

# BODIES, LANDSCAPES, AND THE AIR THAT WE BREATHE

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## Abstract

This article maps out material-discursive entanglements of bodies and landscapes, speaking from bodies-in-movement as ecokinetic poetic phenomena. The first-hand experience of waiting on the end of a phone line for information on disability support becomes a springboard to unpack the term material-discursive, locating it in posthuman thinking, with a focus on the way normative discourses become inscribed at an embodied level. When COVID-19 arrived, or perhaps erupted from within, bodies turned into sites of suspicion and precarity, mirroring the oppressive clout of normative discourses, that move invisibly and insidiously, creating and being created by relations of power. Hands, face, and space became a focus of attention: *Don't touch. Cover your nose and mouth. Keep your distance.* The Other carries potential contamination. Zones of human relations are exposed as zones of exclusion(s). During the COVID-19 pandemic,, there grew a stark realisation that the self is a phenomenon implicated within a relational matrix in which we are only OK, if we are all OK. Macro, mezzo, and micro matters connect at every manoeuvre as we navigate personal, political, and cultural landscapes. Each breath is a reminder: *I am matter connected to all that is pumped into the air, from salty breezes from the Atlantic, to oxygen gifted by the eucalyptus, to polluted layers of city smog.* What we do to the air, we breathe back in. What we do to the earth, we do to ourselves. This writing seeks to identify how an understanding of bodies-in-movement as ecokinetic poetic phenomena can promote empathic and compassionate sociocultural and political relationships towards creating cultures of care.

## Keywords

cultures of care, dance movement, disability, material-discursive, posthuman

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**WAITING**

*I choose option three and out of the window I gaze at clouds scudding behind tall pines. I resign to the long wait, that drips steadily through my body like a persistently leaking tap that needs a new washer. I don't know how long the wait will be, yet I do know that if I put the phone down and try again later, I will be sent to the end of the queue to begin the process again. The music playing has a relentless repetitive rhythm that sounds like Mike Oldfield's Tubular Bells, awakening my 70's teenage self with a memory of a community dance choreography. As I gaze past those real time pine trees, forty years on, I wonder what I thought I was doing and find a kind of shame creeping into the back of my throat at remembering the futility of just moving. I smile at that naïve sense that the materiality of movement for movement's sake is enough. Yes, my real-time adult self argues, it is enough. Of course, it is enough. That is surely the sort of thing I write about, teach, and practise as I attempt to join the discourses of movement practice worlds. Yet, the persistent part of me that privileges discourse over matter suggests that surely there must have been some deeper significance. Not as I remember it. The meaning was simply in being part of the experience of collective, synchronised movement and reaching the end of a shared choreographed dance. My waiting-on-the-phone-line-listening-to-music-akin-to-Mike-Oldfield self begins to sway, holding the phone away from my ear, but close enough not to miss the possibility of a connection materialising with someone who can answer my question about getting a companion bus pass. My left arm lifts over my head, fingertips reaching towards the ceiling. I shimmy through my spine and ripple back up to one of those 70s stretches that I might have used in a second-rate production of the love-rock musical Hair. Or perhaps Pan's People. I remain on hold. The music on the phone persists, one track fading into another, each almost identical with repeating riffs mirroring the stasis of the wait. My 1970s embodied memory scans the community of dancers. I wonder what they are doing now. That young woman with the dark curls, who turned up each time, but never spoke to anybody. What was the story that she carried? I find myself regretting that I didn't attend to who she was. I find myself wondering who she has become over the intervening decades and even if she is still alive. Perhaps in defence of the intolerable stasis of the wait, my feet mark out a rhythmic pattern that takes me around the dining room table, my right arm suspended mid-air with the phone hovering within earshot. The movement helps me manage the frustration of feeling inert, dependent and powerless. I notice the dust on the bookcase and reconnect with a familiar fantasy that one day I will give it a proper clean, which, of course, I never do. The spiders' webs are quite easy to ignore, except when the sun shines in through the window at a particular angle, which usually happens, to my embarrassment, when we have visitors. Whatever must they think? I sense more shame hovering in the dust that lingers above a copy of the Collins Spanish dictionary, reminding me of further unfulfilled intentions to brush up on the subjunctive. Yet another task that never gets done, amplifying that world of unfulfilled desires. The music is interrupted. I am jolted out of my reverie.*

*“...Your call is extremely important to us, However we are currently experiencing a high number of calls and advise you to call back later...”*

*“No way!” I say out loud into the phone, “...you can’t fob me off! I’ll get this disabled companion bus pass sorted if it takes me all day.”*

*I make a mental note to get a duster out when I have time.*

*The music resumes a repetitive riff now pulsating with a kind of urgency. I consciously embody a compliant yet tenacious resignation, fuelled by a determination to see this through. This attitude seems more constructive than exploding in unbridled frustration. I cannot find a speaker function on this landline and so I remain within the audio orbit by continuing to hold this black plastic handphone in the air. I am tempted to put the phone down and call back later, but I hold.*

*And I hold.*

*And I continue to hold, suspended in the oppressive paralysis of trying to bring together disability support... I begin to wonder if anyone, out there, cares.*

## **MATERIAL-DISCURSIVENESS**

This material-discursive entanglement is a snapshot narrative of my moving body as it engages in an experience of waiting, intra-acting with this black plastic phone, the carpeted floor, the proximity of the table, the walls, and the windows. I shift through past-present-future moments, inviting random embodied memories to infuse the present. I teeter on the edge of future becoming. The resignation, the anticipation, the compliance, the suppressed frustration, the tenacity, and the time-travel reverie bring a multiplicity of mo(ve)ment-to-mo(ve)ment experience in which past, present, and future converge. Material bodies of all kin(ds) are affective (i.e., they can affect and be affected) and this relational dynamic includes sensed, felt, and intuitive experience as well as spontaneous movement-in-improvisation. Yet, as I wait on the end of phone line, my affective capacity is waning. It is dulled and dampened by a system of care that renders its recipients feeling abandoned.

This material body of mine in the making, moves beyond representational language with a capacity to respond to the tender embryonic moments of stepping into the future. I nurture not-yet-formed and emergent experiences from which I continue to become. Those spiders behind the bookcase sense the subtle vibrations of humans sharing their environment through their arachnid bodies. Karen

Barad, feminist philosopher and physicist, suggests that *body*, as a concept, is not independently situated within a passive material world. Rather, it is part of the world's differential performative affect economy. Each breath that I take is a reminder that I (am) matter, connected to all that is pumped into the air, from salty breezes from the Atlantic, to oxygen gifted by the eucalyptus, to polluted layers of city smog. What we do to the air, we breath back in; what we do to the earth, we do to ourselves. This "ancient and elemental kinship between air and awareness, between the mind and the wind" (Abram 273) is always there. As I stand, holding the phone, waiting for the connection that might never come, I hold a thin thread of hope that care will be forthcoming. My material connection between different kinds of bodies remains animate in its hopefulness.

The language that we use in relation to this material world is telling, as we try to represent its complexity with words that sometimes don't even come close to experience. These words have the power to obscure the experience itself, as they create layers of abstract meaning. Just look at all those books on the dusty bookshelf, many written in languages that create an anthropocentric objectification of all that does not align to a particular notion of the exceptional and entitled human. Language can be problematic in its representation of what I do, who I am, and how I experience the world. At the point of creating definitions, I create binary others, i.e., differentiating *this* from the *that* that *this* isn't. And *this and that* become oppositional to what they are not. I am asked: "[S]o what is it that you do?" My response lies within my quest to make ethico-onto-epistemological shifts from essentialist ideas that determine pre-existing entities to the affective flows of emergent matter that are at play in my participation in the world ("The cat, the foal"). This kind of attempt to try to come close to the complexity of what I do is not an effective public-facing strapline. As a posthuman ecofeminist, I privilege embodied ways of knowing as equal to language and discourse. I am, however, mindful of my own tendency to subordinate the material, moving body in relation to language and discourse, aware of the prevailing Cartesian cultural phenomena that is deeply inscribed in me, despite my rhetoric.

Robin Wall Kimmerer writes refreshingly about the "grammar of animacy" (55), illustrating how, in the indigenous Potawatomi language, "rocks are animate, as are mountains and water and fire and places. Beings that are imbued with spirit, our sacred medicines, our songs, drums and even stories, are all animate" (55-56). The prolific use of verbs, rather than nouns, reflects the animate nature of all material substance as subject (e.g., she/they/he) rather than object (i.e., it) and Kimmerer illustrates the importance of this subjectivity when she writes that a "bay is a noun only if the water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegammaa* – to be a bay – releases the word from its bondage and lets it live" (55).

This language of animacy brings us into kinship and supports a consciousness shift from the dualities of our internalised anthropocentrism, that separates the individualised *I* from the *not-I Other*. Through this language we are “meeting once again with our kin in the earth community” (Berry 1). This is the language of indigenous cultures that have been oppressed and colonised. One of the most powerful tools of oppression is to take away that language. Kimerer tells us how, in her grandfather’s generation, children were taken away from their families and cultures, sent far away to school and prohibited from speaking their language “long enough, they hoped, to make them forget who they were” (17).

Similarly, indigenous writer Jeannette Armstrong explains the linguistic connections in Okanagan between language, land, and the body. Armstrong says that the Okanagan peoples use the same word for “our place on the land” and “our language” (323). Furthermore, the root syllable for the words for land and body are the same. Armstrong says: “The soil, the water, the air, and all other life-forms contributed parts to be our flesh. *We are our land/place*. Not to know this is to be without language and without land. It is to be *dis-placed*” (323).

As a white, Western, and middle-class older woman, from both Irish and Cornish heritage, I am aware (and less consciously unaware) of the sociocultural and political identities inscribed in me. I try to locate myself within an intersectional matrix of experience that concerns different ways that human identities are organised and thought about. These include, for example, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, class, poverty, marital status, anthropocentrism, maternity, marital status, motherhood, caring responsibilities, care-leavers, people in the mental health system, migrants, people with refugee status carers, and many more. Individuals may be impacted by combinations of these intersections with which they identify and, at the same time, through which they are identified by others. As I stand waiting on the end of the disability support phone line, I become acutely aware of particular vertices within this intersectional matrix.

This body that performs me is a material phenomenon within an ecological matrix. In my own therapy process as a client, I worked outside, refusing the traditional seclusion of the therapeutic space in which four walls and a closed door bring the focus intensively into an individualised inner world. An ancient woodland became part of the therapeutic process and provided a less predictable context for my embodied participation in therapy (aka the world). For example, I remember one session, sitting at the foot of the grand oak tree, when the therapist noticed a caterpillar crawling across my back. She coaxed him onto her finger and the caterpillar arched her back into a bridge, before lifting her upper body and moving her head from one side to another, before making her way across the woodland floor. I then noticed that I was surrounded by small caterpillars, descending from

the treetops on delicate threads, before navigating their route from their landing station with small and undulating contractions that shifted them slowly on their way. A fanfare of activity drew our attention to two squirrels spiralling up a tree trunk. Halfway up the tree, one jumped on the other causing them both to somersault through the air, crash to the ground, jump to a standing position, and plunge effortlessly into their next sequence, like two Shaolin monks. My inner experience collided with the interruptions of the wider world of the ecology of life.

As a practitioner, I work both indoors and out. It is sometimes necessary to create an indoor safety for the therapeutic process. However, four walls and a closed door do not automatically create safety for clients. For example, psychotherapist Jenny Grut writes about her work at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture in her book *The Healing Fields: Working with Psychotherapy and Nature to Rebuild Shattered Lives*. For some of the clients in the Medical Foundation, a confined space with a closed door triggered traumatic memories of torture. A process of planting and growing food and flowers, alongside psychotherapy, became essential partners in reconfiguring shattered lives. The poignant stories illustrate the importance of our embodied connection with the land. One client describes how he could see the top of a tree out of his prison window as he endured solitary confinement. He describes silent conversations with this tree, that helped him to maintain his connection with the world outside his cell, through the changing seasons.

This fundamental intra-subjective connection with a wider ecology, i.e., the notion of the ecological-self, aligns to posthuman discourses in terms of a defamiliarization with anthropocentrism and a disidentification with the dominant cultural values that infuse our subjectivity (Braidotti *Posthuman Knowledge*). This is a way of “decolonizing our imaginary through radical disengagement from the axes and institutions of power in our society” (139). However, I am also cautious of falling into a romanticization of working outdoors. The Western ego can enact its insidious violence of un-care, entitlement, and exceptionalism (Weintrobe) both indoors and out.

This moving body that awaits the voice of a stranger on the end of the phone struggles to maintain that connectivity. Material-discursive entanglements of bodies in landscapes are the stuff of life and this life of stuff requires continuous navigation and negotiation. Bodies are entanglements of both matter and discourse and the two are mutually implicated.

## DISCURSIVE-MATERIALITY

As I stand waiting on the end of a phone line, this intra-action connects with the politics of disability and the powerful discourses that underpin a twenty-first century care system that is in pieces. Dominant discourses privilege the able-bodied, affluent, well-educated, heteronormative, and white European male prototype, embodied by Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* displaying the perfect proportions of the ideal "Man" (Braidotti *Posthuman Feminism*). The discursive body moves through the intersectionality of ecoinetic poetic phenomena that are bodies-in-movement, intra-acting within affective agentic material worlds, along with those political and discursive landscapes.

The COVID-19 global pandemic unveiled and troubled perceived separations between, for example, macro and micro, human and more-than-human, individual and collective, and private and public (Murriss). The slogan *Hands, Face, Space*, along with calls to ventilate rooms and reduce unnecessary contact, highlighted our entangled intra-dependency, troubling neoliberal ideas about humans as autonomous and separate individuals. Structural discrimination surfaced, as, for example, we discovered that learning disabled adults were thirty times more likely to die from COVID-19 than the general population and, in addition, were to be served with *do not resuscitate* orders for no other reason than being learning disabled. Judith Butler notes in *Bodies that Matter* how material human bodies are created within inscriptional spaces of matter and discourse and this entanglement of material-discursive phenomena creates us and, at the same time, is created by us. As a movement practitioner, I am keen on turning towards "*practices of attuning to embodied intensities*" (Fullagar 120) that arise from these relational entanglements.

Moving bodies are speculative, contingent, and affective as well as imaginative and creative. Posthuman ecofeminist perspectives honour alternative worlds within a body-politic of multiplicity. For the post-humanities, humans materialise through a process over time whereby cultural, social and political norms become internalised by repetitive enactments (Murriss). Murriss suggests that human performativity "is neither a biological nor an ontological given but a political concept and a material-discursive *doing*, not a *thing*" (69). Within this processual ontology, the entanglement of theory, research, and practice offers multiple ways of knowledge-ing that challenge and transcend binaries. I use the term "knowledge-ing" as a verb, rather than referring to knowledge as a product, to reflect research as "...a process, an energising, a matter of possibilities..." (Taylor 29). This is a posthuman eco-feminist leaning towards the corporeal matter of the practice of knowledge-ing that is grounded in doing and becoming, rather than in defining and being.



As I begin to write this article, twenty-seven people—men, women, and children—are reported to have drowned as they attempt to cross the channel to the UK in a boat. I reflect on a world that allows those fleeing persecution and trauma to risk their lives, out of desperation, by stepping into a flimsy over-crowded boat and setting sail into the ocean. Where is our duty of care? We hear politicians talk of pushing back boats, as if those making this treacherous journey are an inconvenience to be pushed back into the sea. The sense of hostility is palpable. I find my centre contracting and my spine curving as my upper back drops forwards and my knees begin to bend. My hands push upwards through the air to arrive at my forehead. I want to weep. In my mind's eye, I imagine the terror of these men, women, and children as they are engulfed by the cold waters in the darkness.

And then my availability for the process of writing this article was interrupted by the breakdown in my adult learning-disabled daughter's care, that resulted in her coming back to live full time in the family home. She has become a casualty of a failing care system after a combination of factors. These include years of austerity, based on subtle suggestions that the recession was caused by an inflated welfare bill, exploited by benefit scroungers (such as those pretending to be disabled), rather than a global economic crash (Ryan); the chaos created in the care sector as the pandemic unfolded; a crisis in recruitment, including the impact of Brexit and increasingly prohibitive visa regulations; and increasing managerialism, in which those on the receiving end of care carry a price tag that demands target-orientated efficiency. The powers of normative discourses underpin hierarchies of worth, through which some things (including people) come to matter more than others. Rosi Braidotti describes the struggle for visibility of those people, things and concepts that have historically been missing from dominant discourses as the drivers of the "radical politics of immanence" ("A Theoretical Framework" 51). Those who are cared for and those who care clamber around the less visible margins of the powerful and the visible.

Navigating the care system has become a time-consuming occupation, not to mention the all-consuming emotional toll for my daughter having lost her home of fifteen years and for us, her parents, now providing full-time support. The story about waiting on the phone for a connection as I attempt to secure a companion bus pass at the beginning of this article is just one symptom of a care system that is disempowering, dismissive, and oppressive. Sally Weintrobe in the *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis* links frameworks of care and of un-care to a wider phenomenon of Western individualism, that serves individual interests at the expense of the wider ecology and as such has fuelled the rapid acceleration of climate chaos that is now emerging as a global catastrophe. Weintrobe identifies how cultures of care respond to, and struggle with divisions and hierarchies with an attitude that we are only OK if we are all OK, in contrast to cultures of un-care

that create fractures and divisions in the service of privileged individuals, creating groups of people who are subordinated and othered. These wider divisions and inequalities have been amplified in the pandemic. For example, during lockdowns many families struggled to keep their heads above water, either trying to work from home whilst simultaneously taking total responsibility for the education and wellbeing of their children, disabled or not. Those on casualised work contracts without job security also found their family income shrink or even disappear. In “*Offerings*,” Liverpool-based dance artists, scholars, and mothers Sarah Black-Frizell and Angie Pierre-Louis explore the feminist ethics of creative practice in relation to concepts of home and the maternal and the way in which these became troubled by the COVID-19 pandemic. The writing itself is a performative event that takes us, the readers, into an intimate and relational process between two dance-artist-scholar-mothers. It is evident that care for self and other is central, as is the movement of the family body, the social body, and the body-politic. Radical works such as “*Offerings*” further a postcolonial and post-qualitative feminist turn, which dissolves stylistic boundaries between genres, such as the poetic, the prosaic, and the academic, as well as boundaries around particular knowledges being privileged over others (for example, academic scholarship and professional frameworks over the conversational, personal, and domestic).

During the height of the pandemic, from March 2020 to June 2021, we found ourselves in the UK coming in and out of various levels of restrictions, which included lockdowns. This was particularly disruptive for practitioners and artists whose work primarily involves moving bodies within shared kinaesthetic spaces. Material bodies of all kinds were turned into sites of suspicion and precarity, mirroring the oppressive clout of normative discourses, which move invisibly and insidiously, creating and being created by relations of power. A wealth of research and practice emerged from this crisis regarding bodies, landscapes, and the air that we breathe, as we, homo-sapiens and other species, found ways to navigate the pandemic together-apart. Embodied practitioners began to embrace online practice more readily, navigating a techno-mediated space of connectivity and the pandemic that brought working online as a new normativity.

This refusal of the dominant discourses created new entanglements of mutually implicated phenomena, helping us to climb out of the ontological and epistemological quagmire of a dominant culture that serves anthropocentric and patriarchal exceptionalism. As an older posthuman ecofeminist scholar-carer-mother-activist-practitioner, I find myself cradled within and, at the same time, cradling creativity and multiplicity as touchstones of my being-in-the-world-as-a-whole, moving me in and out, across and through, transversal practices and helping me to navigate this twenty-first century as a third-age woman who revels in the anticipation of who I might become. In her book *Women Who Run with the Wolves*,

Clarissa Pinkola Estés defines our wild nature as linked to our creative instinct, that resides in the guts, rather than the head. Pinkola Estes writes of the “quintessential two-million-year-old” original wild woman who “lives beneath and yet on the topside of the earth. She lives in and through us and we are surrounded by her” (30). She is the earth beneath our feet, the sky above our heads, the mountains and hills around us, and the oceans that connect lands.

### **MATERIAL-DISCURSIVE BODIES-IN-MOVEMENT AS ECOKINETIC POETIC PHENOMENA**

Within this complicated material-discursive labyrinth, there is a simplicity to which the material body can connect. The meaning is in the practice. For example, in a workshop run at an ecopsychology gathering, I invited participants into their immediate material connection with their outdoor surroundings, beginning with the suggestion:

*So, shall we dance?*

*Gently and cautiously, I invited the members of the circle to . . . allow a dance to emerge. The soles of the feet came into conversation with the grass below, which covered the soft, well-watered earth. I brushed a slug from my trousers. Toes, heels, insteps feeling their way...sensing the earth beneath, with grass between the toes. Knees and ankles softening as legs began to twist and turn from the hips, this way and that. Short but sturdy blades of grass were yielding to the emerging dance; side to side; forwards and back. The spine joined the dance, bone upon bone rising vertically to the sky, gently bending, twisting and leaning as the head followed the flow on its delicate axil. Shoulders picked up the undulating energy which rippled through the elbows, wrists, hands and out through the tips of the fingers. Like a meandering river, arms moved snake-like through the air. . . . Birds sang. Slugs crept through the grass beneath our feet. Flying insects zig-zagged through the air. . .*

*...The urge to stamp, the urge to wander, to carve shapes and patterns through the air. The urge to lie on the grass and stare, free and open into the blueness of the sky. The senses led the dancers to explore the smallest moments of connection and to discover the wild and authentic calling of the world around... With the warm air brushing against the skin, half closed eyes peered through flickering lashes to play with the kaleidoscope of shapes, colours and light.*

*Drawn to. . . a conversation with gravity, a dancer began rolling faster and faster down a slope, finding herself being rolled by the earth and punctuating the dance motif with a peel of laughter, hands lifting to her face in delight. A grasshopper watched, balancing tentatively on a blade of grass, the weight of her body causing the blade to curve and bounce. All of a sudden, her powerful jack-knifed limbs propelled her out of sight.*

*A dance of frustration and restriction emerged; of searching for a way out, but finding none, only to find that at the point of resignation to a different way of being was offered by another in the group...we synchronised our energies, coming together in the rise and fall of a rhythmic pulse which shifted us from left to right, meeting each other with open-hearted anticipation and curiosity, allowing the moment to shape the choreography as the universe moved towards us and with us and in us. Breaking away slowly, we separated from the dance to find ourselves alone.*

*We settled again in a circle, to wonder where we had been and what we had created. The warm air was soft and soothing against the skin. The dance had seemed a small oasis in the madness of the world around us. A bird sang from the bushes. Slugs negotiated their slimy route between the short green blades of grass. An insect clambered up the delicate stalk of a wild flower. ("Wild Awakening" 10-11)*

We stumbled through the workshop, as is my tendency in life, improvising from one mo(ve)ment to the next, making it up as I go (Poynor). I live on the improvisational brink of making it up as a responsiveness to the intra-active ebbing and flowing of the world ("The cat, the foal"). As I dance, I participate in the world within an ever changing "sensory-kinetic palette of possibilities" (LaMothe 57). The precarity of improvisation allows me to engage responsively to changing material-discursive landscapes, activating continuous potential for new ways of knowing the world.

As I wait on the end of phone line, I find myself identifying and disidentifying with stories and imaginings. My body intra-acts within this shared ekinetic poetic space, creating and being created by a plethora of material-discursive dimensions. I affect and am affected by numerous worlds created through me, by me, because of me, in spite of me, and around me.

*The music stops and is replaced by the sound of a phone ringing. A wave of hopefulness surges through my body.*

*"Hello, my name is Kevin. May I take your name and reference number?"*

The sun bursts through the clouds and throws a shaft of light through the window, illuminating a finely woven spiders web spun between the blue-grey spine of Braidotti's *Posthuman Feminism*, stretching in front of Frances Ryan's *Crippled*:

*Austerity and the Demonisation of Disabled People*, and attaching to the bookshelf, just in front of a copy of Kimerer LaMothe's *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming*.

And in that shifting sequence from repetitive musical riffs, to the ringing of the phone, to the voice that brings the hope of support, I lean into the next move that will affect the direction(s) of a material-discursive world.

Of sorts.

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