In contemporary mainstream Aotearoa/NZ culture, achievement is valued over process, perhaps due to the fact that it is more readily measurable. Examples of this can be seen in many of our educational contexts where testing and examinations mark achievement. In sporting situations, competition often forms an integral part of play. However, focusing on the goal at the end misses the opportunity to experience the journey. I have found that taking the time to listen through my body’s somatic capacities allows me to notice the processes apparent within my own body, and to value my relationship to immediate environments. Stillness and its contemplative nature, coupled with tactile sensing as the primary approach for orientation, enables me a strategy to engage more meaningfully with the ‘vibrant matter’ of the world. The coldness of a rock under my ribcage, sharp gravel under a warm palm, and the buzzing sensation on the skin from the port machinery nearby were sensory experiences felt in an alert body. The lens of artistic practices such as described in this article, therefore, can offer a view into how we might carefully navigate between dichotomies such as nature vs human, or ‘vibrant’ vs ‘dull’ matter.

However, the discussion feels unresolved, and I acknowledge that further research would enable the development of ideas into a more potent form that engages the socio-political and cultural landscapes of Aotearoa/NZ. Perhaps a way forward is for deep listening practices to be re-imagined as performative ‘eco-activism’ (Kershaw 2007), for generating a clearer intention for this creative work, and to open dialogue between wider societal communities and movement-arts communities. In essence, the practices

---

PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL

mentioned in this article could be used to challenge dominant ideologies within our society (Kershaw 2007), such as capitalism, patriarchy and monoculturalism (Culpitt 1994). Particularly, in order to “decentralise [our] human position in a world made of vibrant matter” (Kramer 2012), and dovetail into wider debates about our current global ecological crisis.

REFERENCES


Nepia, P. M. (2012) Te Kore-Exploring the Māori Concept of Void. Doctoral dissertation, Auckland University of


When it came down to it, it was an awkward time and it was the awkwardness that obsessed them... It was a time of overt and dramatically unsustainable resource use. It was a time of oil. (Spahr 2007)

As the early twenty-first century works of Kristin Prevallet (‘Cruelty and Conquest (Oil, Oil, Oil)’, 2004) and Juliana Spahr (The Transformation, 2007) make evident, the challenge of performing ecologies is ever increasingly the challenge of performing ecologies-in-crisis. Performance and performativity emerge in creative works such as Prevallet’s and Spahr’s, and in theoretical texts, including Karen Barad’s posthumanist philosophy, as important and efficacious modes of response to socio-ecological crisis by acknowledging complicity, vulnerability, and entanglement with the global impacts of “petro-capitalism” (Aborisade 2010, p.35). In Prevallet’s physical performance and Spahr’s textual performance, the dominant trope is “performative ingestion”, a term first deployed by Laura Elrick in her 2011 article on Prevallet’s performance, ‘Cruelty and Conquest (Oil, Oil, Oil)’. In this paper, I draw extensively on Elrick’s term to describe the similarities and differences between Prevallet’s and Spahr’s work in their compelling attempts to confront socio-ecological crisis. While ingestion featured prominently in the work of feminist performance artists and theorists, primarily in relation to issues of gender, embodiment, and sexuality, Prevallet’s and Spahr’s performative ingestion is explicitly directed towards socio-ecological crisis. Although the body is gendered and sexed in Prevallet’s
and Spahr's work, these orientations are focused on a cluster of interrelated systems and forces (Western imperialism, oil economies, resource wars) responsible for ecological degradation that impact human and non-human lives.

Through the mode of performative ingestion, Prevallet's and Spahr's work, as with posthumanist and new materialist relational philosophies of Barad, Stacy Alaimo, and Rosi Braidotti, necessarily engages human interconnectedness with the rest of nature. As both creative performance and theoretical discussion evince, this human/non-human interconnection – particularly in the West – is complex, hierarchical, and compromised. It is awkward and problematic. Prevallet and Spahr perform this connection through ingestion: they take the degrading world – no matter how abject – into their performative and textual bodies. Their work can be interpreted as a provocative rejection of the Western nature/culture binary through the volitional act of ingesting what would be considered “other”. This volitional ingestion inexorably encompasses affective states of loss, grief, and mourning, which nevertheless hold the potential for transformation. My discussion of Prevallet and Spahr is augmented by the work of Barad (2007), particularly her concept of “intra-action,” which she describes as signifying “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (p.33). Intra-action places emphasis on the moment in which entities or agencies are constituted through their encounter with one another. For the purposes of this paper, in terms of the nature/culture binary and performativity, the significance of Barad's (2007) concept is evident in the following extended elaboration of intra-action, “[a]ll bodies, not merely ‘human’ bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity – its performativity” (p.152). Iterative intra-activity is a hallmark of both Prevallet's and Spahr's enactments of performative ingestion.

Barad’s (2007) concept of intra-action is central to her posthumanist philosophy of “agential realism”, which she defines as an “ontoepistemological framework” (p.44) predicated on co-constitution of entities, and the very specificity of those entanglements (p.74). Barad’s work has been especially influential in the formation of new materialism, and her conceptual language is perhaps most evident in the theoretical work of Stacy Alaimo. Alaimo’s (2010) key term, “trans-corporeal”, describes the vulnerable porosity of bodies (human and nonhuman) in local and global contexts (p.15). She goes on to define trans-corporeality as “an ethical space [which] is never an elsewhere but is always already here, in whatever compromised, ever-catalysing form” (p.18), which captures some of the boundary crossing embedded in Barad's intra-action. As I will suggest, it is the volitional nature of Prevallet's and Spahr's performative ingestion that usefully expands Alaimo's concept of the trans-corporeal and provides an active instantiation of Barad's intra-action. To ground the potential efficacy of Prevallet's and Spahr's performative ingestion, I end my discussion of their work in the conceptual terrain evoked by a phrase excerpted from Braidotti’s (2016) relational philosophy, “enfolding the world within” (p.26). Ultimately, performative ingestion in the work of Prevallet and Spahr is, I argue, a volitional act of enfolding the world in all of its inequity and degradation within the self – the self that is, in a loose paraphrasing of Barad, simultaneously differentiated and undifferentiated. Volitional enfolding through the act of performative ingestion is directed towards transformation in which mourning plays a constitutive role.

As performative ingestion is a relational gesture, this paper discusses Prevallet’s and Spahr’s physical and textual performances in conversation with relational philosophies, beginning with Barad, followed by Alaimo, and concluding with Braidotti. In the discussion below, I begin by introducing the similarities and differences in Prevallet's and Spahr's enactment of performative ingestion, then provide an in-depth focus on each practitioner's work for the purposes of comparison. In particular, I am interested in bringing to light the implications of performative ingestion as an efficacious response to socio-ecological crisis.

Performative ingestion in the work of Prevallet and Spahr describes an awkward and unsettling act of volitionally choosing to take into their physical and textual bodies Western imperialism, oil economies, degraded ecosystems, and extinct species. Their performative ingestion can be
PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL

interpreted as an acknowledgment of complicity with structural and coercive systems of oppression. Prevallet’s embodied, durational performance, in which she pours ‘oil’ from a raised oil-can into her mouth, choking and gagging until it is empty, uses ‘oil’ to metonymically encompass petro-capitalism. The gush of oil is a tentacular stream whose flow unavoidably evokes Stephanie LeMenager’s (2014) “fossil fuel complex” (p.66), or the ongoing extraction, refinery, transportation, and distribution of oil even as CO$_2$ emissions continue to rise. This flow of oil for the maintenance of wealth by states and companies who control the production and distribution of oil is necessarily contingent on the military-industry complex to secure continued access and control. Prevallet’s performative ingestion of ‘oil’ is predicated on her everyday complicity with oil-dependent products and systems, and as a U.S. citizen, of her indirect implication with the Gulf resource wars. While Prevallet’s ‘oil’-guzzling performance encourages viewers to recognise their own complicity with the everyday presence of oil in daily life, she does not directly list or otherwise state the role petro-capitalism plays in the destruction of ecosystems. The viewer must make these connections themselves.

In contrast to Prevallet’s evocative physical performance of ingestion, Spahr’s textual performative ingestion explicitly names a vast array of negative, interconnected socio-ecological conditions that she takes into her textual body. Spahr (2007) performatively ingests “the cracking Larsen B iceshelf... endless nameless and faceless deaths... grief for all of them killed by the military that currently occupied the continent” (p.213). This excerpt makes connections between the melting of the polar caps and the deaths of Iraqi and Afghan people killed by the U.S.-led resource wars in the Gulf. The presence of oil, or rather oil-dependency, and the West’s ceaseless drive to extract oil, and to go to war for it, in spite of ecosystemic degradation, underpins the “deaths” and the “grief” in this excerpt, and in other passages, Spahr mentions oil directly. Spahr’s torrent of words, analogous to Prevallet’s gush of ‘oil’, nevertheless enables Spahr to explicitly name the effects and repercussions of oil dependency on both human and non-human ecologies. Spahr pumps the conditions, coordinates, and effects of Western imperialism, oil dependency, and ecological degradation directly into her textual lungs and heart. Arguably it is this presence of the body that draws Spahr’s text into the realm of performance. Her textual body provides a foundation for the ensuing performative ingestion. In addition to the presence of a textual body that performs ingestion, Spahr’s use of formal techniques including the repeated refrain, repetition, “accumulation, acceleration, [and] feedback” (Merola 2018, p.32) coalesce into producing a physiological rhythm that pulses in the body of the reader.

Whether textual or physical, Spahr’s and Prevallet’s performative ingestion registers complicity and personal implication with oil-driven petro-capitalism and negative systemic impacts on human and non-human ecological communities. If petro-capitalism is a system that disproportionately produces excess and lack, it both aggressively and subtly (though coercively) encourages and rewards over-consumption. This drive is captured by a line in this paper’s opening epigraph, “[i]t was a time of overt and unsustainable resource use” (Spahr 2007, p.205). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that both Spahr and Prevallet’s act of performative ingestion instantiates excess and over-consumption. Spahr’s extensive inventory of loss and degradation builds and swells in lengthy repetitious sentences of accumulation, while Prevallet’s mouth, face, and body are deluged by the sticky, viscous ‘oil’ she pours onto herself. Spahr and Prevallet are engaged in “performing consumption”, to borrow Marcy J. Epstein’s term (Epstein 1996, p.23), but are doing so in order to confront the inequities and degradation caused by oil dependency and petro-capitalism. In these two performative instances, excess and over-consumption not only mirror the over-consumption of Western culture, but through their performance of complicity and implication, both practitioners make themselves vulnerable. Acknowledgment of complicity renders both Spahr and Prevallet vulnerable, and this very vulnerability is itself a relational act. Through the act of performative ingestion, Spahr and Prevallet deliberately position themselves in close relational proximity to that which they
protest. Their performative bodies are saturated in the act of being-with petro-capitalism's fallout. In so doing, Spahr and Prevallet's performative ingestion exemplifies a theoretical proposition of Barad's (2007) – namely that, "knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing it" (p.49).

Although Barad (2007) precedes this phrase with "[a] performative understanding of scientific practices [...]" (p.49), it is possible, given the scalable scope of her project, to extrapolate beyond scientific practices to performative practices. Barad’s (2007) proposition of situated and responsive knowing appears in her elaboration of intra-action (p.33). Preceding or appearing in the same year as Barad's influential text, Prevallet and Spahr's performative ingestion enact the very entanglement of agencies articulated by Barad's concept of intra-action. Through the ingestion of 'oil', Prevallet not only privileges the matter or being-ness of oil, she evokes her own (and provokes her viewers') complicit entanglement with the everywhere presence of oil, and what oil is made to do. Similarly, although in textual-physiological form, Spahr presents and ingests the sticky entanglements between Western imperialism, oil addiction, threatened ecologies, and species’ extinction. All appearing in the early 2000s, the texts and performance works by Prevallet, Spahr, and Barad discussed here are concerned with our complicity and entanglement with each other and the rest of nature, and they offer tools for reworking our relationality.

A feature of Prevallet, Spahr, and Barad's work is iterability. In ways comparable to Spahr (though to a lesser extent), Barad too deploys repeated refrains, repetition, and accumulation to communicate her agential realist theory. Prevallet's performance begins with the recitation of a 'procedural poem' that is repeated until deformed, until nearly every word becomes 'oil'. She follows the reading of this deformed poem with the aforementioned 'oil'-guzzling performance. Iteration in all these works can be interpreted as an attempt to expand interconnection, to acknowledge that being in relation to multiple others is processual and ongoing; that it takes time, commitment and numerous situated encounters. From this overview of interconnection, entanglement, vulnerability, complicity, relationality, and iteration in the work of Prevallet, Spahr and Barad, I turn to an in-depth discussion of Prevallet and Spahr's performative ingestion.

To clarify and contextualise, this discussion of Prevallet's 2004 performance 'Cruelty and Conquest (Oil, Oil, Oil)' is accessed through Laura Elrick's description and analysis in her 2011 article, 'Performative Ingestion: Mourning Rite of Peak Oil'. While Prevallet's procedural poem 'Cruelty and Conquest' (first published in 2003, and then 2007) is available online in its entirety, Prevallet's 2004 performance, which involved a reading of the poem and the performative ingestion of 'oil', is not available. For this reason, I rely on Elrick's description of Prevallet's performance. This engagement with Prevallet's physical performance as a textual experience forms a type of equivalence, therefore, between Prevallet and Spahr, though always with the knowledge that Prevallet's performance did take place as an actual physical performance.

In her 2004 iteration of 'Cruelty and Conquest (Oil, Oil, Oil)' at Naropa University, Colorado, Prevallet stood on a U.S. flag, wearing a red, white and blue bathing suit, read a poem, and to quote Elrick (2011), "guzzled an entire gallon of viscous black liquid in an endurance of choking and gagging" (p.267). The poem 'Cruelty and Conquest', read by Prevallet, begins with a section of a speech by George Bush to the United Nations in 2002, giving the tenuous reasons why the U.S. declared war on Iraq. Prevallet deforms this speech by gradually substituting the word 'oil' for specific words over multiple readings until, by the final stanza, nearly every word becomes 'oil'. In an interesting connection between Prevallet and Spahr, Prevallet's poem 'Cruelty and Conquest' was constructed using a constraint originally created by the French avant-garde group Oulipo, and re-introduced by Spahr in 100 Days: An Anthology (Prevallet 2007b). This Oulipian constraint involves counting and eliminating words, or, as is the case with Prevallet, of counting and replacing words. In stanza II, where every seventh word is replaced by 'oil', Bush's speech is still largely coherent.
II.
The United States has no oil quarrel oil the Iraqi people; they’ve suffered too oil in silent captivity. Liberty for the oil people is a great moral cause, oil a great strategic goal. The people oil Iraq deserve it; the security of oil nations requires it. Free societies do oil intimidate through cruelty and conquest, and oil societies do not threaten the world oil mass murder.
The United States supports oil and economic liberty in a unified oil.
(Prevallet 2007a)

Gradually the speech is deformed until it becomes, in stanza VII.2,

VII. 2
Oil Oil Oil oil oil oil oil oil oil; they’ve oil oil oil oil oil oil oil oil; oil oil oil oil. Oil societies oil oil oil oil oil oil oil oil. Oil United
Oil oil oil oil oil oil oil oil oil oil.

(Prevallet 2007a)

Prevallet (2007b) acknowledges that her use of the constraint “refused to stop developing after the steps were followed and the pattern realized” until “the original passage became completely erased” (n.p). In an interesting parallel between the verbal reading of the poem and the physical ingesting of ‘oil’, Prevallet found herself choking and stuttering on the repetition of that small word ‘oil’. She writes,

“It’s impossible to say ‘oil oil oil oil oil’ without choking. It’s a hard, ugly, pig-like sound. When the poem came off the page and into my voice it became apparent that I had to gag on the word oil. Before this evening, I had read this poem several times, at different poetry readings”. (2007b, n.p)

After reading this deformed speech-poem, while still standing on the U.S, flag wearing a red, white and blue bathing suit, Prevallet then begins her arduous, durational ‘oil’-guzzling performance. Prevallet repeatedly chokes and gags on the liquid, which, according to the performer (2007b), is distressing for the people watching her: “[a] nother sobbed, permeating the silence of the riveted room” (n.p).

Both Prevallet’s effective deployment of the (altered) Oulipian constraint to replace the false speech of Bush with its unspoken primary reason for war (oil), and her performative ingestion of ‘oil’, accrue effect and affect through iteration. Where Prevallet’s repetition of the word ‘oil’ tangles her tongue, her lengthy pouring of ‘oil’ causes her throat to constrict. It is perhaps time to consider
why I have placed ‘oil’ in quotation marks when discussing Prevallet’s performative ingestion. The ‘oil’ was in fact molasses that closely resembled oil. By omitting this substitution, I follow Elrick (2011), who in her description of Prevallet’s performance, uses two terms: “viscous black liquid” (p.267); and “toxic substance” (p.270). Only in the footnotes of Elrick’s (2011) article does the reader find the sentence, “[t]he audience was unaware that the substance in the oil-can was molasses” (p.270). Elrick’s withholding of ‘molasses’ for ‘oil’ follows Prevallet, and mine follows Elrick. In terms of performance, it is precisely Prevallet’s substitution of molasses for oil that takes her protest more securely into the realm of performance and performativity.

In contrast to this paper’s focus on one single, evocative performance by Prevallet, my discussion of Spahr’s performative ingestion encompasses the entire iterative accumulation of Spahr’s text, The Transformation, which is Spahr’s third major publication. Spahr (2007) began writing The Transformation in 1999 or 2000” (p.217) when she moved from the U.S. to Hawai’i to take up a lecturing position in the English Department at the University of Hawai’i on Manoa. According to The Transformation, Spahr first experiences the impact of U.S. imperialism as a haole or non-Hawaiian, which triggers an awakening of sorts. 9/11 takes place shortly after her move, as does the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and allies, which results in an increased media focus on oil, and the role it plays in sustaining petro-capitalism and accelerating climate change. Spahr’s text therefore encompasses this constellation of interconnected forces, events and their ramifications. I should also add that during this time, Spahr was living in a three-person romantic relationship to account for the “pressured pronouns” (p.205) she uses.

Over the course of The Transformation, Spahr and her lovers variously ingest flora, fauna, and the climatic elements of Hawai’i, extinct species, pre-colonial languages and the “expansionist” language (English in this case), their status as “colonizers” (Spahr’s term), the melting of polar caps, and the military-industrial complex (p.210-211, p.98, p.213, p.212). Spahr introduces, revisits and elaborates on each of these entities and events throughout The Transformation, and it is only in the final four pages that Spahr and her lovers ingest them all as an interconnected string of somewhat alien comestibles. Spahr and her lovers ingest this string of entities and events not through their mouth but directly into the chambers, atria and ventricles of their heart, and through the valves, atria and veins of their lungs. While Spahr frequently uses the term ‘ingest’ in the buildup to the final pages, the most repeated verb in this last section is ‘pumped’:

Pumped with the right ventricles
the 70 percent reduction of the
zooplankton biomass. Pumped
through their pulmonic valves a
theory of collective responsibility.
Pumped with the pulmonary arteries
a vow to let the nameless and faceless
deaths caused by the military that
currently occupied the continent
break up their language. (p.213)

In this excerpt, it is the anaphoric repetition of ‘pumped’ that pulses each event, entity and affective state in a semantic equivalent of the heart’s pumping of blood through the body. The verb ‘pumped’ not only names the function of the heart, but in the way it is used by Spahr, the verb is active and carries a sense of intentional, volitional action. ‘Pumped’ also coheres these disparate (though ultimately interconnected) events and responses, and in so doing, creates a textual and somatic pulse.

As a performative text, the intention of Spahr and her lovers as they ingest all that petro-capitalism and the military industrial complex have wrought globally on the rest of nature, is to take into their very bodies the fullest extent of (particularly) the West’s degradation of human and nonhuman lifeways. In this text, performative ingestion can be interpreted as an explicit willingness to go beyond the boundaries of subject and object, to swallow any hierarchical difference between agencies and to register absolute complicity. Spahr and her lovers ingest all the awkwardness of the time, as the following excerpt makes clear:

It was a time of overt and dramatically unsustainable resource use. It was a time of oil. And because it was a time of oil, it was a time of risk. It was a time of an altered environment,
an environment altered by the oil economy. It was a time of invasive species. A time of climate change. A time of an overly fished and empty ocean. A time of the elimination of predators from ecosystems. A time of toxins in the water. A time of not enough fresh water. A time when it seemed all the parts of the world were being turned into an oil-based indestructible plastic. And because of this it was a time of bombing in different parts of the world. (p.205)

In this long refrain of anaphoric sentences, Spahr brings together the oil economy, war, and socio-ecological crisis. Her inventory of petro-capitalist-induced ecological crisis includes the introduction of invasive species and the elimination of predator species, climate change, unsustainable fishing practices, and pollution. Anaphoric repetition establishes a somatic pulse that amplifies the interpolation of the oil economy, war, and socio-ecological crisis.

Spahr’s somatic pulse can be contrasted with Prevallet’s stutter, but both emerge as a result of repetition and iteration. Spahr and Prevallet’s enactments of performative ingestion embody and critique the excesses and over-consumption of petro-capitalism. Where Prevallet’s performance is visceral, evocative and allusory, Spahr’s is textual, inventory-like, and accumulative. Both enactments of performative ingestion acknowledge complicity with oil dependency, and through their performances, Spahr and Prevallet make themselves vulnerable for the purpose of examining fraught entanglements and hierarchical relationality. Importantly, both practitioners perform ingestion with abject, toxic, degraded, and violent events volitionally. This volitional dimension draws Prevallet and Spahr’s work into relation with Alaimo’s concept of the trans-corporeal introduced earlier.

In contrast to Prevallet and Spahr’s willingness to be relational through vulnerability, Alaimo and the subjects and cases with which she develops her theoretical framework of transcorporeality are, (perhaps quite rationally) resistant to chemical contamination (the vehicle for interconnection Alaimo uses). Alaimo (2010) draws on environmental justice accounts of toxic infiltration and “chemical trespass” (p.83) to illustrate the trans-corporeal. In the ethical space of the trans-corporeal, Alaimo (2010) frames the human body as “never rigidly enclosed, but vulnerable to the substances and flows of its environments... permeable” (p.28). This intermeshing of human and nonhuman entities via industrial toxins also sustains the theoretical discourse of ‘ecosickness’ in texts such as Heather Houser’s Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S.: Environment and Affect (2014). In these accounts, toxins and chemicals contaminate the soil and water that both humans and nonhumans ingest. Although understandably resistant to chemical trespass without consent, to toxins that “take up residence within the body”, to entities who “absorb” (against their will) toxics (p.83, p.102, pp.110), Prevallet and Spahr’s volitional ingestion can be figured as relationally inclined, even reparative, precisely because the act of ingestion is not resistant but voluntary.

Performative ingestion of all petro-capitalism’s negative impacts in Prevallet and Spahr’s work can be positioned as either commensurate with socio-ecological crisis or excessive. In Braidotti’s (2016) relational philosophy of radical immanence, which is founded on reciprocity, she defines radical immanence as, “unfolding the self onto the world, while enfolding the world within” (p.26). It could be argued that Western bodies (to varying extents) have already unfolded themselves onto the world via imperialism, and that enfolding might be a more equitable approach. On this reading, a clear correlation would seem to exist between Braidotti’s enfolding the world within and performative ingestion as enacted by Prevallet and Spahr. But what are the implications for enfolding or ingesting the world? That is, what does performative ingestion enable? There are both general and specific answers to this proposition.

In general terms, performative ingestion in the work of Prevallet and Spahr evinces a commitment to ethical relationality with the rest of nature, and addresses the inequities caused by petro-capitalism, particularly socio-ecological crisis. This commitment is evident in both practitioners’ acknowledgment of complicity and in their willingness to be vulnerable. Complicity,
vulnerability, and relationality form a chain of interconnected affective states of being that encourage openness to the other, and particularly to the grievances of the other. Performative ingestion through iterative physical and textual enfolding is one response to socio-ecological crisis that makes crystalline our obligations to the rest of nature.

For Prevallet, and here I am in agreement with Elrick’s (2011) assessment, Prevallet’s performative ingestion acquiesces to the “permanence of mourning” (p.264). Through Prevallet’s ‘oil’-guzzling performance and related poetry and performance works, Prevallet offers mourning as a permanent affective state commensurate with socio-ecological crisis (and to personal trauma). As LeMenager (2014) writes, “[f]orgetting the trauma of an oil spill or the death toll of sea otters in Prince William Sound to resume modern life as usual implies not only the vagaries of memory and the cognitive paralysis of despair, but also something terribly compelling about modern life as usual” (p.66). Prevallet holds open the duration of mourning in order to be responsive to the affective potentialities that such an openness encourages.

Loss, grief, and mourning similarly recur in Spahr’s poetry, but in The Transformation, performative ingestion, as the text’s title suggests, is oriented towards transforming Spahr herself and her writing. By listing, inventorying, ingesting, and pumping through her and her lovers’ bodies the abjection of ecological crisis and war, Spahr and her beloveds hope that this process of volitional vulnerability will transform them sufficiently to write precisely from a place of transformation. A transformation that is oriented towards ameliorating socio-ecological crisis.

REFERENCES


How can a Non-Indigenous Australian Explore Ecological Identity?

_Bird Wings and Puppet Strings_ (BWPS) is a practice-led research project I developed during 2017-2018. As a puppet and theatre maker who lives in Western Australia’s South West, a unique biodiversity hotspot facing exceptional habitat losses, I am acutely aware of the damage wrought by anthropocentric attitudes. _BWPS_ comprises of puppets and a performance script that explores ecological identity from the perspective of a non-Indigenous Australian. In response to a constantly evolving environmental movement, this research shows how imaginative engagement with the landscape can actively influence a shift in Western cultural perspectives when expressed through art. The research draws upon an ecopsychological framework while implementing puppetry and mythology as a means to communicate different perspectives in a non-threatening way. The puppet characters combine the human form and elements of flora and fauna, found in Western Australia’s South West landscape, representing my reciprocal relationship with the natural world. During active exploration of ecopsychological perspectives, I developed a story containing archetypal plot motifs and symbols to support a non-linear, nature-inspired narrative, including the hybrid features of the human/nature characters. _Bird Wings and Puppet Strings_ explores how puppetry performance can communicate the relationship between humans and the natural world in response to limiting cultural beliefs, and encourage social change.

Re-establishing the connection we share with nature has become a significant focus across the ecological-based disciplines, with environmental themes currently flooding the art world in a variety of creative ways. Cambridge clinical psychologist Sarah Conn states that: “The Earth hurts; it needs healing; it is speaking through us; and it speaks the loudest through the most sensitive of us” (1995, p.171). It is in response to the Earth’s voice that my research emerges. Whilst such a perspective may be at odds with the usual discourse of scholarly thinking, it is increasingly pervasive. I consider two modes of thought.
understood by the ancient Greeks: *mythos* and *logos*. The *logos* relates to logical thinking, reason and facts, while the *mythos* is based in story, emotions, dreams and imagination. Historically, there was knowledge that both ways of thinking were important; however, today Western society is driven predominantly by scientific *logos*, and the importance of myth has become lost (Armstrong 2009, pxiii). *BWPS* develops a contemporary story that draws on the core of mythic understanding to communicate and re-think how Western values can impact our relationship to the natural world.

Most indigenous cultures share a view that the living world, including elements such as rivers, stones, seas, animals, plants, and dirt, is alive (Blackie 2018, p.18). According to indigenous Australian writer Bruce Pascoe (2013), “Earth is the mother” and the way people relate to understanding their connection to the land is a primary difference between Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal people (p.145). Gammage (2014) notes that Australian Aborigines see ‘country’ as a ‘communal and spiritual landscape of the mind’, a landscape alive with beings from an ongoing Dreamtime, present in site-specific features and “mapped by stories” (p.43). Pascoe says Aboriginal stories about mythic beings and the eternal actions they perform, such as those set in the night sky, generally inform the law of the land (p.144). I respect and am interested in the Dreamtime that guides indigenous Australian knowledge; however, as a non-indigenous Australian, I was not taught to see the world through an interrelated cultural lens. Whilst I am aware of these perspectives, they have not informed my research due to cultural limitations. Out of respect for the 48,000 years that Wadandi people have cared for the Margaret River region where I live (www.noongarculture.org.au), the puppet show begins with an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land as referenced at the beginning of the script. During an informal discussion with Wadandi custodian Josh Whiteland, he confirmed that, as I was not telling indigenous stories and the story I told was my own, then it was not culturally inappropriate (Whiteland 2018, personal communication).  

Wadandi elder Vivian Brockman and Wadandi custodian and co-ordinator of the Wardan Centre, Mitchella Hutchins, were also invited to attend a puppet show rehearsal and discuss my project. Both offered enthusiastic support of my work in sharing land care through storytelling and puppetry (Hutchins & Brockman 2019, personal communication). The Dreamtime is acknowledged in my script as alive in Australian country, with reference made to ‘old stories that aren’t mine to take’. The use of local indigenous language when referring to some animals, such as *Djitty* for the Willy Wagtail, also acknowledges and respectfully integrates an indigenous presence into my story, as does the inclusion of didgeridoo music in the land scenes. It is from this sensitive crossroads, as a non-indigenous Australian, that my research offers an original puppet-based story as a method to teach land care, question anthropocentric perspectives, and promote a sense of belonging in contemporary Australia.

The Western worldview, from the moment we begin to learn language, teaches us to label and categorise the world into a dualistic perception of ‘us and them,’ creating a forced sense of separateness between the living human and the rest of the world (Blackie 2018, pp.17-18). Detachment from the world can be traced to early philosophy, as intellectual and rational knowledge became increasingly promoted over the physical senses – as seen in Descartes’ clear distinction between the body and mind (Descartes & Cottingham 1986, p.7). To question these cultural assumptions and support my process of consciously reconnecting to what David Abram terms ‘the more-than-human world’ (1996), I employed the theoretical understanding of the emerging field, ecopsychology, to examine and assess the way human suffering is intertwined with ‘dissociative alienation’ from the Earth (Metzner 1995, p.64). Roszak, who coined the term ‘ecopsychology’ (1995), addresses sanity in modern society by repositioning the notion of mainstream psychology to emphasise a shift of personal awareness, asserting that “at its deepest level the psyche remains sympathetically bonded to the Earth that mothered us into existence” (Roszak et al., p.5). An ecopsychological
perspective supports a belief structure that the human psyche expands beyond the separate idea of self and is embedded within the more-than-human world.

Accounts of ecological identity shift, and the promotion of non-anthropocentric focus can be examined through literary sources and the developing field of ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism expands the notion of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology, “Everything is connected to everything else,” we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex, global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996, p.xix).

Although texts such as Thoreau’s *Walden* (1954), Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) explore human relationships within an environmental context, I needed to personally experience my own sense of widened ecological identity. This required more than an intellectual understanding gained through literature or academic texts; I needed to engage in a regular active practice. To develop my relationship and reciprocity with the animate world around me, and truly experience being embedded in the more-than-human world, required my physically experiencing it.

**A PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF ECOPSYCHOLOGY**

I began walking a recently-opened section of the Wadandi track, a manufactured track carved through the Margaret River landscape, between paddocks, vineyards, peppermint trees, a running brook in Winter and a massive granite outcrop. For years I have walked daily through the bush surrounding the Margaret River region. Walking this new track, however, coincided with my conscious attempt to integrate an ecopsychological perspective and dissolve my perception of separateness from the surrounding natural world. My practice-led research consequently evolved in response to the intimate relationship I formed walking through this stretch of ancient land for over two years.

Listening to frogs and birds, walking through flowing rain, watching moss turn green and then transform to shrivelled brown clumps in heat, became regular sensory and somatic experiences. Through walking, writing and engaging my imagination, I began developing a perception that includes the living land as an extended sense of self. My project aims to share the sense of awe which stems from my solo pondering in the natural world, to promote a shift in ecological identity and communicate an understanding of belonging to a wider sense of self.

Although part of me was preparing to use my human/land experience to write a script, when given space and time to interact and re-immersse myself with the natural world, I did not want to simply contemplate a linear narrative; instead, I allowed my imagination to run wild with the interrelated natural world. From this experience rose a creative dialogue, formed when in communication with the landscape – an inner narrative that interacted with my perceived voice of the land. In his book *Scatterlings: Getting Claimed in the Age of Amnesia*, mythology teacher and storyteller Martin Shaw describes how, for thousands of years, humans would “wander freely in a wider psyche”; experiences such as the stars in the sky and earth under your feet were direct forms of self-knowledge and relatedness (Shaw 2016, p.102). It was through engagement with imagination that I was able to experiment with ecopsychological ideas and see myself as interrelated to leaves, sky and rocks. This practice began to dissolve the illusion of an inner and outer self. These non-linear experiences informed my creative script writing as I experimented with contrasting narratives, nature writing, interrelated stories, sounds of the land, and the inclusion of non-anthropocentric life.

It was from this creative space of imaginative reciprocity with the land that I began to form the characters that would inspire my puppet-making and script development. According to Jung, the psyche or nature cannot be defined as we can merely describe belief and function: “Our psyche is part of nature, and its enigma is limitless” (Jung
Jungian analyst and ecocritic Susan Rowland claims that literature and the use of symbolism can express the viewpoint that human creativity is embedded in nature (Rowland 2012, p.xi). My characters and story have evolved from my exploration of these ideas. Rather than directly describing the inner dialogue I would share when walking the land, my creative writing and art-making are the result of my communicative relationship within the natural world. Through close reciprocity, breathing, walking, observing and imagining within the more-than-human world, my experience revealed that the language of my imagination provided a way to develop my ecological identity. A mythic voice of character and narrative arose in response to my relationship with country. Sean Kane notes a similar voice in *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, claiming “[m]yth, in its most ecologically discreet form, among people who live by hunting and fishing and gathering, seems to be the song of the place to itself, which humans overhear” (Kane 1994, p.50). After many months and changing seasons, I walked the land, listening, looking and dreaming up a way to personally express the voice and image that emerged through me from the land. The process behind my puppet making and story is consequently a reflection of my inner/outer psyche and an active attempt to understand my human self as part of the wider ecosystem.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

A symbolic-based story evolved in response to my relationship with the South West environment. Ethnoclinical psychologist Pinkola Estés reaffirms that “story is far older than the art and science of psychology, and will always be the elder in the equation no matter how much time passes” (1992, p.18). Embedded within the framework of myth and stories are archetypal patterns, such as recognisable characters, familiar plot structures and symbols, developed to guide and support transformation (Estés 1992; Campbell & Moyers 1988; Vogler 2007; Tater 1999). The most predominant of these symbols in my story was the old Bird Woman, who I imagined to live behind the rocky granite outcrop on my walk. Jung describes a symbol as an image that implies more than an obvious meaning, claiming a symbol has an element that lies beyond reason and cannot be explained (Jung 1964, p.20). The Bird Woman evolved as a symbolic form through my exploration of the ecological self, and
resulted in a blurring of the lines between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. The Bird Woman character evolved whenever I would visit the granite outcrop, and is my personal experience with what Estés describes as a fleeting moment of mysterious knowing; a “taste of the wild” (1995, p.5). Rowland states: “The symbol can lead to healing of one of the greatest wounds of our age: our split from non-human nature ... the symbol is a reciprocal portal to nature, and a means of psychic evolution” (Rowland 2014, p.82). As I regularly engaged in inner dialogue with my natural surroundings, the symbol of this ancient Bird Woman was becoming a well-fed element of my psyche; an untamed aspect of my imagination.

The role of the old oral storyteller has been lost in my contemporary Australian heritage, so I have drawn on the wisdom of the ‘old storyteller’ archetype, ‘the keeper of stories,’ to inform my developing character. The old hag woman is found in many fairytales, such as the witch who lives in the woods, the crone, the old creator known in Gaelic tradition as the Cailleach, or the Russian Baba Yaga, who holds the wisdom of life and death (Blackie 2018, p.136). After my own personal land-based interaction with my hybrid Bird Woman, I discovered other examples of the same symbol. Psychologist and teacher of Celtic mythology, Dr. Sharon Blackie, discusses her relationship with an old bird woman who had presented herself in the Irish landscape. Blackie claims that, while she was walking the land, a being, part woman, part bird, "emerged in the only way that is meaningful: not just out of my head, but directly out of the place itself, and the creatures that inhabit it” (Blackie 2018, p.225). Blackie describes her Old Crane Woman as “an act of co-creation. This is how the land draws us into relationship with it. This is how we build belonging” (Blackie 2018, p.225). Theatre maker Catherine Diamond also adopts the bird woman as the symbol for her Kinnari Ecological Theatre Project. The kinnari is a mythical hybrid bird woman found in the Kinnari Jataka, stories of Buddha’s previous births (Diamond 2013, p.577). Diamond states that the half bird, half woman “seemed an appropriate symbol for the imagined human/nature connection that has become attenuated in modern life” (2013 p.577). These examples offer interesting correlation between my own Bird Woman, who rose from my imaginative relationship to the Western Australian South West landscape, and validate my experience as belonging to a larger archetypal response (Figure 1).

PUPPETS AS A METHOD OF COMMUNICATION

The method I have chosen to communicate my research-based shift in ecological identity, and the character-driven story that arose from my response to the land, is puppetry. This project builds on over two decades of personal experience in theatre-related practices, including ten years as a puppet maker and the creator of three environmentally-inspired puppet shows. The puppets created for Bird Wings and Puppet Strings are a modification of the traditional Japanese bunraku puppet, and explore a widened sense of ecological identity through hybrid characters such as the Bird Woman and Possum Boy (Figure 2). They have physical traits that resemble humans, yet wear distinct elements influenced by the South West landscape, such as local flower species, cattle horns and animal features in the form of leather masks to function as symbolic representations of the wider ecological self (Figure 3). The environmental impact of constructing these puppets has also been considered, and materials have been sourced in an ethical way with recycled options used when possible.

Mythology and puppetry have both been successfully explored in performance over the years to promote cultural and social change, as demonstrated by Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre Company. See http://www.skyriverart.com.au for documentation of this work.
Puppet Theater (Bell 2005, p.101) and William Kentridge’s collaboration with Capetown’s Handspring Puppet Company (Blumenthal 2010, p.45). A growing body of research also supports the effective nature of puppetry as a communicative tool with children in therapy and education (Bernier & O’Hare 2005; Gendler 1986; Steinhardt 1994). Puppetry is an ancient art form with traditional roots in many cultures (Bell 2005, p.7), and was originally used to give voice to ancestors during sacred rituals (Gross 2011, p.425). Puppet educator John Bell notes: “We choose to believe that this combination of wood, clay, cloth, metal, or plastic is capable of telling us something about ourselves and others” (Bell 2005, p.11). Puppetry creates an impression of bringing something inanimate to life, and is an art form capable of building a bridge between the material world and the imagination (Ahlcrona 2012, p.172). When implemented as a therapeutic tool, Steinhardt (1994) describes how puppetry provides a ‘projective distancing technique,’ creating a safe way to express and identify feelings or ideas that might otherwise be uncomfortable (p.205). The use of this ‘projective distancing technique’ offers me, as a puppeteer, a vehicle to address cultural issues and alternative ways of perceiving the natural world without being a direct threat. Through adopting my archetypal puppet characters, I can provide what Steinhardt observes as an increased ability to communicate with children, enabling me to present a different, non-direct example of the human experience.

For thousands of years, stories have been a way for humans to make sense of their place in the world while passing on wisdom about how to create healthy reciprocity with the land. My research stems from applying theories of ecopsychology to an active Earth-based practice that led to recognising the binaries of Western perception and realising my own ecological identity. This shift in awareness facilitated an imaginative myth-based dialogue with the landscape and forms the basis of my creative response. The emergence of my wild Bird Woman, living behind the granite outcrop, blurred boundaries between my psyche and the more-than-human world. This symbolic language I shared with the land has developed into an archetypal narrative and been represented through constructing a cast of South West landscape inspired puppets. The intention underpinning this practice-led research is to use my creativity to respond to the Earth’s voice and shift the toxic untruth embedded in Western culture that separates humans from nature. The Bird Woman symbol aided my understanding of how living reciprocity between humans and nature can take an imaginative form and be communicated through art. My work adopts puppetry and story as communicative tools to explore contrasting perceptions that can reignite positive connections within a community.

Bird Wings and Puppet Strings provides a new understanding of how puppetry can be applied as an ecological performance practice and promotes a shift in ecological identity.

REFERENCES


Doubleday Publishing Group.


Indigenous Australian writer Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* (2013) is a work of fiction set in a dystopic future that has been altered irreversibly by climate change. The text, in terms of how it functions as a narrative and represents its narrative space, emerges as a potent example of the absolute interdependence between the non-human environment and the human. In my paper, I explore how such a narrative form deployed on a spatial language not only dissolves the strict division between nature/culture, but also emboldens the discourse on ‘new animism’. It is my argument that when a climate change novel, taking the example of *The Swan Book*, is also animist realist, it meets one of the biggest challenges facing climate change fiction at present, which is to enable its readers to recognise the fallibility of human exceptionalism.

*Keywords: New Animism; Anthropocene; Indigenous Australian Literature; Climate Change Fiction; Decolonisation*
purpose; her genre bending; her virtuosic gift for interweaving stories on multiple levels, from the literal to the metaphoric, the folkloric and the mythic”. In another review, Katherine Mulcrone remarks:

Nothing about *The Swan Book* is easy or straightforward, least of all a conclusion on its merit ... Wright, it seems, is determined to keep her readers unmoored, which she accomplishes via omniscient narration that tends more toward stream of consciousness than linear thought, challenging readers to untangle which strand of narration belongs to which character. The author complicates this task by dispensing with any commitment to standard syntax, so that sentences wind over and around themselves in such a way that only multiple readings can unpick the threads. (2014, p.518)

The composition of the novel consistently evades the usual conventions of literary narratives, making any understanding of it seem less thorough than it should be. *The Swan Book*, set in the near future, takes place when the world as we know it has changed drastically because of anthropogenic climate change. People have been rendered stateless and homeless, and have migrated to any place possible on the planet where life can be sustained even in a nominal condition. Consequently, hordes of climate refugees have forced themselves into Australia. The central character of the novel, Oblivion Ethylene or Oblivia, is a young Australian Aboriginal girl who was raped by a gang of petrol-sniffing youths, after which she has fallen into the underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree where she remains locked in a state of sleep. Her family and community have stopped searching for the missing child, when Bella Donna of the Champions – a European climate refugee in Australia – finds her. Together, they live in an old rusty hulk stuck in the middle of a swamp, which is an Army-run Aboriginal detention camp. Oblivia, however, is unable to recover from the trauma of her past. Symptomatically, she remains mute for the entirety of the novel.

After the death of Bella Donna, she is claimed as wife by Warren Finch, the first Aboriginal President of Australia, who comes for her from the other side of the swamp. Shortly after the wedding, Finch leaves Oblivia behind in a city in the south of Australia, locked in a building called The People’s Palace. Stuck in the palace, one night, suddenly, Oblivia finds that the black swans that were with her in the swamp have come back to her. Soon after the arrival of the swans, Finch is assassinated as he re-enters the city, leading to the Australian government’s decision that his dead body will be taken on a final journey to farewell the nation, during which the government can settle on the burial place of his coffin. It is also decided that, as long as the decision is not made, the journey shall go on and Oblivia will accompany Finch’s dead body in a vehicle. Nonetheless, Oblivia leaves the corpse of Finch behind. Yet again, she finds her black swans from the swamp. “They were heading north, on the way home” (Wright 2013b). She decides to follow them. In the end, we are told that Oblivia can be regularly spotted walking around the old dry swamp as a teenage girl, “screaming, *kayi, kayi kala-wurru nganyi*, your country is calling out for you” (Wright 2013b).

With such a complex narrative, the novel unlocks discussions on themes that include the loss of Indigenous traditions, Stolen Generations, detention camps, dispossession, the disappearance of Indigenous languages, and the ongoing struggle for Aboriginal rights and sovereignty. Every sentence is a reflection on all these issues. However, the idea for writing *The Swan Book*, as Wright reported in an interview with Arnold Zable, came to her when she was working in Central Australia in the year 2003 and people started telling her about “swans that they had seen in the desert, sometimes on very shallow stretches of water. People were surprised to see them in these places, so far away from coastal and wetter regions of Australia” (2013a). The swans had moved far from their natural habitats, and this was accompanied by a change in the weather patterns, explaining why the swans were migrating in the first place. More importantly, it was the cumulative result of human activities; climate, the environment, and non-human beings were being impacted by human beings. Inspired
by these events, Wright wanted to write a story for the Anthropocene. Thus, *The Swan Book* can be considered first and foremost a climate change novel.\(^2\)

In literary fiction, climate change is generally regarded as an intrinsically difficult topic to write about, as writers confront a set of scientific and cultural phenomena that is bewildering in its complexity and scale (Garrard 2013). Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra (2011), in their survey of fictional representations of climate change, conclude that the depiction of climate change in literary fiction, particularly in science fiction, relies on the construction of other-worlds. These other-worlds are either planets other than Earth made habitable for life, or Earth with an altered climate located in the future. Narratives set on Earth rather than other planets have been referred to as “future histories” by Trexler and John-Putra (2011, p.186). *The Swan Book* is a future history in this regard, but it also goes beyond many other climate change novels that are also future histories by exhibiting an exceptional approach in terms of its setting and characterisation. It has not only tried to depict how human and non-human planetary life can be affected by climate change, but has constructed the narrative space of the novel such that it helps us think about the fallibility of human exceptionalism or anthropocentrism in radically new ways. This, I argue, has been achieved by grounding the text in animism.\(^3\)

In an illuminating piece of scholarship by Alison Ravenscroft (2018), the novels of Wright, including *The Swan Book*, have been read with the purpose of revealing the gap in new materialism and post-human theories that critically interrogate nature-culture dualism, such as those posited in the works of Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour, which let Indigenous materialism fall through without any mention of it. Ravenscroft’s essay begins with the all-important question of her own position as a non-Indigenous reader/scholar approaching Indigenous texts. Consciously and conscientiously, she comes to the point that there is a need for new reading practices, and proposes one “where the non-Waanyi reader takes up Alexis Wright’s invitation to be ‘welcomed strangers’... [Ravenscroft is] interested in the possibilities of a reading practice based in estrangement for the possibilities it may hold for de-centring the Western-centric knowing reader-subject” (2018, p.359). While I am grateful to Ravenscroft for confronting the issue of positionality as it affects non-Indigenous readers/scholars like myself who study Indigenous literary texts, and for offering an enabling reading practice that is based on an acknowledgement of the limits of non-Indigenous understanding of Indigenous self-representation, I hope to tackle the question of the binary relation between nature and culture from a different angle. That is, I do not use the term Indigenous materialism, for I have the objective of rehabilitating and decolonising the term ‘animism’, which was once – and to some degree remains at present – used in relation to Indigenous peoples and practitioners of non-mainstream religions in a derogatory fashion. The term ‘animism’ was first used by English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1832–1917). Tylor lived and worked in a Europe that had begun experiencing the spread of the Enlightenment, the ideology of scientific progress, and the theory of evolution. Consequently, for Tylor, animism was not a desirable quality, but was rather an indication of primitiveness among certain cultural groups. It is in his text *Primitive Culture* (1871) that we find his first detailed account on animism. Now, when scholars refer to animism, as detailed in Tylor’s study, they refer to it as ‘old animism’, by way of ushering in the concept of ‘new animism’.

\(^2\) There is a growing body of scholarship that engages with *The Swan Book* as a climate change novel. See, for example, Mead, Philip (2018), ‘Unresolved Sovereignty and the Anthropocene Novel’, *Journal of Australian Studies* 42 (3), pp. 24-538. Also, White, Jessica (2014), ‘Fluid Worlds: Reflecting Climate Change in *The Swan Book* and *The Sunlit Zone*, *Southerly* 74 (1), pp.142-163. However, it is outside the scope of this article to discuss the existing literature on the novel unless directly relevant to the argument being made.

\(^3\) This is not equivalent to the claim that *The Swan Book* is magic realist, posited by some scholars who have since then been criticised for it, as it superimposes onto an Indigenous novel a literary narrative strategy developed primarily by Latin American writers and formulated into a theory by Western critics. For more on the difference between animist realism and magic realism, please refer to Harry Garuba’s article ‘Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, Society’.
New animism is animism reinterpreted and redefined to become “a self-designation among some Indigenous and nature-venerating religionists, many of whom are well aware that it can carry negative associations but reject these in favour of its more positive associations” (Harvey 2005, p.3). Graham Harvey, a religious studies scholar based in the United Kingdom, who published Animism: Respecting the Living World in 2005, defines animism as that which “names worldviews and lifeways in which people seek to know how they might respectfully and properly engage with other persons” (2005, p.xiv), and animists as those “who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others” (2005, p.xi). In literary studies, Nigerian poet and scholar Harry Garuba was one of the first to discuss certain texts, especially by African writers, and to place them in the tradition of ‘animist realism’. Graham Harvey, building on Garuba’s study, offers more examples from literatures, especially Indigenous novels and poetry, that exhibit an animist conception of the world.

Of the characteristics of Indigenous animist realist writings listed by Harvey, the most prominent is that they are not defined solely or predominantly by the presence of magic or spirits in their content. Their primary trait is that they habitually assume a radically plural, “larger-than-human social cosmos” (2014, p.461) in which it is possible for human beings to relate intimately to non-human beings, whether they are animals, plants, spirits, artefacts, ancestors, or divine beings. Another significant feature of Indigenous animist realist texts is that boundaries are transgressed all the time. “Whether it is in relation to the putative division between this and other worlds (whether of spirits or other species), between times, between conscious states (wakefulness or sleep) or between the everyday and the larger-than-human, boundary crossing is rife” (Harvey 2014, p.465).

The principal way animism materialises in The Swan Book is through its narrative space. “Spaces function in a story in different ways. On the one hand they are only a frame, ‘a place of action’. On the other hand, it becomes an ‘acting place’ rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula, and the fabula becomes sub-ordinate to the presentation of space. The fact that ‘this is happening here’ is just as important as ‘the way it is here,’ which allows these events to happen” (Bal 1997, pp.135-136). In The Swan Book, the narrative space is an acting place. It is not just the characters that suffer the consequences of the great climactic derangement, but the space which is the Aboriginal country has been presented as suffering equally. In fact, there is no separation between the characters’ experiences and the country’s; they are interconnected and deeply entangled with each other.

In the first chapter, ‘Dust Cycle’, Oblivia’s rape and her subsequent fall into the bowel of a eucalyptus tree has been linked with the severe drought in the country; one’s trauma has a bearing on the other: “Some say that there was an accident before the drought. A little girl was lost” (Wright 2013b). By speculating on the supposed connection between the natural phenomenon of drought and the Aboriginal girl going missing, the narrative is drawing a parallel between the suffering of the country (induced by climate change) and the traumatic experience of Oblivia. Furthermore, this section of the text neatly illustrates how, in Aboriginal cosmologies, everything relates to everything else, and how the country – along the same lines as a living person – possesses language, memory, story and even emotions that are always being transmitted and transcribed on itself.

To go back to Harvey’s definition, animism recognises that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human beings. Wright understands the non-mutability of this statement and the role it plays in Indigenous worldviews, thus weaving non-human agency and subjectivity seamlessly into the narrative of The Swan Book. Moving beyond examples of anthropomorphism, at a more intricate level, the swans in The Swan Book offer a figure of extreme complexity that remains irreducible and yet open to interpretation. What is quite remarkable is that the characterisation of the swans has escaped the instrumentalisation that non-human characters are often subjected to in literary fiction. The swans in The Swan Book are animate beings and bring their own unique
energy to the environment in which they are present. The following passage describes Oblivia's opening encounter with the swans:

Oblivia remembered thinking that dust had a way of displacing destiny the first time she saw a swan ... In all of this vast quietness where the summer sun was warming the dust spirit's mind, the swan looked like a paragon of anxious premonitions, rather than the arrival of a miracle for saving the world. Seeing the huge bird flying through the common dusty day like this, disturbed whatever peace of mind the stick-like Oblivia possessed. Everyone watched a swan's feather float down from the sky and land on her head. Oblivia's skin instantly turned to a darker shade of redbrown ... She knew as a fact that the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her. (Wright 2013b)

In the above passage, the figure of the swan, grey-black and alone, has been presented not as a bird that has found itself in a new place, looking perturbed or guarded to be devoid of its flock and away from its former habitat. Rather, it presents a powerful image of a person that has arrived with a mysterious purpose. This purpose unfolds as it drops a single feather on Oblivia. In my reading of the text, this is the moment of entangling when Oblivia and the swan(s) become conjoined in their common purpose of finding a place of belonging. In the prelude, the only section of the text written in the form of a first-person narrative told from the viewpoint of Oblivia, she says: “I must continue on, to reach that one last place in a tinder-dry nimbus where I once felt a sense of belonging” (Wright 2013b). This confirms the connection between the swan(s) and Oblivia. They are fellow-travellers on the same journey, exiled from their homeland and in search of a home that has perhaps been lost forever to the ravages of time.

Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2015), writing in Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches, believes most current narratives of the Anthropocene position the human subject at the centre of the discourse and as exceptional to non-human species, perpetuating and furthering the ontological split between humans and nature. Emily Potter (2009), in 'Climate Change and the Problem of Representation', considers this to be the inheritance of Western thought that operates in binaries. “Within these binaries, power is allocated unevenly, with the capacity to do, to have creative impact, and to author, invested in the human. Where the non-human environment ‘acts’ – for instance, in the case of a ‘natural disaster – it is interpreted with the human at the centre of concern: what does the occurrence mean for humans?” (Potter 2009, p.70). It is, therefore, important that we turn to alternative modes of narrative that do not sideline the non-human others in their depiction of the Anthropocene if we are to overcome the overpowering influence of the nature/culture dualism. The Swan Book, being an animist realist environmental narrative, offers such an alternative.

Wright's subjects in the novel are both human and non-human. The Aboriginal country, inclusive of all beings, is itself sentient and collapses our conventional understanding of the terms 'life' and 'non-life'. In Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason, where Val Plumwood (2002) argues that the logical structure of Eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, and androcentrism is the same, she lists the tendency to homogenise the other as one of the chief features of such structures. In the case of the nature/culture divide, the other-than-human entities are conceptualised as being interchangeable, replaceable units located under broad categories, whether they are trees, flowers, or animals. As Plumwood puts it, “an Anthropocentric culture rarely sees animals and plants as individual centres of striving and need, doing their best for themselves and their children in their condition of life” (2002, pp.107-108). This type of culture, as Plumwood explains, promotes human insensitivity toward non-humans, an underestimation of the complexity of nature and a mechanistic culture – all of which predictably
To counter polarisation, it is necessary to acknowledge and reclaim continuity and overlap between the polarised groups as well as internal diversity within them” (Plumwood 2002, p.102). Wright has, throughout The Swan Book, consciously tried to decentre the human/nature contrast by attending to the factors of both continuity and diversity. In recognition of nature’s amazing diversity, Wright has featured in the novel brolgas, owls, monkeys, myna birds, crows, dogs, and other hybrid figures such as that of the ghost, genie and the Chinese dragon. More prominently, Wright recognises the continuity and convergence between all life forms, with Oblivia’s relationship with the swans being emblematic of this continuity. Throughout the text, there are more instances of cross-species contact. The ancestral tree in whose bowel Oblivia lay asleep for almost a decade shares a divine relationship with the Aboriginal people of the swamp. “Old people said that the tree was like all of the holiest places in the world rolled into one for us, no wonder [Oblivia] went straight to it ... The tree watching everything, calling out to her when it saw some people had broken the Law ... This ancestor was our oldest living relative for looking after the memories, so it had to take her” (Wright 2013b). In this instance, Wright makes the sacred ancestral tree the only witness to Oblivia’s rape which, as a protective, generous guardian, takes her in and offers her shelter. What is more important here is the recognition of rape as an act of violation of justice and Aboriginal Law by the ancestral tree. Here, Wright is pointing not only to the profound failure of the constitutional law of Australia to protect the Aboriginal population, but at the same time showing the durability of Aboriginal Law while restoring its relevance to Aboriginal people.

It is necessary to bring in the concept of ‘deep listening’ at this point, because treating nature as alive and interactive may not be sufficient if we do not invite human beings to be attentive observers and listeners. In fact, Val Plumwood considers “listening and attentiveness to the other” (2002, p.194) to be one of the most important of the counter-hegemonic virtues that resist the instrumentalisation and othering of nature. This is so because it is only by paying attention and having an open stance that the relationship between the human and the non-human can move from being monological to dialogical. During my research, I found that there is, in fact, a term used by some Aboriginal people, even though not mentioned by Plumwood, for the quality of listening and attentiveness that helps one receive the disclosures of nature. It is called dadirri. Indigenous elder Mirriam Ungunameer, from the Ngangikurungkurr tribe, describes it as “inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness”. Ungunameer attributes this special quality to the years of practice of listening to stories passed on by the ancestors, the cumulative result of which is that Aboriginal people become skilled listeners. She explains: “In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn – not by asking questions” (‘Dadirri’ n.d.). This kind of attentive listening, practised by the Indigenous community to which Mirriam Ungunameer belongs, can be developed only by having the patience to stay still, by being truly comfortable with silence, and by exercising mindfulness. This attentiveness, at last, is what will truly enable us to enact the refusal to consider humans as the only repository for agency and re-envision the nonhuman as a source of action and intentionality for the sake of the health of the entire planet.

An interesting article to refer to on Plumwood’s environmental philosophy is Deborah Bird Rose’s ‘Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World’. In the article, Rose recounts the event in which Plumwood was almost killed and eaten by a crocodile at Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory, Australia. In the moment of near-death, Plumwood had understood that she, a human being, was to a crocodile its prey, its food, whereas the entire anthropocentric culture is based on denying the reality that humans are part of the food chain and thereby part of a cycle of reciprocity that links the natural world with the cultural sphere of the human.

Indigenous scholar Judy Atkinson of Jima, Budjalung and Celtic-German heritage, in Trauma Trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia (2002) has used dadirri as an Indigenous cultural tool in the promotion of individual and community healing through transgenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous people as a result of the violent history of European colonisation of the country.
REFERENCES


TO BE AND NOT TO BE: THE SELF AND THE OTHER, TWIN ELEMENTS IN THE AFFECTIVE ECOLOGY OF EMBODYING A CHARACTER (WITH APOLOGIES TO WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE)

ABSTRACT

What does it mean to ‘become’ someone else? In the context of theatrical performance it means creating and becoming a character, but what is the significance of this transformation? For one amateur actor, “it was a bit of a buzz […] the freedom to be someone other than who you are.” (Respondent K) Yet for the actor their everyday self is also present, and aware of this fact, while engaging with the imaginary worlds of the stage. Based on the experiences of non-trained practitioners in amateur theatre, and drawing particularly on the work of Giuseppe Barbiero (2018) and Thomas Schwinn (2007), this paper focuses on the intimate affective ecology of ‘becoming’ someone else on the stage.

Keywords: Ecology, affective ecology, affect, emotion, empathy, attention, mindfulness, theatre, mimesis, character, acting, enactment, body, self, awareness.
thought it was correct to act on my ‘feeling’ that affective ecology was an appropriate theory with which to frame this discussion.

Barbiero writes that affective ecology is “a complementary tool to cognitive ecology that conveys knowledge via rational reasoning”, for affective ecology makes “new channels of comprehension [...] and] wise use of the affective and emotional competences of people” (2011 p.13). The interviews with a range of amateur theatre practitioners reveal that for many the experience of ‘becoming’ a character is deeply emotional as it provides “freedom to be someone other than who you are,” (Respondent A) and gives performers the opportunity “to take yourself, literally out of yourself” (Respondent B). It was the strength and prevalence of these comments about an emotional attention and awareness of the nature of the transformed self that affirmed the selection of affective ecology as a lens through which to examine the experience of amateur theatre practitioners.

The ability to discern relationships between the self and the other, human or not, is a function of the affective capability of human beings. This can occur in an appreciation of nature, creating an emotional bond between one’s self and aspects of the natural world. This paper theorises a connection between this innate ability to respond emotionally to the world, and, through the process of being both self, and at the same time someone other than the self – a process driven by what Michael Taussig terms “the mimetic faculty” (1993, p. xv), the ability to create an emotional connection to an imagined entity, that is, a character.

AFFECTIVE ECOLOGY AND NATURALIST INTELLIGENCE

Affective ecology is a “branch of ecology concerned with emotional relationships between human beings and the rest of the living world” (my emphasis), (Barbiero 2011 p. 12). Barbiero proposes that human beings are made aware of their connection to the natural world through their emotional responses to it, writing that:

our feeling of a deep connection to Nature [...] is probably an instinct

and it is present in all human cultures, including those more technologically advanced, where a scientific understanding of the planet’s living nature has been developing to an ever more advanced level (The Gaia Hypothesis), (Barbiero 2011 p.11)

The concept of affective ecology is based on Howard Gardner’s (1999) theory of multiple human intelligences, Multiple Intelligence Theory. This work is cited in Barbiero (2011), who draws in particular on Gardner’s concept of ‘naturalist intelligence’:

An individual with a high degree of naturalist intelligence is keenly aware of how to distinguish from one another the diverse, plants, animals, mountains, and cloud configurations in her ecological niche (Gardner 1999 as cited in Barbiero 2011)

A deep connection to nature is fuelled by what Barbiero terms the “Biophilia Hypothesis”. Biophilia, which literally means the love of life, is a concept developed by Edward O. Wilson, (2002 p.134). Quoting Wilson, Barbiero notes that this idea refers to:

the basic instinct that guides the evolution and maturation of a well-tuned relationship with the living world [for], our innate tendency to focus upon life and life-like forms [...] in some instances, [allows us] to affiliate with them emotionally (Wilson 2002, p.134)

Again quoting Wilson (1993), Barbiero writes that biophilia is;

not comprised of a single instinct. Like all complex behaviours that characterise the human species, biophilia is characterised by a set of learning rules. The sentiments and behaviours that emerge from these learning rules traverse a wide spectrum of different and at times contradictory emotions: from attraction to aversion, from a sense of peace to one of aversion and anxiety (Wilson 1993, cited in Barbiero 2011).

Thus is it not easy to define this human
instinct with precision. Barbiero uses the word “attentional” to describe responding and learning emotionally through our contact with nature. This response is also available through theatre and acting, which allows a direct access to emotions. It is the gestalt appreciation of events though emotion which aligns the activity of theatre with Gardner’s notion of naturalist intelligence. Intuitive understanding of abstract ideas like ‘nature’ or ‘performance’ depends to a large extent on emotional knowledge. Thomas Schwinn suggests that the main advantage of affective and emotional knowledge is that it can be obtained through a “gestalt” moment of understanding (2007). These non-cognitive gestalt moments, writes Schwinn, contribute to a deeply informed understanding of the world, for they produce a “simultaneous form of construction of the world”. In a gestalt state, “the details are grasped, not in a differentiated way one after another, but simultaneously and figuratively […] Thanks to their simultaneous character emotions permit a rapid grasp of a situation, whereas a cognitive assessment would take longer” (2007, p.307).

There is a similarity between Biophilia and the experience of theatre. Biophilia is rooted in the connectedness to the natural world, which includes other human beings. Similarly, the tendency to ‘become’ an ‘other’, also a basic instinct in human nature, is rooted in a connectedness; in this case the connectedness is to an alterity (person, animal or even inanimate object) which can be reproduced by the living performer as in the form of a character. Actors are aware that creating a character may take them into hidden aspects of their psyche for, as Respondent A explains, acting is “the opportunity to take risks with what you were doing and who you were.” The dual nature of performance that creates the venture into otherness gives performers the opportunity to be more open to themselves, to who they are, and to form connections with others. I argue that such a connectedness is part of the affiliation to the natural world that Barbiero discusses.

For Barbiero, affective ecology develops from an interaction across a gap, the gap between individual human beings, and beyond this to the whole of nature. Quoting Ursula Goodenough (1998, p.127), Barbiero writes that:

> the root of altruism and of responsibility, in the literal sense of the term to marry (sponsum) things (res), has its origin in “our capacity to experience empathy with other creatures and respond to their concerns as our own.” (Goodenough)

The sentiment ‘to affiliate with’ seems, from this perspective, like a particular manifestation of empathy, here intended as the capacity to feel, to understand and to share thoughts and emotions with another” (my emphases) (Barbiero 2011 p.14)

Thus writes Barbiero, affective ecology is:

‘affective’ because the capacity of the human species to bond with is only in part genetically programmed, and instead depends to a large degree upon the development of psychological potentials that themselves depend more upon cultural than genetic contexts (Bell, Richerson & McElreath 2009); and ‘ecology’ because ecology is the science of phylogenetically determined connections. (Barbiero, 2011 p.12)

This cultural learning can include the learning derived from Gardner’s notion of naturalist intelligence. Naturalist intelligence, which gives humans the ability to relate and distinguish beyond the self, is thus able to encompass that which is not the everyday ‘I’ and which presents as the ‘being’ of performance characters. Therefore, theatrical embodiment and the response of affective ecology potentially have some common ground.

Theatre, a multi-textural activity covering spoken/sung verbal text as well as scenography, costume, music and movement, including dance, is a human activity which intrinsically allows complex instantaneous access to the intellectual and emotional understanding of complex situations and ideas. Barbiero writes that we are discovering that the natural world affects us “on a deep psychological level, activating our involuntary attention [i.e. our] (fascination)

Phylogenetically: “Biology in a way that relates to the evolutionary development and diversification of a species or group of organisms” (Oxford Dictionary Online).
and favouring the restoration of our attentional capacity” (p.11) Affective ecology is, he writes, the way to: “consider emotive and affective connections between human beings and the rest of the living world” (p.11). It can also be suggested that this ecology opens an inquiry into the boundaries between concrete and abstract. Through an examination of a possible origin of the desire for connectedness, i.e. naturalist intelligence, and of a process of its application to the wider world, i.e. affective ecology, this paper aims to present the way in which theatre, through its ability to take actors into hidden aspects of their psyche, and activate an audience’s involuntary attention, can offer similar perspectives to those of affective ecology.

RESEARCH ON THE VALUE OF AMATEUR THEATRE

The research material presented in this paper is drawn from a study of the value of amateur theatre to those people involved in this activity. Amateur theatre was chosen because it is a popular activity in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The New Zealand Theatre Federation (now known as Theatre New Zealand) website listed nearly 100 groups who were members of the body and 59 individual theatre societies. If the average society or group has fifty members, then around 5000 people are actively involved in producing theatre, as a hobby, throughout New Zealand.

The 36 interviewees were drawn from six amateur societies. All were provided with a written outline of the project and were asked to sign a consent form for the interview, and for that interview to be recorded on tape. They were all in agreement with these conditions. Participants were also asked to indicate whether or not they wished to remain anonymous. While no interviewee so elected, and though these conversations are not confidential, the decision has been made to refer to interviewees by code letter only, except in the case of two respondents who hold, or have held, an official position with the Theatre New Zealand.

The research used the method of semi-structured interviews which were recorded over a four-month period. Participants were asked about the length of their involvement, the aspect of theatre they participated in, if their involvement enhanced their lives (and if so, how), their experience of acting or directing or other activities, and whether or not they would recommend amateur theatre to other people (and if so, why). Only two of the unnamed respondents had formal or theoretical training in performance. The answers to initial questions led to other questions, and interviewees were encouraged to delve deeply into their personal experience of what theatre did for them.

Thirty of the 36 people interviewed for this project had acting experience, and it is the material from the section of the study that focused on the experience of stepping outside oneself and becoming a character, which is being considered in this paper.

COPYING AND THE AFFECTIVE CAPACITY

Actors in this study were asked, “what does acting do for your life?” While the responses from the interviewees listed a range of gains including friendship, and having a valuable leisure activity, the response that is being discussed in this paper is the one articulated by Respondent C, who says that people acting on stage are,

learning about the freedom to be […] other than themselves, so that they are now a character, they don't have be [themselves] any more, they can be this new person and this new person isn't going to be judged. And I think that gives them security and freedom.

A key to this process of creating a character is the ability to discern that there is a relationship between the self and the ‘other’ which is the character. This is the process that Respondent C describes. This ability to become someone else, the new person of the character, uses the affective capability of people. This capability can be linked to the naturalist intelligence, and this is the intelligence that Barbiero (2011) makes the basis of affective ecology.

Although the practitioners of amateur theatre may not discuss this process in such theoretical terms they nevertheless have a clear awareness of it as Respondent D illustrates; “you know […] the minute you step out of the wings and onto the
stage you’re not yourself, you’re somebody else, you’re in a completely different setting and you’ve got to relay that to everybody.” This requires a conscious attention, and like fascination with the natural world, this alternative reality is able to affect the actor on a deep psychological level. This is because theatre offers more than one view of an event making it, as Bruce Wilshire writes, “both playful and serious, and [...] while in one sense it is deceitful, in another it can be truthful” (1982, p.3).

It has been theorised that the ability to copy and create representations, which is the core component of acting, began with rituals designed to achieve success in hunting (Turner 1982, 1990; Schechner 1985, 1990). It may well have been that the first ‘characters’ created by humans were the animals they hunted. Augusto Boal, drawing on this idea of characterisation in ritual, links the development of theatre to human awareness of the natural world. The first step is the development of self-awareness:

> When a man hunts a bison, he sees himself in the act of hunting; [...] he has invented theatre: he has seen himself in the act of seeing (Boal 2000, p.14)

The ability to see “in the act of seeing” gives a perspective to what were previously innate actions – the acts of obtaining food. This awareness is, suggests Boal, a strictly human ability which allows people to reflect on their actions and to repeat them in a different context. Thus the reproduced action, the facsimile of the everyday event becomes a theatrical performance. It is in this context of conscious reproduction and reflection that “theatre is a vocation for all human beings: it is the true nature of humanity” (Boal 2000, p.14).

Thus, while the link between theatre and the natural world may no longer be as obvious as Boal suggests it is in early performance, the intrinsic impulse to copy and create continues to employ the naturalist intelligence. Gardner has observed that naturalist intelligence is also applied outside the natural world. Even while it provides the ability to discriminate, it also creates the ability to bond with the natural world and thus is the intelligence that most directly relates to that beyond the self. It is possible that the instinct to double, to make a copy, is triggered by a form of emotional response similar to the intelligence which provides a positive relationship to the natural world, thereby making theatre the true nature of humanity, because it employs the naturalist intelligence in order to make a copy of what was previously an unobserved action. In addition, such a connection as that between food gathering and performance links people directly to the natural world.

Writing of the deep-seated desire that human beings have to ‘become someone else’, Taussig (1993) suggests that the ability to imitate – the mimetic faculty – enables people to step outside their immediate experience (p.255) into other realities. Bruce Wilshire states that the purpose of theatre is to manifest what is hidden, and so it assists people to come to truly know themselves (1982, p.204). This mimetic faculty or manifestation of the hidden, notes Respondent E, “is something that’s inherent to our basic makeup”, and is something that children do instinctively:

> Children from a very young age play dress up. Little girls always have a dress up box, little boys have [...] cowboy outfits, Spiderman suits. They put those on and they don’t pretend to be cowboys, or Spiderman, they are that character. And you have to talk to them in that character while they’re dressed that way. They take the gear off and they’re back to being who they were before.

Many amateur actors are aware that the process of ‘becoming someone else’ is a gestalt occurrence through which they can experience the instantaneous transformation and understanding that Respondent C calls “the freedom to be ... other than themselves”. Respondent C stresses that the freedom to be “this new person [...] gives them security and freedom”. It is the freedom to experience new relationships, new ideas and new ways of being in the world. As Respondent E puts it, “if we feel like being somebody who says things that they really mean, but can’t do it in case it offends somebody, if the character we’re playing does that sort of thing, we can get that out”.

106
These moments of ‘seeing’, and creating a person who has an alternative perspective, produces the affective moments of connection in performance.

For the participants, amateur theatre is a very positive experience. For Respondent F, “it was just fun really. [...] just to become another character, to become somebody else who isn’t you”. Respondent F’s assessment of acting in amateur theatre as a fun and positive experience is echoed by Respondent B, who says, “it gives you a chance to take yourself literally out of yourself”. The experiences of becoming someone else, of doubling and ‘stepping into’ another person has the value of self determination, says Respondent A, for it gives the participant the “freedom to be someone other than who you are”. For Respondent G, the experience is so valuable that they want to share it with a friend who is unfamiliar with theatre:

I [...] spent most of my time in the bed, with an ear trumpet. And I used to have the run-ins with René; I wondered how an old person reacted to someone you didn’t like so you forget that you’re you, and you’ve gotta be that person. And I enjoyed doing that because it wasn’t me and I thought, God, it’s like a Jekyll and Hyde [Laugh].

This is not Respondent H’s image of their everyday self, yet as well as exposing a ‘type of humanity’ on the stage, the part allows them to express an aspect of that self, possibly the ‘Hyde’, which may normally be repressed. Respondent E puts it more bluntly: “we can’t throw tantrums [in everyday life], but if we’re playing a character who throws tantrums, we can bring out how we feel when we’d like to throw one”. Wilshire observes that “we must make a distinction between the actor as artist and actor as character” (1982, p.xv). Creating a character involves using memories, imaginings and previously observed behaviours to create a presence, which is not the everyday ‘I’. It can be suggested that the process of creating a character, of stepping outside of the everyday self, utilises natural intelligence, for according to Gardner (1999) that is the intelligence which allows humans to relate beyond the self. This ability to create an external relationship also allows human beings to draw on “empty intentions” (Sokolowski 2000 p. 33), the emotional aspects of their own memories and imaginings, to create a bond between firstly the actor and the character, and subsequently between actor and audience For example, Respondent H spent time in the army, an experience they were able to bring to their performance character:
with this play, this *Chunuk Bair*, we’re soldiers in a difficult situation, odds are against you and so on and so forth, but you want your audience to be able to go ‘well yeah that’s’ [...] a real life scenario.’

Taussig (1993, p.xiii) notes that creating copies gives human beings the ability to gain control over mysterious or threatening aspects of life, and Respondent A, considering the emotional power of accessing the dark places of their own psyche, observes that; “sometimes it’s scary in that you frighten yourself.” This expression of intense emotion may be particular to amateur actors who have not had the formal training of the professional, and so are less able to distance the emotional response of their acting self from their everyday self. It is certainly a venture into otherness for them. If such a journey does achieve the clarification of self that Wilshire proposes, it may make both performers and audience more open to themselves, to who they are, and to others.

How do actors experience the change in themselves when they ‘become’ somebody else? The amateur theatre practitioners who were asked about their experience of being a character have had little formal acting training and scant exposure to performance theorists, and yet the responses reveal knowledge of a deep emotional connection with the dual nature of embodiment. For Respondent I, the important aspect of performance was the chance to step out of the everyday: “You’re in another world really. Just in another world”. The heightened experience of being on stage creates an alternative reality which is compelling. For Respondent I,

You never get sick of it [...] I just used to wait for each and every [performance]; you know it was always disappointing when the show ended at the end of the season.

More importantly for these performers, the truthful nature of theatre is often experienced in the revelations that it brings to them about themselves. Respondent J describes the “changes in perception that can take place through engaging with acting”:

I really like getting into the psyche of a character and working with other actors [...] It makes me think about what I’m doing and think about what would this person do and how would this person act? [...] Also you start thinking about the other actors as well, and you become a lot less selfish I think as an actor [...] you can really actually get involved with each other because you’re actually thinking about the other person and how they are going to react.

Respondent J then reflects on the personal changes that can take place in their own acting:

I think you become a much more truthful actor because that’s what life’s really like isn’t it. When you’re talking to somebody you’re [... thinking], what are they thinking, how are they reacting, what are they going to say next? And that’s what you need to be doing when you’re acting because [...] it becomes truthful.

This sense of ‘truthfulness’ relates to an emotional connection between actors themselves, and with the audience. In his study of the development of what he terms a “fascination” with or “involuntary attention” to nature, Barbiero describes a series of experiments with children in which what he terms “active silence (mindfulness meditation)” and play were combined to regenerate “directed attention” (pp.13-14).

Play, in the broadest sense of the word, has important psychic functions. Wilshire suggests that acting, another form of play, may be an essential part of our learning process, for “we grasp what actually is only after we have imaged what it might be” (1982, p.5). Play, observes Respondent E, is part of the process of developing skills of coping with situations that we will later encounter ‘for real’:

we draw on it when we're in a social situation, or a work situation where we're uncomfortable. We reach in and pull out one of those alter egos to cope with the situation [...] You may need to assert yourself, but do it in a kind and polite manner and, because you've developed different skills for projecting how you're feeling, you
can do that more effectively in your general life.

Though the actor creating the character is not the character, the experience of the character is nonetheless emotionally charged for the everyday self of the actor. Thus, through their presence in and connection with the scene, the everyday self and body of the actor can be affected by the emotion of the scene, for as Peta Tait writes, “emotions are experienced through the body,” (2002, p.171). Therefore, the bodily experience of acting can produce a bodily response in the actor that is similar to experiencing a real emotion, and this bodily effect of the emotion can be transmitted to others. Respondent A recalls such an event:

I remember there was one play that I did called *Exorcism*. [M] was playing opposite me […] and I had to scream at her, and with her pupils dilating […] the power of that transition became quite real, and that was quite scary.

Maxine Sheets-Johnson (2009) observes that we recognise another’s emotional state – she instances fear – “on the basis of our own kinetic/tactile-kinesthetic bodily experiences” (p.212). This occurs because the movements of those people who are experiencing an emotion, however minute, elicit a corresponding kinetic response in those witnessing the expression of that emotion. It is this recognition of the emotion of another which is harnessed in performance. Respondent A also speculates that the intense emotion that they experienced on the stage may be similar to the emotion occurring in a member of the audience observing the scene for the first time.

When I saw her reaction […] which I hadn’t seen before. It created quite an effect because […] it wasn’t an acted reaction, or a rehearsed reaction […] the audience would experience that, that same emotion I guess.

Respondent G, who has not studied either Sheets-Johnson or Barbiero, realises the power of this emotional intersection between performer and audience, seeing it as a place of exploration: “[You’ve got] to be at liberty to experiment [with] the characters. You want to be able to play your character in a way that’s gonna let the audience in.” For Respondent G, the importance lies in the moment “when you’re playing it close to your chest; that’s when you can experiment” with how to develop the character. What Respondent G calls playing it “close to your chest” may equate with what other actors might call ‘being real’ or ‘being present in the moment’. What they describe is the complex duality of experience in creating the emotional nature of the scene for the character and for the audience, while their ‘everyday self’ intellectually chooses the best way to make the scene seem real.

Most of the amateur actors interviewed gave spontaneous responses about the nature of acting, from personal experience, rather than drawing on formal training. They did not frame a complex argument about their duality on the stage, but rather produced an intuitive understanding that they simultaneously occupy two positions at once. Not all of the respondents were aware of the depth of their experience, calling acting ‘dressing up’, but even though some people spoke only of the surface aspect of ‘becoming’ somebody other than themselves, they were still transformed by the experience.

Oh it was fabulous because it was dressing up. I was getting out of my comfort zone […] wearing and things that I thought that I’d never ever wear. (Respondent H)

Although Respondent H’s focus is on the costume, they are still aware of a more fundamental shift, for in moving from their everyday attire to the theatrical clothes they are expanding their view of their world. For many of the actors, the empowerment was in the moment of stepping out of the darkness backstage into the lights and connecting with the audience. The audience response is particularly important to Respondent K:

Oh I love being on stage; I really get a kick out of it. […] I think it’s the feeling of teamwork, the fun, […] the buzz of being on stage. I suppose it’s a bit of an adrenaline rush in a way. It’s that contact with a live audience that you get.
These actors recognise the importance of this feeling of ‘rush’ or ‘buzz’. Part of the phenomenon called ‘flow’, it gives a person a feeling of energised focus, full involvement, and enjoyment. Named by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1975), the state of flow is characterised by the complete absorption in what one does, resulting in the loss of one’s sense of space and time. Respondent H believes that this state of total absorption can come from the act of performing itself. Being on stage gives them:

extreme calm, so calm. [...] Once you get on stage and you know there’s a reasonable audience, you’re prepared, and you know what you’ve gotta do [...] you’re just relaxed [...]. That’s where I like being as much as possible, that’s where it feels good.

It is also possible to experience a sense of flow from the knowledge that the audience are enjoying the performance. This can make the performer feel socially useful:

I just, you know I guess I feel joyous (laugh). I like making people happy and entertaining them. (Respondent L)

This affective aspect of flow can produce a peak experience. This is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “a momentary awareness of joy or fulfilment, akin to ecstasy and of a higher and different quality from ordinary experience”. It can take some performers beyond thrill and calm to the quality of a mystical experience, and for several respondents playing an ‘other’ was a deep encounter. When they spoke about it, they recounted a deep level experience of ‘being someone else’, while being at the same time themselves. It is this relationship with the affective that links performance with affective ecology. Performance can allow people and societies to know themselves more deeply and in so doing, become more open to connecting with the natural world:

You have to kind of leave yourself and kind of go into a whole different space. It's very strange. It's almost spiritual. It's completely coming out of yourself, and thinking about things that are completely different. It's very strange, I don't know quite how to describe it. (Respondent J)

As Wilshire observes, “[t]he [total] result of theatre is discovery, and we come home to ourselves as we believe we are: beings of inexhaustible particularity as well as indefinitely extendable horizons of human concern and identification” (1982, p.10) and for many of those involved, amateur theatre acting opens up the world, leading to self-discovery:

Its only when I stepped into those rehearsals and things, that this world's open for me. That's what I'm really sort of grateful for and so I try and do my best and work hard, and that's how I show my gratitude. (Respondent G)

While this peak experience is key to the emotional involvement of both actors and audience, Ian Maxwell, Mark Seton and Marianna Zabó (2018) note in their paper on the precarious lives of professional actors that “being an actor itself entails [...] a precariousness not simply of identity, but a gamble, in which the actor invests themselves in what is all too often a high-risk, low-return vocation” (p.151). This leads to “intense distress, self-doubt, loss of motivation, and, in extreme cases, clinical depression and other diagnoses” (p.173). This distinction in experience is profound. While both professional and amateur actors are engaging in the process of ‘becoming someone else’, the source of the satisfaction experienced by amateur actors seems to lie in the freedom they have to choose to participate, and to choose which performances they will act in, most obviously because they do not rely on their theatre work to provide them with a living. They also have the important freedom to ‘become somebody else’, and to act on the stage to the best of their ability, without the risk of professional failure if their performance receives negative reviews. This is not to say that actors in amateur theatre are not self-critical or unaware of the seriousness of what they are doing, but to note that however central to their life and their sense of self performance is, it is one of many aspects, and this gives them the greater freedom to experiment with it.

CONCLUSION
The idea that drama and nature are linked is not new. Arthur Symons (1905) summarises Richard Wagner’s (1851) idea about the essence of drama and its close relationship to nature. Wagner thought, writes Symonds, that drama is:

a condensation into one action of the image of all man’s energy together with his recognition of his own mood in nature, nature apprehended, not in parts by the understanding, but as a whole by the feeling. (Symonds 1905, 1968 p.300) (My emphases).

Raymond Williams (1961) wrote that art is “literally a way of seeing new things and new relationships” (p.24), and as one of the arts that makes us human, performance offers a complex connection between people and the wider world. Theatre allows people to create representations of things that can be seen and heard, and things that are thought or felt – what phenomenology calls “empty intentions” (Sokolowski 2000 p.33) – and in so doing, creates the opportunity to change people’s perspectives.

Considering both the impulse to double and the ability to make connections to the natural, it is possible to see that both stem from the naturalist intelligence and are affective in origin. In that sense, the desire to double and biophilia – the love of the natural world – are connected. The bonding that occurs in the affective response to nature and the understanding that one is ‘someone else’ are both moments of gestalt understanding. The experience of ‘becoming someone else’, while still being oneself, copies ‘reality’ and at the same time uses “the real in its realest form: man, his language, his rooms and cities, his weapons and tools, his other art” (States 1985, p.123).

Both theatrical performance and being ecologically responsive to the world alter the way that people see the world, thereby allowing them to connect to their environment in new ways. As Lewis Mumford (1964, 1970) writes, “All thinking worthy of the name now must be ecological in the sense of appreciating and utilizing organic complexity,” and he adds that we must adapt “every kind of change to the requirements not of man alone, or of any single generation, but of all his organic partners and every part of his habitat” (p.393).

REFERENCES


Oxford Dictionary Online https://www.lexico.com/definition/peak_experience

PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL

Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.


PRESENT IN PLACE: LIVELY POTENTIALS OF SITE-RESPONSIVE PERFORMANCE IN AN ERA OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Gretel Taylor

ABSTRACT

Following political theorist Jane Bennett’s advocation to impel more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption via “more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things” (2010), performance practices might aim to facilitate such ‘lively’ engagements. Drawing upon the practice of Body Weather, author Gretel Taylor’s site-responsive performance works, and dance and performance practices more broadly, this paper discusses how such practices might offer insights at this crucial time for human action to mitigate the effects of global warming. The paper explores how the performative activation of places and (re-)sensitising of audience/participants to their surrounding environments can decenter the role of performer and offer audience members opportunities to have subjective phenomenological and aesthetic experiences of place (both urban and ‘natural’), which are rare for many people in today’s world. Acknowledging the Australian (post-)colonial context as an already dense and uncanny space to perform with/in, the paper proposes moving beyond questions of ‘whose place is it?’ to the urgency of ‘who is responsible for it now and into the future?’ through performance’s potential to propel us – via engaged presence in place – towards collective responsibility.

Keywords: Site-specific Performance; Dance; Global Warming; Climate Change; Body Weather; Colonisation; Responsibility

At a moment in history when Australians have re-elected a government whose leader jovially brought a lump of coal into parliament and spruiked its virtues, and current scientific modelling indicates a likelihood of global warming reaching a catastrophic five or six degrees by 2100 if humanity continues with ‘business as usual’ (Marvel 2019), what is the use of a practice of site-specific dance? How might the embodied philosophy of the Japanese-originated practice of ‘Body Weather’ be reconsidered in an era of increasingly frequent ‘extreme weather’ events? What can performance offer in the face of now almost-inevitable catastrophic environmental change, which our governments and their constituents continue to willfully ignore? The answer to all of these questions is, of course: too little, too late, to too few people who might give a damn. But performance communities, like any thinking communities, cannot give up and bury our heads in the sand. We need to galvanise our resources, and harness our knowledges and capacities.

I am reminded of dance scholar Ann Cooper Allbright, who – in the aftermath of the September 11 attack on New York City – found value in somatic practice at a time of crisis: “[I]n the midst of our rude awakening to the meaning of global antagonism, and a subsequent re-evaluation of national priorities, I still believe that the practice of opening one’s physical and psychic being to the unknown can be both personally useful and politically profound” (Cooper Allbright 2004, p.3). Cooper Allbright describes how, on the day after the attacks on the Twin Towers, she took an improvisation class out into Tappan Square and they performed a simple series of movements: “we sink to the ground, roll and then rise up into a standing position, playing with the soft balance..."
of muscles and bones that makes maintaining a most simple position into an intricate dance” (2004, p.4).

Cooper Allbright’s approach to the shock of destruction by terrorism can be applied similarly to the situation of environmental change that we are now becoming conscious of, not through a singular event like 9/11, but through the creeping realisation via scientific observations, predictions and the increase in extreme weather events globally. The shock is not so sudden, but nonetheless amounts to a reality deeply devastating for us all. Scholars and practitioners from all disciplinary areas need to focus their specific skills and capacities on aspects of this global crisis. Performance and Dance Studies alone cannot save us, but they might offer some different perspectives. Cooper Allbright justifies bringing her dance practice into a space of large-scale catastrophe as follows: “Because improvisation leads us to imagine other ways of being-with-one-another-in-the-world. Because improvisation is one of the few experiences which cultivates a self open to possibility. Because improvisation can teach us how to dwell in our bodies and live in an unpredictable world” (p.3).

This paper will discuss how dance and performance practices, particularly those that relate to environments/sites/places, might offer insights at this poignant, teetering moment for humanity and the planet we live on and are part of. I suggest that these practices have the potential to open up questions and connections between sensory perception, care, behaviour, access and responsibility. Following Jane Bennett’s advocation for “more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things” (2010) to impel more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption, I propose that site-specific performance practices might aim to facilitate such ‘lively’ engagements. Becoming more consciously present in our places offers a starting point to locate ourselves – our bodies – with the matter that is crucially in flux.

A PRACTICE OF AFFECT BY PLACE

During my PhD, I evolved an improvisational practice in relation to place that I called ‘locating’ (2009). Today I think of it also as kinaesthetic empathy with place. We all have embodied responses to our surrounding world. When we look at a waterfall, we feel something: our ribcages may soften and perhaps the falling watery action has an effect of making our skin feel like melting in a kind of reflective echo. When witnessing a vast expansive landscape, we unconsciously broaden our gaze and shoulders to mimic its openness, and when we look up at tall trees, we feel lifted through our spines, becoming a bit taller ourselves. I have developed this embodied empathy or relationship with place and made it my dance practice.

As well as this mainly solo locating, empathetic body-place practice, I am a core member of a Melbourne-based group called Environmental Performance Authority (which cheekily shares the acronym EPA with the Environmental Protection Agency). Formed in 2013, the EPA brings together dancers and other artists and academics with an interest in place, site-specificity and ecological performance. We have created many site-specific works around Melbourne’s central city, suburbs and outer regions, responding to sites that interest us for various reasons: ecological, historical, social, aesthetic and conceptual. EPA have developed a genre of walking performance, which combines elements of experiential workshop, guided walking tour and site-specific performance. In the latter section of this paper I describe several of my own and EPA’s works to exemplify some aspects of our current site-responsive practices elucidated here.

My approach, and that of EPA, to site-based performance employs archival research, local knowledge and stories of place, as well as an embodied research methodology drawing strongly from practices of Body Weather. Body Weather was conceived by Japanese dancer Min Tanaka in the 1970s and 1980s. Tanaka’s philosophy and physical training engages in rigorous investigation of the body in relation to its environment. The part of Body Weather practice that most directly relates to place is an open-ended investigation and development of sensory perception, which heightens the body/mind’s awareness to its affective experience. We note our bodies’ affects by place through embodied
research processes; subjective observations of this place generate a repertoire of embodied material, or a site-specific “dictionary of atmospheres”.¹

Examples of Body Weather sensory training include blindfolded explorations to observe haptic sensations; a partner giving stimulations of varied pressure and direction to body parts to emulate the wind’s influence upon the body; and reducing the pace of movement to one millimetre per second in the practice of bisoku. These activities radically shift one’s perception of one’s surroundings. The intense engagement required to maintain the extremely slow pace in bisoku seems to bring us deeply into a co-presence with the place. Slowing down to this extreme, with this disciplined self-awareness, brings us into a hyper-present state, whereby we might notice such minute movements as ants walking in a line down a tree trunk, the flicker of wind in grass, even a flower’s bud slightly opening to reveal its petals.

Min Tanaka once asked the workshop group I was part of to ‘explore the sensations’ atop a snow-covered mountain, blindfolded for an hour. Tactile engagement with features of the surrounding environment without the usual dominance of sight over that period of time produced a deeply felt immersion in place. A practice called ‘bag of bones’ involves giving over the weight of one’s body to the other practitioners, who move the recipient in ways which may be beneficial for enabling subtle muscular release, as well as experimenting with being supported on angles and orientations to the space that would be difficult or impossible to achieve on one’s own. When practising this ‘bag of bones’ activity in outdoor environments, the recipient’s body becomes consciously relational with the surrounding features – leaning into, dragging across, brushing over, surfaces of varied textures and temperatures. The effect of these Body Weather tasks is to experience one’s body and surroundings in detailed and unfamiliar ways. Such qualities and observations compose evocative aesthetic and kinesthetic experiences for our audiences. Choreography crafted from the surroundings invites their attention to these qualities of the place.

**BODIES AND WEATHER**

Although he did not explicitly deal with climate change in his 2002 thesis on Body Weather practice in Australia, Melbourne-based theatre academic/practitioner Peter Snow proposed that both weather and bodies are characterised by change. He described weather as a system of unpredictable yet cyclic forces that course through the world and through bodies. Weather, in Peter Snow’s expansive interpretation, is “all pervading and omnipresent”; tending “toward the sacred, that which is beyond and yet which concerns us all” (Snow 2002, p.109).

Relating these notions of weather to the physical training of Body Weather, Snow quotes a characteristically ambiguous statement by Min Tanaka: “Body Weather diagram does not have solid lines but dotted lines with continuous lines in and out” (Snow 2002, p.110). Tanaka may be suggesting a fluidity between interiority and exteriority – that the borders of the body are not fixed, but permeable or mutable. He could also be referring to the changeability of Body Weather training itself – that its tasks and methods, like the weather, are ever in process, adapting.

In the context of climate change, I find the sensitising tasks derived from Body Weather that research the relationship of our human bodies to our surrounding landscapes and atmospheres to be more poignant than ever. The malleability of the tasks themselves – and Tanaka’s philosophy, which refuses to become formed, but rather is always opening out new questions – suits this environment, which is in flux in new ways. In rendering similarity between bodies, weather and place, the practice aligns with anti-anthropocentric philosophies: that the human is not the centre of the world, nor is she separate from the world, but that her body, the physical features of place and the cosmos are all interrelated and of similar substance. Body Weather explores the interstices between these elements and attempts to dissolve our rigidly construed bodily boundaries.

The notion of permeability suggests seepage

¹ A term borrowed from Body Weather practitioner Tess de Quincey.
between my body and the world that surrounds it, a softening of the margins, acknowledging the body’s role as a “threshold between the social and the natural”, as feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz noted (1994). The fluid interrelation between the body and its surrounds that this notion encourages aligns with monistic views of material being – from Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘flesh’ to Spinoza’s ‘conative bodies’, to the vibrant materialism explicated by Jane Bennett. Bennett theorises “a vital materiality that runs through and across bodies, both human and non-human” (2010). Bennett’s materialism repositions humans in amongst the other ‘things’ of the world, recognising that agency is not solely the province of humans. Apprehending the world through highly sensitised bodies, Body Weather practitioners perceive ‘things’, both animate and inanimate, as vibrant, vital. From a body that has consciously permeable borders to that which surrounds it, our perceived separateness from the ‘things’ of the world softens and is replaced by a sense of similarity of substance.

ENCOUNTERING THE UNCANNY

Freud used the German word ‘unheimlich’ to define the uncanny as the unfamiliar, strange, inaccessible, unhomely – the opposite of ‘heimlich’, meaning home, familiar, accessible place. It is specifically the combined presence of familiar and unfamiliar that generates the anxiety of uncanny; the way one seems to inhabit the other.

Whilst Freud was referring to the uncanny sense of place in war-torn Europe in 1919, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs in Uncanny Australia apply his notion to postcolonial Australia and their identification of the White experience. Since the 1992 Mabo precedent and 1993 Native Title Act overturned the notion of terra nullius, the colonial assumption of governing right (Ghassan Hage 1998, p.17), of entitlement to land and blindness to the presence of Aboriginal people, is gradually becoming de-institutionalised (Gelder & Jacobs 1998, p.24). The implications of violence, dispossession and genocide are inescapable when facing this history of colonisation, which is not easy to bear and exacerbates white Australians’ sense of disjunction from place. As I have written about elsewhere, this dislocation manifests in our bodies and in our relationships to the environment. The increasingly culturally diverse population of Australia has further complexified the picture, even unsettling Anglo Australians’ demographic majority. The Australian (post-)colonial context is an already dense and uncanny space to live and perform with/in. Now, reluctantly, the changing climate is unsettling any firm ideas anyone may still have harboured about this country and our relationships to it.

At this tipping point in environmental history, humans globally are grasping at the memory of our familiar physical world, and grappling with the unfamiliar instability of its climatic systems. Bruno Latour has elucidated that the ‘land of old’ we long to return to is no longer there (2016). Like the ‘uncanny valley’ effect usually discussed in relation to human-like robots or dolls, we can barely even look at the scale of impending ecological disaster and its ensuing social, political and economic issues, although it is encroaching from all angles. Like the colonial ‘unsettledness’, a degree of guilt is implied (particularly for the so-called ‘Baby Boomers’ generation) and adds horror to this bombshell, in the knowledge that humans have caused this gross imbalance. It gives us such a vertiginous sense of unease that it is easier to deny, repress or minimise our knowledge of it. Our nostalgic longing for the past pre-climate change world is so extreme that there is a reluctance to accept imminent realities, such as new projections through Climate Central’s satellite cartographic study, whereby much of Earth’s land mass, including highly populated areas and major cities of the world, will be erased by sea level rise by 2050 (with a conservative two degrees of warming), resulting in 150 million displaced people (Climate Central 2019).

When the landscapes we knew are ripped apart by storms, hurricanes, earthquakes, burnt to become unrecognisable or disappear underwater, how do these sudden dramatic changes affect our bodies (provided we survive the extreme event), or the
bodies of those who inhabit the affected places? As well as attending to basic means of survival and physical recovery, responses might include shock and trauma, which have psychological and physical repercussions for individuals and collectives. A common response to traumatic situations of major change is the tendency to detach; to disassociate from our bodies and become literally numb to our situation.

Research into the sensory experience of asylum seekers and immigrants on arrival in Australia has found many examples of the depreciation of sensory perception. The loss of family, community and home coupled with the shock of foreign terrain, where the world of everyday life is incomprehensible on multiple levels, paralyses some people to the point of literal desensitisation. Some refugees reported skin numbness, an inability to taste food, muteness, anxiety, vertigo, agoraphobia, and reduced bodily orientation, haptic and proprioceptive senses. Researcher Mandy Thomas explained these responses as a psychological evasion of experiencing their new unfamiliar world. She emphasised that the body is often the site of “disjuncture between the known and the unknown […] Living in another country may be an uncanny experience, which can shatter one’s spatial world” (Thomas 2010).

Living in an age of changing climate could be compared to this kind of uncanny experience whereby the known place may literally become a different place.

TOWARDS PRESENCE IN PLACE

As well as opening new coal mines, our reappointed right-wing government has also effectively taken off the table the possibility of any meaningful acknowledgement of indigenous sovereignty and the institutionalisation of an indigenous political voice, as requested in the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017). This Statement also sought a Makarrata: “the coming together after a struggle [that] captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination” (The Uluru Statement 2017). In the light of the climate crisis, these words also ring true. We urgently need to come together and change our behaviours to mitigate the catastrophe for our children, future generations of humans, and all lifeforms on Earth. Although successive governments have failed to appropriately acknowledge sovereignty or indeed improve the current situations of Aboriginal incarceration, health, and education, the last couple of decades have seen gradual shifts in Australia’s sense of itself to incorporate indigenous presence and history. Performance in many forms has been instrumental to this cultural shift, from Welcome to Country ceremonies at official events to the phenomenal Tanderrum annual public dance gathering of the tribes of the Kulin Nation at Federation Square, the immense contribution of Bangarra Dance Theatre, and popularity of musicians such as Archie Roach, Gurrumul and Jessica Mauboy, to name but a few. Bruce Pascoe’s 2014 publication of Dark Emu, compiling carefully researched accounts from early colonists, has catalysed recent reappraisals of how we perceive pre-colonial land management and agriculture, transforming profoundly the prior generally accepted view of Aboriginal Australians as hunter-gatherers. Indigenous knowledge of sustainable environmental practice offers much to discussions about how to reorganise land use and food production, as well as listening and responding with sensitivity to ecological patterns.

In a recent lecture, humanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2019) calls for a broader perspective than that of climate change or the Anthropocene, and reminds us that ‘human’ is not a neutral term. She notes, “‘Human’ indexes access to rights, entitlement to visibility, to credibility”. As such, Braidotti continues, “the human has to be situated very carefully: which human, where, in which context?”, because “entire categories of inhabitants of this Earth never qualified as human”, listing examples such as women, the gender diverse, and people of colour.

The politics of location espoused by Braidotti correlates to my acknowledgement of, and attention, to the particularity and privileged and loaded position of my whiteness in seeking to redress its normativity in many of my performance works. My locating dance in relation to Australian places problematises my
presence, referencing colonial violence as a cause of disjuncture between my body and place, whilst simultaneously longing to belong.

In recent years there has been some mainstream groundswell, and in spite of the lack of governmental reforms, many Australians are coming to new assumed understandings and moving beyond questions of ‘whose place is it?’ (of course, it is ancient indigenous Country that was forcibly invaded by Europeans and is now occupied by many cultural groups from across the world), to asking: ‘who is responsible for it now and into the future?’ (All of us).

I have barely touched upon cultural complexities which deserve more space than I have here, but can merely point out that becoming present in place in Australia requires these considerations and, I would argue, a certain embodied integration of these awarenesses. In any performance about place in Australia, I attempt to include indigenous people by inviting them to represent themselves in person if possible, and otherwise by consulting with them in the process and acknowledging them in the performance. They were also, of course, the first site-specific dance artists.

The story of place in Australia, already thickly complicated by the repressed history of colonisation, is now further thickened by climate change. Whilst part of survival in extreme weather events may encompass temporary sensory repression, at this stage we cannot afford to close over our senses, to become numb or mute. Those of us who are able (for I also acknowledge my privilege in having physical, social and cultural access to such choices) need to learn to encounter that which we do not wish to see, feel or know because it is profoundly unsettling. We need to be able to engage with contradiction – to translocate between the familiar world and that which is newly unpredictable. Body Weather and other site-specific dance and performance practices now take on a new potential. There is an urgent need to find ways to inhabit the uncanny new world of global warming.

Performing site-based work in urban or suburban environments, the pedestrians and usual users of the place become incidental audience members or even incidental performers. When we work in outer suburban and regional areas, audiences often also include curious local people who do not usually frequent contemporary performance, nor necessarily share the same eco-political worldviews as inner city art-viewers. Not being regular ‘trained’ performance attendees, passers by and local residents can have the most interesting audience responses, and expand the impact of our artistic and eco-political aims beyond ‘preaching to the converted’.

SITES OF PERFORMANCE
In 2015, EPA took audiences on a two-hour guided walking performance, *Distal Fragments*, through coastal parkland at Altona, an under-appreciated area west of Melbourne, Victoria. Welcomed and introduced to Bunurung Country by indigenous elder and custodian N’arweet Carolyn Briggs, audiences were then led by performers through landscapes of creek, estuary, wetlands, salt pans, sandy sclerophyll forest and down a grassy hillside. Performers placed our bodies in aesthetic as well as kinesthetic relation to these landscapes, to draw attention to certain features such as the contour of a large rock, or evoking an abject response by legs emerging out of slimy green mud, or mimicking the calls of local existing and extinct birds. Comic scenes alluded to human practices within this parkland: a dysfunctional family banged percussively with found objects on a dumped car wreck to try to restart the car. Audiences encountered a leaf-covered body in a ditch and a horizon demarcated by a line of pink-caped figures. In one scene, performers shed our plastic rain ponchos to be swept into the dunes by the wind, and audience members scrambled to grab the plastic in an almost involuntary impulse of agency and ecological responsibility (we had stationed assistants to catch the ponchos before they got subsumed by the environment, but they were hidden from view).

As part of (during or after) EPA’s performances, we facilitate discussions with audiences about local and global ecological phenomena, and the role of art and performance in activating awareness, which audience members of all ages have been very engaged in. From their responses we realise that just being there, in a place, paying attention to a performance that draws out aspects of the site, seems to ‘do something’. Audience members have the opportunity to have their own subjective, sensory, playful experiences in relation to that place, as reflected in this written response from an audience member for *Distal Fragments*:

> The parts that stood out for me were the creatures emerging from the polluted wetlands, the dirt bike riders, the image of the dancers with pink capes billowing in wind, the disturbance to the peacefullness by the cacophony of bags and squeakers (and the way we could all participate in that and create our own soundscape) and the sounds from the wind sculpture. A strong environmental message, without being zealously polemic.

Unlike the real EPA, the Environmental Performance Authority does not project value judgements on the degrees of ‘naturalness’ of features of a given environment: the disused industrial concrete pylons are ‘fair game’ for us as much as a tree, for example. These new ecologies in states of becoming are revealing and of interest. We dance in and with these sites and these non-human others to explore what we might also be becoming. Through Body Weather training, we also encounter extremes of temperature and textures that might be construed as uncomfortable, without deeming these sensations as positive or negative. We attempt to simply “experience the sensations” (Tanaka 1999). These performance contexts aspire, like Cooper Allbright’s description of improvisation at a time of crisis, to offer “a space in which to change our habitual responses, thereby expanding the possibility of dwelling in the world” (2004, p.5).

Screen-based performance, though less tactile for audiences, can bring them to less-accessible sites as well as offer insights from the dancer’s mobile perspective in relation to the site. In the solo video work *Encroach*, created with photographer Laki Sideris, I responded to an eroded coastal site on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, where dead trees uprooted from the former coastal bushland are strewn along the beach like driftwood, evidencing the rising tide as the sea encroaches upon the land. These poignant effects of climate change evoked a visceral response. The camera followed and framed my movement as I was buffeted, swept and eroded, exploring the elemental forces causing the shoreline to recede. Although I was dancing in relation to this particular beach and these particular eroded cliffs and uprooted trees, by inference audiences might reflect upon the global impact of rising sea levels. According to a major new international climate assessment by NASA and ESA, if warming reaches two degrees Celsius, more than 70 percent of Earth’s coastlines will see sea-level rise greater than 0.66 feet (0.2 meters), resulting in increased coastal flooding, beach erosion, salinisation of
Another recent dance-place-video work with Laki Sideris, *Scourge*, explores the troubled environment around the Murray and Darling Rivers on the border of Victoria and New South Wales, where drought and salinity issues stemming from agricultural exploitation are compounded by the effects of global warming. *Scourge* suggests salinity and other ecological imbalances parallel the other ‘white scourge’ since colonisation, lamenting greed and insensitivity to the ecologies that have sustained millennia. My movement takes on qualities of the arid landscapes, salt lakes and dying rivers that have recently been the site of devastating fish kills. In contrast to my improvisational dance of relating and responding to the environment, I also perform ‘characters’ that reveal human disjunction from our environment and explore the complex faces and attitudes of White Australians to the Country we inhabit: suppressed grief entwined with colonial guilt, and now, of ecocide; continued exploitation; denial; longing to belong; and desperate attachment to and love of ‘our’ Australian landscapes. The video is mainly shot on a GoPro camera, which I sometimes hold or attach to my body as I move, and we have also incorporated use of a drone. This interplay between the close-range and aerial views aims to express human, embodied scale in relation to the vast geographic scale of our ecological impact.

The EP A’s most recent work, *A Blind Date with Blind Creek*, was a walking performance along a suburban creek that had been buried by the Metropolitan Board of Works in the 1950s to make it more manageable and neaten up the area. It is now a grassy ‘green wedge’ strip, and some locals are campaigning to unearth the creek, which would enhance the neighbourhood (and potentially create a greater carbon sink). Performed for secondary school students as well as public art program audiences, *A Blind Date* considered the environment’s past, present and future, as well as this localised environment as a microcosm for broader ecological issues. Senior Wurundjeri custodian Ian Hunter collaborated closely with us, welcoming audiences with a ceremonial bark-smoking as they walked through a underpass beneath the road and were led to a scar tree (evidence of historic indigenous cutting away of the tree’s bark to make a canoe to traverse the once-flowing creek).

Playfully responding to the ‘blind’ aspect of the site – in name and referring to the invisibility of the actual Creek – EPA members facilitated blindfold activities for the audience/participants, including tactile explorations of the fauna, encouraging ‘tuning in’ via senses other than the visual. We also danced as the flowing and ebbing currents of the Creek, yelled ‘Hello!’ into caged drains where the Creek was visible in its subterranean passage, and pointed out the place where there should have been a billabong, playing the calls of the plethora of frog species that had until recently existed there. Ian Hunter led a participatory ‘finale’ whereby he invited the audience/participants to play clapsticks and chant an indigenous song, ‘Ngakan Nah’, meaning “looking here, looking there, looking everywhere”, and pointing out their observations in the surrounding environment.

Drawing attention to the potentials of such local undervalued places, we hope to activate in our audiences an intensified awareness of the multiple layers of place, starting with multi-sensory listening in this moment and expanding to consider the (indigenous, ecologically sustainable) past, and ponder the uncertain future and our roles in that future. This is becoming present in place with a full sense of context.

In apprehending the world through highly sensitised bodies, Body Weather performers perceive the ‘things’ of the sites in which we work as vibrant and vital, and ourselves as affective and responsive in relation to them. We ‘model’, if you like, this sensitivity and porosity to place to our audiences, whilst also stepping back as performers and allowing the audiences to experience the place for themselves. Despite the lag of governments to act to respond to the climate crisis, there is currently a groundswell of human momentum, including among artistic and academic communities, to look at how we can all contribute from our specialised perspectives. The worth of site-responsive performance work in these complex contexts may be to proffer
courage, creativity and inclusion in meeting the unknown as our places become unfamiliar. Such performance might set its goal as to propel us – via engaged presence in place – towards collective responsibility to navigate ways forward.

REFERENCES


Over the last twenty years, the video game industry has become a sizable force on the media landscape. While the global film industry brought in $41 billion at the box office in 2018 (Hughes 2018), the video game industry raked in over three times that amount, at nearly $135 billion (Batchelor 2018). As the industry grows, the video game medium continues to diversify, producing scores of thoughtful and intelligent games that look to engage deeply with contemporary themes and social issues. One such theme is our current ecological crisis. Of course, video games themselves are associated with an unsustainable cycle of digital waste, with e-waste production “on track to reach 120 million tonnes per year by 2050 if current trends continue” (United Nations Environment Programme 2019). Colin Milburn (2018, p.175) describes the so-called ‘green game’ as oxymoronic, as an attempted “mystification of its own material context”. However, despite their clear material effect on the environment, video games are at the same time capable of critically reflecting on environmental concerns and the impending climate crisis. A growing number of games use their core gameplay structures to highlight the relationship between player and virtual environment, with an implicit connection back to the relationship between the player and their real environment. For example, games in the survival genre such as Don’t Starve, Subnautica, or ARK: Survival Evolved, ask the player to scrounge for food and shelter in the wilderness, foregrounding our dependence on the land and our place within wider ecosystems. Alternately, city-building games increasingly incorporate ecological systems. For instance, in Oxygen Not Included, a more recent title from Klei Entertainment (the team behind Don’t Starve), players are asked to manage water treatment, basic agriculture, and air quality, all of which interact with environmental conditions such as temperature, air pressure, and the presence of bacteria. In this article, I explore how the environment is constructed across different video game genres, drawing special attention to the dynamics of control and dominance in the relations between player and virtual world. I begin with the theoretical framework offered by James Newman (2004), which implies that video games as a form are fundamentally tied to patterns of dominance and exploitation. I then draw on the examples of two games, Klei Entertainment’s Don’t Starve (2013) and Plethora
Project's *Block'hood* (2017), to refine Newman's approach and locate a theoretical foundation from which video games may bring the player to engage with environmental themes and ideas. Where Newman sees the experience of play as about developing control and dominance over a given virtual space, I give more weight to the role of the virtual environment in shaping and determining the conditions under which players engage with the game's fictional world. In short, I argue, the virtual worlds of video games are designed spaces. The player is no marauding overlord, bringing wrack and ruin to virtual environments – unless the game allows them to perform in such a way.

Broadly speaking, issues of control and dominance are well-trodden concerns across video game scholarship. For instance, video game theorists regularly draw parallels between video games and different forms of imperialism. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) suggest that “video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire – planetary, militarized hypercapitalism” (p.xxiv). They point to the links between the video game medium and military systems, arguing that video games “originated in the US military-industrial complex, the nuclear-armed core of capital's global domination, to which they remain umbilically connected” (p.xxiv). Many games especially involve a kind of Eurocentric othering, where a white male protagonist guns down hordes of enemies, be they demons, as in *DOOM*, aliens, as in *Halo*, or Arabs, as in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. Really the example of *Modern Warfare* only makes apparent the implicit xenophobia of these other games, which are governed by a ludic structure of 'white self against inhuman other'. In those games, cross-cultural communication and empathy are elided in favour of armed conflict. Demons and aliens function as a symbolic shorthand, nestling alongside recent political efforts to demonise migrant caravans, for instance, or to scaremonger about Muslim communities.

These patterns of control and dominance can also be conceptualised in spatial terms. Players exercise violent control not only over enemy bodies, but over different environments. Newman writes that the plot in a video game is often a superficial framework for a spatial adventure. He sees games as an extended transition from abstract, potential sites for action into colonised sites, which “have been acted upon, explored, colonized” (p.113). This structure applies neatly to games such as *Modern Warfare*, where in order to win the game, players must take ground from their enemies, invading foreign territory or defending that which has been conquered. The levels set in the Middle East only accentuate the themes of colonisation and empire under the auspices of the American military-industrial complex. Even in games that do not revolve around gun violence, the spatial dynamic of colonisation remains. For example, in *SimCity*, each new game opens with a sprawling forested island. Within the structure of the game, the forest is treated as an empty space, rather than an autonomous ecosystem. It is treated as a space of pure potential, an otherwise wasted opportunity to build. By the end of the game, the forest has become a sprawling urban cityscape. It has been acted upon, explored, and colonised. Newman's theory again holds true: the natural forest environment is positioned as potential space, and the urban city as actualised space, space conquered and remade for human purposes. Crucially, the conception of the forest as potential space refuses a more ecological perspective, one that might see the forest as already-actual, with a thriving ecosystem that exists outside and before systems of human capital and colonisation. Newman's concerns clearly do describe the representation of space and the environment in some video games. However, I would suggest that they do not account for all games; on the contrary, some offer meaningful engagements with the environment and with broader ecological themes. By considering two such games, we may develop counter-examples to Newman's argument, and recognise some of the potential avenues by which video games may engage with ecological themes and ideas beyond this destructive colonising impulse.

**COPING MECHANISMS**

The first game under consideration here is Klei Entertainment's *Don't Starve*. Released in 2013, *Don't Starve* is a well-known example of the survival genre, where the player is positioned within...
a series of ecological systems and is expected to survive, despite inhospitable conditions. In contrast to games like *SimCity*, survival games are predicated on the notion that the player does not control their environment. One can learn to live within the environment, and alongside it, under its rules and systems, but the player is not the master. In *Don’t Starve*, for instance, the player must find cover when it rains, or risk a sharp decline in their sanity. Other weather systems further dictate player behaviour. If it gets too hot, the player needs to cool down. When it gets cold during winter, the player needs warmer clothing, or risks frostbite. During a thunderstorm, a bolt of lightning might strike the player’s house or farm and start a fire. Each of these elements can be managed, but that does not mean the player is in control. They cannot stop the rain, or determine the order of the seasons. At best, they can adapt to their environment and develop a series of coping mechanisms to perform according to the constraints of the existing ecosystem.

*Don’t Starve* thus serves as a counterpoint to the earlier examples of *SimCity* or *Modern Warfare*. It illustrates the broad theoretical point that players play or perform within and under the constraints set forth by the game. If a game uses a hunger mechanic, then the player is obliged to eat. If a game asks the player to play as an American soldier killing Arabs in the Middle East, then those are again the constraints of the game. Newman is not wrong, but his theories of spatial adventures, of potential and colonised spaces, need to be contextualised within the wider systems of obligation imposed through ludic structure. One might think of it as a sort of environmental determinism for video games.

Environmental determinism is a geography term that basically refers to the influence of the environment in shaping human societies (Meyer and Guss 2017, p.6). It carries something of a stigma among academic geographers, owing to its most extreme uses, where the environment is fatalistically treated as a singular or overwhelmingly determinative factor in human development. Despite this stigma, geographers William Meyer and Dylan Guss are among those looking to revitalise the term with modest and scientific claims about the influence of a given environment. They see environmental factors as part of a “conjoint construction” between “social and biophysical dimensions” of human life (p.12). For our purposes, we may deploy an adapted form of environmental determinism, and note that in video games, the coded structure of the text does largely determine the way in which players engage with the fictional world. For example, in the 2015 game *Beyond Eyes*, the player is placed in the role of a blind girl looking for her lost cat. Players are only granted a partial view of the fictional world, and even that is always indirect; it is the fictional world as conceptualised or projected by a blind person. During gameplay, much of the screen remains blank until environmental stimuli help the player-character to fill in certain gaps. For example, at one point she hears a bird cheeping slightly above her, so she adds the bird to her mental map of the area. Crucially, the bird only becomes visible to the player under the conditions set forth by the game. The blind girl must hear the bird before it can be visualised. Again: in video games, the player is configured towards and by the environment. An ecological game is therefore one that configures the player towards the virtual environment in such a way as to model or simulate relevant environmental
principles in the real world.

One such environmental principle is that of sustainability, which is explored through the game mechanics of Don’t Starve. In Game Studies, ‘mechanics’ refer to the rules of the game, the systems and procedures that constrain the player. Games often use these mechanics to simulate the function of the human body. For example, Don’t Starve has a health mechanic, a meter that measures health. When that meter reaches zero, the player-character dies, and the game is over. Another related mechanic is hunger, a meter that represents how hungry the player-character is. If the hunger meter reaches zero, the player-character is starving, and will begin to lose health at a rate of one point per second. A typical full health meter starts at 100, meaning that if the player-character starts to starve, they will be dead in less than two minutes. Obviously these simulations of the body are only crude approximations. Hunger and health do not work in these over-simplified ways; we do not die two minutes after missing breakfast. These simulations operate more on the level of metaphor, distorting and exaggerating different aspects of human physiology to make their point. Don’t Starve emphasises the crucial link between food and our continued survival. It reminds us that we are dependent on food, and simulates, albeit in an exaggerated and heavily stylised way, the biological consequences of starvation. It further uses a ludic structure to make the player emotionally invested in the main character’s survival. If the player-character starves, the player loses the game. Competition becomes an emotional springboard, quickly developing player investment in key themes and ideas. In Don’t Starve, the need for food attunes players to the specificities of how food can be developed and sustained, priming them for ideas around sustainable living.

One such priming towards sustainability can be found in the early stages of Don’t Starve. At the start of each new game, the player-character is teleported into a weird and magical world with nothing but the clothes on their back and must scrounge and forage for food. Two of the most immediately accessible food sources are carrots and berries. At this initial stage, carrots are a non-renewable resource: they can be found sticking out of the earth, and they can be pulled up and eaten, and then they are gone. Berries, by contrast, are positioned as renewable. If the player picks the berries off a bush and eats them, the bush remains, and in two or three days another crop of berries will have grown. Note that the timeframe for growing food is not particularly realistic; again, the game is weighted towards stylisation, rather than strict realism. Similarly, we know that carrots can actually be propagated in the real world. The division between berries and carrots in Don’t Starve is meant to be read on the level of systems. It is essentially a type of metaphor, as it models the different systems of renewable and non-renewable food sources. Non-renewable sources are used and exhausted, forcing the player to search for more. Renewable sources are cyclic, and will sustain the player over the long term.

As the game proceeds, the player is able to develop increasingly complex systems for sustainability across different resource types. For example, the player can develop a crude agriculture by building ‘farms’, which are essentially small vegetable patches. These farms draw on a string of different resources, including manure, which is only produced by certain animals, and a bird, which first needs to be trapped, and then contained within a birdcage. The manure functions as fertiliser, and the bird as the method of propagation, as the player can feed it fruit or vegetables and receive seeds in return. The output is thus partially tied into the required input: if a crop produces twelve pumpkins, one or two of those pumpkins may be fed to the bird to create more pumpkin seeds and start the process again. Other resources in the game operate according to similar principles of sustainability, where the output of a given process creates the resources needed to repeat the process. For example, when the player chops down a tree, they will receive wood and pinecones. The pinecones can be planted to make new trees, creating a sustainable cycle. If players choose not to maintain that cycle, they may end up deforesting an area, and will need to move on to find new resources. The stakes in this instance are not desperately high, as there will be several groves and forests
scattered liberally around the map. Trees are not an especially scarce resource. Nevertheless, the basic premise remains: the resources gained from harvesting a tree include the resources with which to begin the next cycle. Players have an opportunity to integrate into a pre-existing ecological system and, in a sense, perform as part of that system.

INPUTS AND OUTPUTS

Although *Don't Starve* demonstrates how games might engage with ecological ideas, it also has certain limitations that are worth acknowledging. For instance, it is not really addressing our contemporary ecological crisis in any meaningful way. It focuses on one individual living in the woods, rather than billions of humans burning coal in a post-industrial society. Arguably, the survival genre itself is not particularly equipped to confront the theme of global warming, as it operates on such an individualistic level. Further, because the primary goal of the game is for the player-character to survive, all other concerns are ultimately seconded to that goal. If a player is being chased through the forest by a monster, it is a legitimate strategic decision to burn the forest down in an attempt to kill it. *Don't Starve* points to some of the potential of the video game medium for ecological themes, rather than exemplifying that potential on all fronts. With that in mind, we may turn to our second game, *Block’hood*, to consider how a different set of mechanics might better address some of the shortcomings identified in *Don’t Starve*.

*Block’Hood* is a 2017 game published by Plethora Project. It is a management sim, in the same vein as games such as *SimCity*, where players are tasked with managing a given environment – usually a city of some sort, although there are plenty of variations, such as the *Roller Coaster Tycoon* series, *Prison Architect*, and, in a bizarre metafictional twist, *Game Dev Tycoon*, where the player creates and develops video games. In *Block’hood*, one of the core ecological mechanics is that of inputs and outputs. Every element of the ecosystem is conceptualised in terms of what it requires, and what it produces. The same concept exists in *Don’t Starve*, although *Block’hood* particularly foregrounds this aspect through the user interface, which lists each individual item alongside its inputs and outputs. For instance, if a player wishes to place a poplar tree, they can see that it will require a set amount of groundwater, and will produce fresh air, wilderness, and leisure. Wilderness and leisure are somewhat abstract measures, representing lifestyle components mostly relevant to humans. Even so, the game foregrounds something about ecosystems through this basic framework of input and output. Trees need water, and they create fresh air. As with *Don’t Starve*, the process is stylised, but the basic theory is sound.

One area where *Block’hood* potentially offers an advance on *Don’t Starve* is in how it explicitly frames humans within the context of inputs and outputs. Again, *Don’t Starve* arguably also applies inputs and outputs to the human player-character, as it foregrounds the required inputs of food and sleep that keep the player-character alive. However, as noted, *Don’t Starve* operates under a rubric of human exceptionalism. By hinging failure on the death of the player-character, the game elevates the life of that character above every other dimension of the fictional world. *Block’hood*, on the other hand, treats humans as just another type of producer, no different to trees or animals in terms of their centrality or importance within the wider logic of the game. In *Don’t Starve*, humans operate in similar ways to other components of the ecosystem, but retain a sort of ludic priority. *Block’hood* flattens that hierarchy out by reducing every component of the ecosystem to its status as producer and consumer; that is, by considering things only in terms of inputs and outputs. For instance, the player can build a small apartment, which has as its listed inputs water and electricity, for the proper functioning of the building, but also leisure and fresh air, for the wellbeing of the apartment dweller. Given that leisure and fresh air are outputs of most types of tree, trees and humans are thus positioned in a synergistic relationship. Leisure is framed as an input for humans, and an output for the poplar tree. In less mechanistic terms, the implication is that people need leisure areas, and trees help to create that space. However, a system made up of only trees and people is not stable. The trees require a water source, which itself will have
other required inputs. The game, then, is to loop all of these inputs and outputs into each other to the point where one has a stable ecosystem. The player builds up a complex web of interrelations, where every part is dependent on everything else, and where throwing one aspect out of balance threatens the entire system. This approach decentres the human figures, placing them alongside plants and animals as just another type of producer/consumer.

As a further advance on *Don't Starve*, *Block'hood* recognises that the outputs of different actors are not always positive. For example, a human population will produce greywater and organic waste, such as food wastage. If the player does not find a sink or a method of recycling for these outputs, their ecosystem will quickly be overrun with rancid waste. Similarly, some available technologies for creating certain outputs can themselves have increasingly negative side effects, and in many cases are better off left unused. For example, the player is able to build an incinerator to dispose of inorganic waste. The incinerator takes inorganic waste as an input, burns it, and uses the heat to output electricity. However, it also outputs greenhouse gas and pollution. Large amounts of pollution will begin to generate sickness, and some agents may leave the area entirely, which in turn could cripple the wider system. Frankly, the incinerator is hardly worth the trouble. The player could deploy further technologies to offset the pollution, but at some point one has to wonder whether it might not be more efficient to simply avoid the problem in the first place. The game quietly encourages players to choose not to use certain available technologies. It casts the costs and benefits in such a way as to essentially obliterate their appeal. This ludic structure serves as a fascinating parallel to real-world movements looking to end coal mining or plastic bags, which similarly hinge on the idea that the costs of those technologies far outweigh any potential benefits.

Despite these strong advances, some scholars have raised concerns with an overly systematised approach to environmentalism. Milburn (2018) associates games like *Block'hood* with cultures of power and surveillance, lamenting that “there is no outside imaginable in the games of environmental control” (p.184). He continues, “Such games function according to logistics of infrastructure that cannot – or at least, this is how the societies of control perceive themselves – be radically changed, hacked, or reconfigured” (p.185). Without disagreeing with Milburn, we might note that similar concerns have been raised in the related field of religion and digital technology. For scholars in that field, the fundamentally systems-driven nature of video games seems to exclude the possibility of representing the supernatural as anything other than a mechanical process. Although the two concerns are not identical, both are looking for ways for video games and digital texts to express meaning, beyond the cold, insular logic of ones and zeros. Some inroads have already been made in the field of religion and digital technology; for instance, Daniel Vella (2015) focuses on the role of mystery in *Dark Souls*, which “suggests to the player an ineffable whole that extends beyond her necessarily limited perception and cosmic understanding of the game at any given moment” (n.p.). Scholars of ecology and digital literature might be able to dovetail such a concept with, for instance, Timothy Morton’s (2013) hyperobject – although clearly the heavily systematic nature of *Block'hood* means that it may not be the starting point for such conversations.

**CONCLUSION**

Within the context of these two games, then, *Block'hood* offers certain advantages over *Don't Starve*, particularly in terms of how it treats human exceptionalism and the broad systematic nature of global warming. At the same time, *Don't Starve* offers a much more personal vision of certain ecological principles. *Block'hood* exists on the relatively abstract level of urban design, while *Don't Starve* focuses more on how the biology of an individual embeds them into a wider ecological system. Each game draws on strengths and weaknesses that are perhaps rooted in their respective genres. However, a range of questions are yet to be answered. The substantial body of research around the environmental impact of digital technology remains a point of concern. Also, as Lauren Woolbright (2017) suggests in a study of *The Flame in the Flood*, another post-apocalyptic video game, any “representation of
climate calamity may have the opposite from intended effect, convincing players ... that the plight of the climate refugee is fantasy” (p.94). Her quite valid point taps into a broader concern about fiction as mere entertainment, a concern that applies just as much to poets or filmmakers or any other practicing artist. Speaking solely in terms of video games, future research might consider whether and to what extent the genres of survival game or management sim shape the thematic scope of their games, particularly regarding these ecological themes. Can the management sim insert a stronger sense of individual agency into its ludic structure, or, as Milburn suggests, is it destined to be programmatic in how it conceptualises higher-order systems? Alternately, can the survival genre offer any meaningful commentary on our current ecological crisis, or is it constrained by its individualism? The limits currently demonstrated by Don’t Starve and Block’hood are to some extent issues of scale. They activate issues that already exist in other forms and disciplines; for instance, Sebastian Conrad (2016) notes that from a historian’s perspective, “when we zoom in on specific moments and short time frames, personal decisions and individual agency move center stage ... [but] as soon as the time frame is extended, more anonymous factors will gain analytical weight at the expense of personal accountability” (p.156). Conrad is talking about temporal scale, rather than spatial, although he quickly notes that spatial scales have the same problems (p.157). It may be that the best solution is a composite approach that utilises multiple perspectives across several different games. In that view, Don’t Starve and Block’hood perhaps operate collaboratively, rather than competitively, in building up a wider picture of the operations of ecological systems. They bend the player in different ways, offering different perspectives on our relationship with the environment by prompting us to perform within ecological systems and processes that exist at different scales.

REFERENCES


PERFORMANCE OF THE REAL
PERFORMING ECOLOGIES

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ANIMAL REALISM
BREATH AND ATMOSPHERE DECOLONIAL
PERFORMANCE PRACTICES ECOLOGICAL
THINKING AND EMBODIED PRACTICE
INTIMACY AND VIBRANT LANDSCAPES
CHOREOGRAPHIES OF PARTICIPATORY
ECOLOGIES THEATRICAL LANDSCAPES
AND CLIMATE CHANGE AFFECTIVE
ECOLOGY IN EMBODYING CHARACTER
PERFORMATIVE INGESTION AND
ECOLOGICAL CRISIS VIDEO GAMES AND
ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS SITE RESPONSIVE
PERFORMANCE AND CLIMATE CHANGE
PUPPETRY AND ECOPSYCHOLOGY VISUAL
NARRATIVE AND THE POST-HUMAN
EMPATHY AND SITE SPECIFIC ART PRACTICE