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Lakes and Bodies: A Somatic Posthuman Praxis

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Abstract

This paper delineates an embodied praxis for exploring the ongoing interactivity that entangles humans with environments. Somatic-based movement encounters activated by posthuman concepts are positioned as generative sites for perceptual shifts of human-ecological connections. I consider this project my “doing the posthuman,” or a means of enacting theories via practice. I focus on breath as an experience of mutual exchange, touch and the possibilities afforded by haptic knowledge, and the practice of witnessing as active material engagement. From these encounters, I experienced an emerging sense of ecological-self that is irrevocably interconnected within a matrix of materiality.

Keywords

Site-specific, posthuman, ecological-self, breath, haptic knowledge, witnessing

Biography

Meg Kirchhoff Singh is a dance educator and choreographer invested in somatic practices as research and collaborative praxis. As an emerging scholar, Meg focuses on how dance practices transverse disciplinary boundaries and has the ability to enhance understanding of theory. She holds an MFA in Dance from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Meg’s most recent performance projects explore ways of bringing site-specific dance to life on film.

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Introduction

Driving slowly down the dirt road toward Pine Lake nestled in the middle of Wisconsin always feels like coming home. Dapples of sunlight filtering through pine bows, oak leaves, and velvety ferns bring floods of memories. Learning to swim in the sandy shallows with my cousins. Hours amongst the sap-spilling pine trees. The delight of baby frogs smaller than a finger pad swarming the lakeshore. Reverence for wind gusts too powerful to paddle against. The lake was my classroom, the trees my confidants. Our relationship has shaped who I have become and who I will become. Just as I have changed over the course of my thirty years, the lake has too. I sense a level of anxiety in the conversations between neighbors about natural shifts in lake level, fish population, and vegetative growth. They are symbols of undesired change; omens of a future Pine Lake that might be

unrecognizable to those who call it home. In this way Pine Lake is a microcosm that reflects global trends—the earth is evolving in beautiful and troubling ways. I want to feel more acutely our mutual relationship—the connections between this place I call home and me. There is a kinship that exceeds the paradigm of humanity, which instead includes all materiality—lakes, bodies, rocks, and trees—we are all always in the process of becoming. Together.



In the summer of 2020, over a period of about three months, I explored and moved within the small groundwater-fed Pine Lake, the coniferous forests that line its shores, and an aspen grove that borders both the forest and a restored prairie. As a dancer, my goal was to move, sense, and explore the lake and its surroundings and my relationship with this place. Specifically, my intention was to investigate from a posthumanist perspective a somatic inquiry and how environments can engender shifts in perception of human-ecological connections. I consider this project my “doing the posthuman,” or an enacting of theory via practice. In this article, I offer the reader my perspective of Posthuman theory in relation to somatic practice followed by descriptions of three specific encounters with the lake environment while “doing the posthuman,” an exploration of breath, touch, and witnessing.

Posthuman Theory and Somatic Practice

Through a posthuman lens, the world is co-created in and through relational dynamics. All material entities—human bodies, aspen trees, lakes, etc.—are always and have always been entangled. In my work for this project, I primarily engaged with posthuman theories from Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, and Jane Bennett whose

scholarship builds a vocabulary for positioning the body as primarily a material entity while implicitly recognizing the unruly, animating quality of matter. As Jane Bennett (2010) writes, “each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter” (p. 13). Their frameworks are not speculative theories of how the world could or should operate instead, they reframe how matter functions: agentially, co-constitutively, and non-linearly. I take this perspective of the human body as an opportunity to propose that somatic practices are sites of entry and inquiry into the embodied experience of materiality.

My understanding of ‘somatic’ draws on the work of scholars and dance practitioners and my personal embodied experiences within numerous somatic modes. I use ‘somatic practices’ to indicate movement practices that acknowledge the integration of the mind and body to cultivate awareness of sensation, kinesthesia, and proprioception. Somatic practices in their orientation toward spatial, temporal, and affective dimensions of existence offer a playground for exploring a bodily sense of material vibrancy. In this project, I enacted somatic movement exercises with the intention of perceiving the self as irrevocably connected to the environment. In particular, I drew on the emerging field of eco-somatics which performance artist and disability culture theorist

Petra Koppers (2021) describes as, “Somatic sensing that invites political and cultural knowledges. The moving, feeling body becomes part of a sensing assemblage that engages encounter zones between self and environment” (p. 6). Koppers’ articulation of the body as part of a “sensing assemblage” that is generative and actively engaged represents a nonhierarchical relationship between humans and environments that resonates with my posthuman framework.

Underlying this entire project was specific attention to what Karen Barad (2003) terms “intra-activity,” a term that acknowledges the “fluid boundaries between inseparable components” (p. 135). Describing how intra-activity functions, Barad (2007) writes:

Bodies do not simply take places in the world. They are not simply situated in, or located in, particular environments. Rather, “environments” and “bodies” are intra-actively co-constituted. Bodies (“human,” “environmental,” or otherwise) are internal “parts” of, or dynamic reconfiguring of, what is. (p. 170)

Further, in Barad’s “post humanist performative” theory of agential realism, the body and the world are entangled beyond separability in a way that fundamentally reworks the dynamics of relationality and materialization (2007, p. 225). Intra-activity also grounds the notion that

“nature” is not “out there,” it is in and around us all the time. Barad’s theorization of intra-activity as fluid boundaries also aligns with Kopper’s notion of the self and environment as parts of one sensing assemblage that engage zones of contact. Interestingly, Koppers’ “zones of encounter” imply a kind of intentionality needed for an eco-somatic experience of intra-activity to be felt as such.

These overlapping theoretical and practice-based encounters fueled my postulation that posthuman concepts like intra-activity are more than theoretical or linguistic interventions into discourse. They are also modes of attention, particularly attuned embodiments, and physical practices. After completing my experience and inquiry in and around the lake, I attempt to describe the evolving praxis that started with asking how posthuman language could awaken and bring attention to differing frequencies within somatic experiences. My goal was to experience the posthuman not only as a network of theoretical concepts but a felt sense of moving together. Through the act of repeated encounters with the lake environment, I began to cultivate bodily knowledge of the world as reciprocal and irrevocably intra-connected.

Encounter Breath

It's July, midday. Nestled in a sea of goldenrod, the swaying soon-to-be yellow tassel tops paint patterns of sunlight on my skin. Deep breaths of humid air come and go from my lungs. Inhale unfolding exhale. I let the breath go on without me. It feels like sinking and expanding at the same time. Eyes closed, I parse through the multiple scales of sounds. I hear birds call from the nearby marsh, woody shoots of goldenrod rustle with friction, the flap of a dragonfly's oversized wings, a far-off crunch of tires on gravel. Time slows here. Borderless. Edgeless. Subtle, always ongoing transitions. What are the boundaries of the present moment?

Humans are inseparable from their mutual exchange and relationship with plants. Both give and receive in a feedback loop that provides humans with the air we need. As a relational process, breathing and exchange are always ongoing but often unconscious. As I moved with and through the prairie, I wondered what might emerge when I intentionally attended to my breath as a mutual exchange and intra-active process? As I engaged in deep breathing practices over time, I felt a heightened awareness of sensation. I noticed the physiological effects of breathing supporting a bodily state where I was able to cultivate perceptual shifts. I became more attuned to the subtle differences in the air, the changing density of sound, and the pattern of my breath. As my sense of time and bodily state



began to slow and sync with the environment I began to experience my presence as a kind of transition rather than as a fixed and self-contained moment.

Breathing is an innate intra-relational action that entangles humans in their becoming. The prolific feminist philosopher and neo-materialist scholar Rosi Braidotti writes of becoming as a way of approaching time nonlinearly. She writes: “approaching time as a multi-faceted and multi-directional effect enables us to grasp *what we are ceasing to be* and *what we are in the process of becoming* ” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 64). The present is not a blank space between before and not yet. It is a complex, collaborative negotiation entangling matter, space, and time. As I breathed and engaged in a reciprocal relationship, I was also at the

intersections of multiple simultaneous unfoldings: ants methodically traversing the spine of a branch; gusts of wind spilling through the trees; once, a family of deer lazily meandering through the field. Who I am and what I was becoming at that moment was in relation to and with the environmental happenings around me. The practice of intentional breathing heightened my awareness of the entanglement of the world. Entwined with the personal discoveries this practice evoked was a curiosity towards the vibrant bodies expressing and performing materiality in ways wholly different from my own. I felt, paradoxically, small/expansive, and grateful/curious.



Encounter Touch

Just before the daylight sinks behind the treeline when the air is thick with the hum of insects, I wade out to a grove of aspen. Sandy soil pushes up between my toes as I soften my weight against the uneven, smooth rough trunk. A greeting. The bark is a map of the day's sun. A spark of knowing acknowledgement precedes finger pads softly tracing patterns of heat. A stuttering slide as far as I can stretch. Protruding elbows and roots. Gradations of skin, moss, dirt, grass, and sand. The weight of a fallen branch heavy on my leg. Shuddering leaves raising hairs at the nape of my neck. Negotiating shifting proximities in a web of contact. Where do I end?

In the aspen grove, I focused on the immediate sensory experience of touch. Touching, like breathing, is intra-relational. The haptic is a dual sensation: touching and being touched. I approached touch as a practice of listening/sensing/receiving. When I placed my palm on a trunk of an aspen tree, we, the tree, and I both, provided and received information. *What does a tree know? How would I ask?* I became curious about the ways in which matter touches and intra-relates and my bodily limitation to know and understand these engagements. What haptic capacities exist beyond what I can understand with my material body? *How does an aspen express and experience touch?*

Aspens grow in colonies that share a rhizomatic root system (Grant & Mitton, 2010). The aspens' extensive network of touch—its roots—encompasses a tremendous spatial expanse used to share resources. In their case study about Quaking Aspen, ecologists and evolutionary biologists Michael Grant and Jeffry Mitton note that aspens transfer water and vital nutrients like phosphorus to other trees in the colony through their network of roots. While scientists do not fully understand the complete functionality of clonal tree root systems, one could reasonably argue that the trees communicate via their shared physical connection. With this research in mind during this practice, I started to think of the grove as a kind of interconnected family. I wondered in my repeated visits what this family of trees might feel and communicate about my presence.

While many in the sciences warn against anthropomorphizing nature, Jane Bennett suggests anthropomorphic thinking can function as a step toward recognizing material vibrancy and “thing-power” (Bennett, 2010). Attributing human capacities to nonhumans, in a way, implies recognition of kinship. Perceiving familiarity across materialities is a move toward understanding nonhumans not as “human-like” but rather humans as “thing-like.” Bennett (2010) writes, “we at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of

“talented” and vibrant materialities” (p. 99). The underlying sense of kinship in anthropomorphic thoughts can reveal insights into the multitudinous nature of materiality. Articulating my thoughts with anthropomorphic language led me to then question what is knowable if I enact and imagine myself as a non-human “thing-like” among the trees, an entanglement together. In this questioning process, I fail. Their interiority was inaccessible as I could only imagine the sensation of a human body pressed against my trunk or how it feels to share roots with kin. The aspens’ dynamic materiality exceeded any images, words, or feelings they inspire in me. The aspens were not reducible to my perception of them.

Encounter Witnessing

It's five o'clock in the morning. The lake's glassy surface shimmers with rising steam. Submerged up to my waist I sit folded in on myself. Burrowed feet anchor against steady, almost imperceptible motion, just below the surface. Circular spine ripples water. Swirling currents unfurling in endless directions wrap legs and pull hips. A cacophony of micro-movements unfolding momentums that swell and quiver. Listening/feeling from the edges.

I approached the practice of witnessing as a structure and impetus to investigate my way into the already ongoing, and disorienting flow of the lake environment. I have encountered and used variations of this practice in dance classes and workshops numerous times: one person



moves, sometimes with eyes closed, while their partner witnesses the movement, then the roles are reversed. For this project, I wondered what the exercise would reveal if I imagined the lake as my movement partner. Central to this witnessing practice, and embedded in each of my encounters, was imagination as a method or tool for attending to connections by suspending beliefs about logic and causality. While the lake was not given the choice to enter this practice, nor could the lake consent to engage in this exercise in the way a human could, imagining this dynamic as partnering allowed me to attend to the lake as an agentic, dynamic collaborating co-actant.

In the lake, I witnessed with an attitude of non-judgment and conscious attention. In my witnessing I paid attention visually, however, I cultivated a witnessing presence beyond the visual and as extended through my body - cellular, muscular, and affective. First, I attempted to shift between two roles, witness and mover. The distinction between witnessing and moving, imaginatively imposed, directed my focus. I noticed, as I switched between witnessing and moving, that witnessing was not stillness, but instead, initiated varied focus and intensity of movement. Like my encounters with breathing and touching, witnessing was an experience of boundaryless and continuous transition. While witnessing, gestures, motions,

and weight shifts were intuitive responses rather than conscious choices. The lake's ever-shifting landscape and form affected the embodied specificity of my presence.

I know the lake was not intentionally moving for me, but I experienced its movement as a kind of intricate choreography in, with, and through my body. The ongoing movement of the lake, both subtle and immense, heightened my awareness of the subtle motion detectable in any assumed stillness. I sensed the lake as an extension of my body and my micro-movements. The growing embodied understanding of a web of affective relationality, of which I am not at the center, merged witnessing and moving together. These were no longer separate acts. This encounter with the practice of witnessing pushed me to reflect on my ecology and experience the environment as a co-material presence that is always already in movement together.

Conclusion

This is the end but also another beginning. I have offered three specific physical practices which arose from my posthuman praxis. And I discussed attending through intentional breathing experienced as mutual exchange, centering body knowledge with haptic intra-relational experiences of touch, and witnessing as both a practice of active material

engagement and ecological self-reflection. Might this praxis enact change in the relationship between humans and the environment in ways that matter beyond my own practice?

Within the field of environmental psychology, research suggests that investing in human-nature relationships and the actions they enact and evoke encourage environmentally responsible attitudes. Researcher Wesley Schultz and his team found that when people feel they are implicitly connected to the environment, they show more explicit concern and empathy (Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico, & Khazian, 2004). This implicit connection is referred to as our "ecological self," (Schultz, 2001) or our "environmental self-identity" (Van der Werff, Steg, & Keizer, 2013). Research also suggests that "interventions targeting environmental self-identity may be a more promising approach to promote pro-environmental behavior than interventions targeting values" (Van de Werff, Steg, & Keizer, 2013, p.55). A sense of environmental self-identity can be developed through direct experiences with nature. This supports the idea that feeling connected to nature and attuning to one's ecological self requires more than a shift in thinking but direct embodied personal experiences. Through my evolving somatic encounters, I experienced my ecological self-identity as co-constituting with nature as an intra-active force.

Performance studies and communications scholars David Terry and Ann Marie Todd (2014) claim "effective environmental activism must be able to not only critique existing relationships between humans and the broader environment but also offer positive, meaningful articulations of an alternative mode of belonging" (p. 11). An ecological self-identity foregrounded on a shared material vibrancy enacts a different mode of belonging, one in which humans are embedded, not simply record keepers of the world's flow and development. The threat of irreversible ecological damage accelerated by climate change is a disastrous situation. However, humans have agency and can activate and rework the matrix of crisis that all material beings are confronting. Additionally, because all matter exists as constellations of networks and intra-relations, there are opportunities to co-create a more equitable present.

Braidotti's call for an "affirmative ethic" outlines how this moment in time affords opportunities to reenvision and reinvent ecological relationships. They state,

The negative is not foundational but functional to the articulation of a practice of affirmation...Affirmation is not a disavowal of negativity but rather another way of working it, activating it, and extracting knowledge from it. (Braidotti, 2019, p. 62)

Braidotti's affirmative ethic is not a move to smooth over inequities of the past but to face them head-on. The racial and social injustices that shape the world and human existence mean that the effects of large-scale issues like the climate crisis are not evenly distributed or equally felt by all humans. While I propose it is essential to decenter "the human" to focus instead on shared materiality in climate solutions, it is also imperative that the real and material consequences for historically marginalized and oppressed communities who bear the brunt of the unfolding climate crisis are addressed.

In thinking about humans' intra-active position in the world, it is necessary to also consider the pervasive systems of land ownership that have sought to erase indigenous communities' ancestral connections to places across the globe. Post humanism implies a future beyond the category of human as it has thus far been realized, but what does that mean for the communities who have never fully been considered human? It is vital to be critical when engaging with posthuman theories and practices, but as the title of "praxis" denotes, the process is central. Praxis implies a continuous, ongoing process, unconcerned with arrival at one particular conclusion. In the repeated doing, in the attention to becoming, there is space to enact more affirmative ethical futures in the here and

now. By sharing my experiences, reflections, and connections to theory, I hope to contribute to this ongoing dialogue. Together, humans and non-humans have the capacity to "do" post humanism and make and remake reality until it serves all material beings.

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