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Embodied Ecocriticism: Improvisational Forms of Practice-Based Ecocritique

By

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THESIS

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Abstract:

The complexity and ubiquity of ecosocial crises demand that our methods of engaging with the world must become radical: far-reaching, fundamental-altering, and rooted firmly in the ground. This essay introduces and explores *embodied ecocriticism* as one possible answer to such an urgent transdisciplinary call. While traditional literary ecocriticism analyzes relationships between literature and environment, *embodied ecocriticism* reckons with the role of the critic as they participate in transcorporeal and relational intra-action. In the context of this essay, this is made visible through bodywork and earthwork, somatics and small-scale farming. Tracing feedback loops from idea to perception to action to impact and back again, the form and content of this essay reflect the recursive circuit that connects material to semiotic, nature to culture, and individual to environment. Understanding the physical and extra-physical bodies of ecocritics as contact zones between materialdiscursive theory and practice, this project employs autoethnography alongside traditional criticism to underscore the personal response-ability of scholars in sustainable world-making. Transforming self-centered and anthropocentric ways of being into collaborative *becoming-with*, we are presented with the opportunity to co-author multispecies ethnographies that prioritize symbiotic co-creation and emergence, and there is no better place to begin than in our own backyards and in our own bodies. The ongoing transaction and entanglement of humans with more-than-human counterparts identifies the body as synecdoche for the larger systems in which it is co-created and creating. Improvisational theory and social somatics reveal the personal and collective power of reuniting theory with practice in such critical physical action. Turning to the life and labor of a small farm as a particularly suitable location for fleshing out embodied ecocritical ‘fieldwork,’ this project understands alternative agricultures as improvisational forms of relational embodiment, drawing together the critical, environmental, and sensual concerns of applied ecocritique. I read my personal experience on the farm alongside David Mas Masumoto’s *Four Seasons in Five Senses: Things Worth Savoring* to explore how personal engagement with small-scale agroecologies models the confluence of embodied environmental theory and practice. Not ignoring the grim realities of a world shaped by capitalism but choosing instead to focus on the restorative power of co-creation and collective emergence, the *embodied ecocriticisms* explored throughout this project develop ever-more attentive and regenerative ways of being in, with, and of the world.

Keywords:

agriculture, ecocriticism, embodiment, emergence, environmental humanities, improvisation, multispecies kin, response-ability, social somatic

Embodied Ecocriticism: Improvisational Forms of Practice-Based Ecocritique

What value and respect do we give to our bodies? What uses do we have for them? What relation do we see, if any, between body and mind, or body and soul? What connections or responsibilities do we maintain between our bodies and the earth? —Wendell Berry, “The Body and the Earth”

1. Introduction: embodied ecocriticism

This essay combines critical theory, improvisation, social somatics, agricultural engagement, and storytelling to imagine one path toward a more sense-able and response-able way of becoming-with the world. In addition to my academic training, I am drawing on twenty-five years of dance and movement education and an ongoing practice of small-scale farming. Writing from the shifting and porous boundaries between theory and practice rather than simply about them, the ideas that come together in and as this essay are as much practice-based as they are theoretical, as much autoethnographic as they are esoteric. Dissatisfied with traditional forms of capitalist cultural reproduction¹ and trusting that “soulful and constructive politics are possible, as a way of relating that can build worlds of common resonance and sensitivity,”² I am emboldened to make the politics of this essay as personal as possible and the personal as political as can be. For this reason, each section begins with a brief note outlining how I’ve come to know—through practice—that which I’m about to present. By ear-marking the essay as an outpouring of practice-based research, I join the ranks of other practitioners who use the term to argue “that they are as important to the generation of knowledge as more theoretically, critically or empirically based research

¹ “Capitalist values such as private property, competition, profit and exploitation are much more than matters of the market and ideology. It is impossible to deny the influence of these values in vital areas of social relations, where feelings (jealousy, possessiveness, insecurity) and situations (competition, betrayal and lies) seem to reproduce on the micro-social level, the authoritarianism of states and corporations. The political starts in the personal, and this is where the mechanisms that maintain social order are born” (Goia 1).

² “Introduction,” *nanopolitics handbook: the nanopolitics group*. Plotegher, Zechner and Rübner Hansen, eds.

methods.”³ While I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to muddy the scholarly waters in this way, I would prefer to adopt Ron Finley’s approach, who says, “If you want to meet with me, come to the garden with your shovel so we can plant some shit.”⁴ In a perfect world, we would be discussing these ideas as we plant a row of collards, reinforce the chicken coop, or stretch out our tired hamstrings. Until then, I offer autoethnographic insights and—like ripe peaches dangling from the branch—applicable asides from a veteran in ‘the field.’

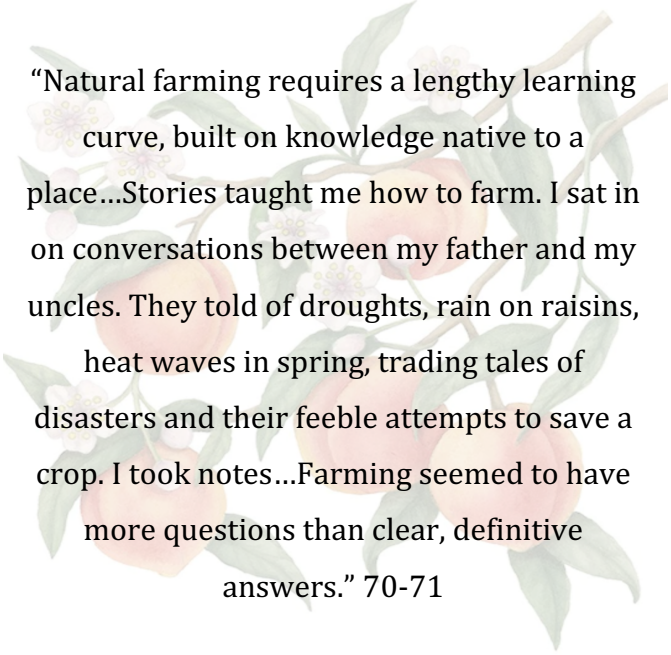
David ‘Mas’ Masumoto is a sensei (third generation) Japanese-American farmer at the Masumoto Family Farm in the Central Valley of California. The recipient of numerous awards and appointments, author of eleven books, and subject of a nationally aired documentary, Mas and his family have become the faces of organic family farming in America. On their 80 acres, the Masumotos grow peaches, nectarines, apricots, and raisin grapes. They also grow inter-generational land stewardship, ancestral wisdoms, and stories. The connection between stories and fruit, culture and nature, or matter and meaning is what keeps Mas coming back to his writing desk, and it is this dedication to telling stories that matter⁵ that draws me to his work. Throughout this essay, I provide a selection of Mas’s words from his book *Four Seasons in Five Senses: Things Worth Savoring as examples of an envired, embodied refrain*. An experienced farmer, philosopher, and poet, Mas wears every hat as he takes readers through a

³ Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, 2.

⁴ “Ron Finley: A Guerrilla Gardener in South Central LA,” TED: Ideas Worth Spreading.

⁵ “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with...it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories” (Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 12).

sensorial tour of the farm and the cultural, historical, and economic contexts that shape it. The ways in which Mas interacts with and describes this world are hard-won yet sensitive, deeply personal yet intended to be shared. It is an honor to present his writing alongside mine as a polyvocal incantation⁶ toward embodied becoming-with.



“Natural farming requires a lengthy learning curve, built on knowledge native to a place...Stories taught me how to farm. I sat in on conversations between my father and my uncles. They told of droughts, rain on raisins, heat waves in spring, trading tales of disasters and their feeble attempts to save a crop. I took notes...Farming seemed to have more questions than clear, definitive answers.” 70-71



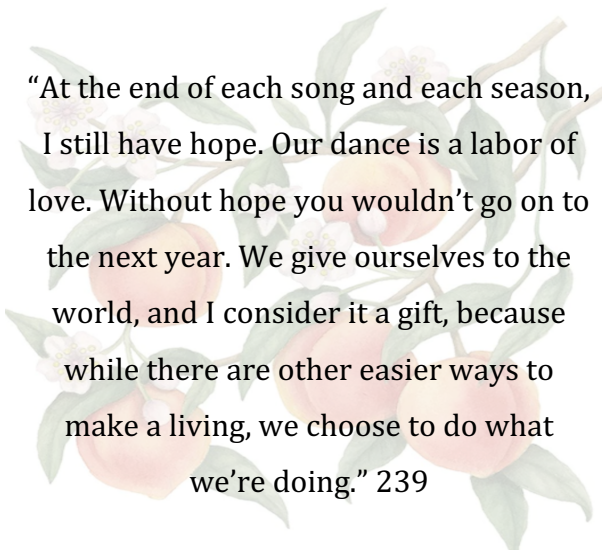
For too long, environmental scholars have operated as though our theories *about* the world are not also *of* it; as though our ideas exist in separate, neater realms than the messy material stuff that co-creates them. An embarrassing reanimation of the nature/culture divide that ecocritical work often attempts to deconstruct,⁷ we’ve forgotten that just like the stories we analyze, our theories about them “are not mere metaphysical pronouncements on the world from some presumed position of exteriority,” and that “theories are living and breathing reconfigurings of the world.”⁸ This is not to say that experience-driven, praxis-oriented critique is not present in literary studies at large. For

⁶ Adopting Natasha Myers’ approach from “How to grow livable worlds: Ten not-so-easy steps,” which she explains is, “not so much a research talk, as an incantation. We have to remember that we are living under a spell, and this spell making it impossible for us grow livable worlds. It’s time to cast another spell, to call other worlds into being, to conjure other worlds within this world” (1).

⁷ I am by no means the first to suggest that there is an uncomfortable distance between theory and materiality, especially in fields of cultural and literary studies. In “When Theory Is Not Enough: A Material Turn in Gender Studies,” Ingrid Hotz-Davies cites Eve Kosofsky Sedwick as “most virulently and wittily” critiquing a version of ‘theory,’ “that which in all seriousness believes that ‘the distance of any...account [of human beings or cultures] from a biological basis is assumed to correlate near-precisely with its potential for doing justice to difference...and to the possibility of change’” (1).

⁸ Karen Barad, “On Touching: The Inhuman that Therefore I Am,” 2.

practitioners of critical race, gender, and dis/ability studies, the personal has never been apolitical; and theory is impossible to disentangle from practice. Working and living within these frameworks demands that critics “think about how theory influences practice and, more specifically, how our experiences, conversations, and practices influence theory.”⁹ Despite the fact that ecocriticism has been called-out for a noted lack of reflective and reflexive follow through,¹⁰ creating ideas and perceptions to facilitate wild and wooly worldings isn’t a new concept for literary scholars in the environmental humanities.



“At the end of each song and each season,
I still have hope. Our dance is a labor of
love. Without hope you wouldn’t go on to
the next year. We give ourselves to the
world, and I consider it a gift, because
while there are other easier ways to
make a living, we choose to do what
we’re doing.” 239

Finding ways to put theory into practice
within diverse socio-environmental realities
has been a defining feature of third-wave
ecocriticism,¹¹ and we already have what we
need: we are surrounded with textual
accounts of multispecies polyvocality,
identify comfortably as transcorporeal
creatures making do in the Anthrop-Cthulu-

⁹ Kelly P. Vaughan and Gia Super, 1107.

¹⁰ “Ecocritics continue to invoke the virtues of interdisciplinary research, but the invoking has always been somewhat ritual in character and, when it comes to conducting the actual research, the execution rather limited; as a whole, the field now risks becoming complacent and hidebound thanks to its hard-won and newfound respectability as a branch of literary studies” (Bergthaller et al. 262).

¹¹ Examples include Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), and Sarah Jacquette Ray’s *The Ecological Other* (2013). In his 2010 essay “The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline,” Scott Slovic identifies these trends as representative of ‘third-wave’ ecocriticism: “global concepts of place being explored in fruitful tension with neo-bioregionalist attachments to specific locales,” “raising questions about the possibility of post-national and post-ethnic visions of human experience of the environment, while... consider[ing] the importance of retaining ethnic identities but placing ethnically inflected experience in broader, comparative contexts (including postcolonial contexts),” “the new wave of ‘material’ ecofeminism,” “intensified focus on the concept of ‘animality,’” “critiques from within,” and a “‘polymorphously activist’ tendency” (7).

Capital-Plantation-ocene,¹² and have been taught to speak the language of entanglement by our co-constitutive networks of oddkin. But the *knowledge* of these realities cannot live up to their potential when theorizing isn't understood, taught, and performed as a materially intra-active process. Cultivating a practice-based ecocritique—what I am calling *embodied ecocriticism*—demands physical actions, material manipulations, and intentionally aware engagements with human and more-than-human others to fill the gaps in our criticism and make the most of our role in the entanglement.¹³ Not satisfied to simply acknowledge that the semiotic is always-already material, mindful multispecies encounters confront a long tradition of ecocritical analysis that has remained largely within the realm of the symbolic.¹⁴ It's time to get messy.

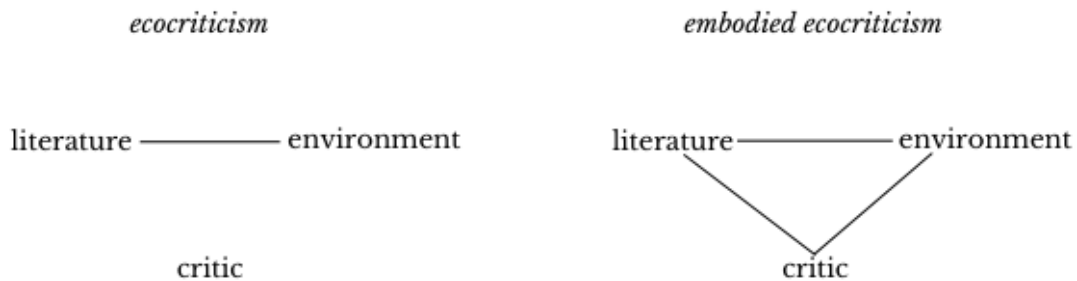
In the midst of global ecosocial crisis, environmental critique without embodied engagement is insufficient, even negligent. Concern cannot be confined to special edition journals or corralled behind classroom lecterns. We cannot shy away from the physical

¹² “The Anthropocene marks a geological era in the history of the planet in which humans as a collective are said to have become a geophysical force on a planetary scale... and in doing so affecting the functioning of the Earth system as a whole...Reframing capitalism as a global relation and system of putting human and nonhuman nature to work at a very low economic cost, [Jason Moore's] concept of the Capitalocene refers to a ‘world-ecology of capital, power, and nature’ (Moore 6)” (Barla 1). And in Donna Haraway's figuring of the Chthulucene, she “tries to find a position beyond catastrophism on one side, and a naïve faith in technologically fixing the wounds that have been inflicted to the Earth and its inhabitants on the other. The Chthulucene is...a ‘thoroughly terran, muddled, and mortal’ site (Haraway 55) where our multispecies becomings in the present and future are at stake” (Barla 1). Finally, the Plantationocene “suggests that large-scale, export-oriented agriculture dependent on forced labor has played a dominant role in structuring modern life since the insertion of European power in the Americas, Asia, and Africa” (Wolford 1).

¹³ ‘Making the most’ is intentionally vague, as reinventing the critic's role within the literary field and physical environment sometimes requires maximizing our impact, and other times requires diminishing it.

¹⁴ Despite the new/materialist ‘turn’ in literary studies that has blossomed and somewhat faded since the time of Barad's writing (2003), these remarks on the importance of language remain relevant, especially as we enter an age of remote, distanced, and virtual living: “Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing”—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation...it seems to be symptomatic of the extent to which matters of “fact” (so to speak) have been replaced with matters of signification (no scare quotes here). Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter” (Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” 801).

encounters and even labor that is proposed by our scholarship. If ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii), embodied ecocriticism does away with the illusion that the critic is somehow external to the configuration or exempt from the onto-epistemological ethics of materialsemiotic entanglement.¹⁵



We are able to measure, critique, and analyze the relationships between literature and the physical environment because we *are* these relationships; we feel the effects and cause effects in turn, un/making and mattering all the way down. In *What is the Measure of Nothingness: Infinity, Virtuality, Justice*, Karen Barad explains that observations and evaluations do not exist in a vacuum:

Measurements are agential practices... they help constitute and are a constitutive part of what is being measured. In other words, measurements are intra-actions (not interactions): the agencies of observation are inseparable from that which is observed. Measurements are world-making: matter and meaning do not preexist, but rather are co-constituted via measurement intra-actions. If the measurement

¹⁵ "The point is not simply to put the observer or knower back in the world (as if the world were a container and we needed merely to acknowledge our situatedness in it) but to understand and take account of the fact that we too are part of the world's differential becoming...We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming" (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 91, 185)

intra-action plays a constitutive role in what is measured, then it matters how something is explored. (6)

Taking seriously the intra-active agency of ecocritical scholarship, embodied ecocriticism braids physical practices together with traditional critique to emphasize and hone the worldmaking capacities of ecocritical measurement. In this way, the physical and extra-physical bodies of critics are the contact zones and testing grounds for materialdiscursive theorypractice, making first-person experience an invaluable tool for grappling with the application and implications of our measurements' agential cuts.¹⁶

In 1991, Mary Louise Pratt used the term 'contact zone' to describe "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath" (34). Since then, the phrase has been taken up by many to identify and explore spaces of encounter. In their introduction to a special edition of *Nature and Space* dedicated to 'More-Than-Human Contact Zones,' Jenny Isaacs and Ariel Otruba take up Pratt's term to examine the intersecting forces of environmental criticism, including the critic: "Because a 'more-than-human' contact approach is focused first on the local scale of different bodies in encounter, such research often implicates *the researchers themselves*," and then "extends environmental justice concerns beyond the present, the human, and the local to 'higher'

¹⁶ "Intra-actions include the larger material arrangement (i.e., set of material practices) that effects an agential cut between 'subject' and 'object' (in contrast to the more familiar Cartesian cut which takes this distinction for granted). That is, the agential cut enacts a resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy. In other words, relata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions... Moreover, the agential cut enacts a causal structure among components of a phenomenon in the marking of the 'measuring agencies' ('effect') by the 'measured object' ('cause'). It is in this sense that the measurement can be said to express particular facts about that which is measured; that is, the measurement is a causal intra-action and not 'any old playing around'" (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 139-140).

scales,” (703, emphasis added). Perceiving and experiencing our bodies as more-than-human, material-semiotic, ecosocial contact zones is essential for an accurate and effective political ecology and allows practitioners to approach issues on a number of scales. Knowing ourselves as the same basic “stuff”—all stories and stardust—as the earth and its systems, our bodies become cyphers for the small and large forces that construct every intra-action and encounter. Translating the ontological and epistemological, local and geohistoric, material and semiotic into a scale or application we are familiar with knowing and feeling, our bodies actively render the universe. These are the bodies that Donna Haraway, in her landmark “Situated Knowledges” essay, describes as “material-semiotic generative nodes,” with boundaries that “materialize in social interaction,” and “shift from within” (595). Knowing the world by way of the body and body by way of the world is to understand them as one and the same; tricky, porous, fluid creatures, bursting with creative capacities and trickster tendencies even in the face of late-stage capitalism, even under the weight of ongoing injustice. In this way, the contact zone is also somewhat ‘Twilight Zone;’ freaky and fantastic, dystopian and supernatural, a place to reflect on primitive pasts and dream up speculative futures. The slipperiness of these subjects requires careful and transdisciplinary attention, but the payoff is nothing less than optimism amid collapse. Haraway muses, “Perhaps our hopes for accountability, for politics, for ecofeminism, turn on revisioning the world as coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse” (595). Thankfully, we already know the local dialect: ‘trickster’ is the mother tongue of all bodies and the language they’ve been whispering all along. Once we learn how to listen, we too can lend our voices to the coyote chorus of co-creation.

Living and theorizing the body as contact zone requires tending to the ways nature/cultural forces make, shape, move through, and are made by the body. But because bodies are key locations in and on which harmful cultural constructions are “installed, defended, called for, [and] impelled,”¹⁷ the body remains “an extraordinarily volatile site”¹⁸ for political theory and action. Reclaiming the physical and symbolic forces of the body, feminists, scholars and philosophers of science, and new materialists¹⁹ have argued that biologically and materially centered approaches are essential to the reconceptualization of matter and meaning, even, “prerequisites for any plausible account of coexistence and its conditions in the twenty-first century.”²⁰ And yet, referring to the body’s extra/biological capacities in most academic settings—mere mention of feeling, sensation, or intuition—continues to be looked at askance. Plenty of scholarship has revealed that the disembodied, so-called ‘rational,’ scholarly mode is little more than the performance of upper class cis-male heteronormative whiteness,²¹ but the enduring legacy of mind-body dualism—preserved as it is in patriarchal perpetuity—continues to conflate ‘reason’ with the erasure of all divergent bodies. This distance from (and even disdain for) the body is deeply

¹⁷ “When Theory is Not Enough: A Material Turn in Gender Studies,” Ingrid Hotz-Davies, 1.

¹⁸ Alaimo and Hekman, 1.

¹⁹ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman’s *Material Feminisms* (2007), Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2009), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s *New Materialisms*, Sandra Harding’s *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986) and *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women’s Lives* (1991), Iris van der Tuin’s *Generational Feminism* (2015), Elizabeth A. Wilson’s *Gut Feminism* (2015), N. Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), and the work of Karen Barad and Donna Haraway have been absolutely essential in moving this conversation forward.

²⁰ Coole and Frost, 2.

²¹ “Feminist scholars have studied women, men, and social relations between the genders within, across, and insistently against the conceptual frameworks of the disciplines. In each area we have come to understand that what we took to be humanly inclusive problematics, concepts, theories, objective methodologies, and transcendental truths are in fact far less than that. Instead, these products of thought bear the mark of their collective and individual creators, and the creators in turn have been distinctively marked as to gender, class, race, and culture. We can now discern the effects of these cultural markings in the discrepancies between the methods of knowing and the interpretations of the world provided by the creators of modern Western culture and those characteristic of the rest of us” (Harding 15).

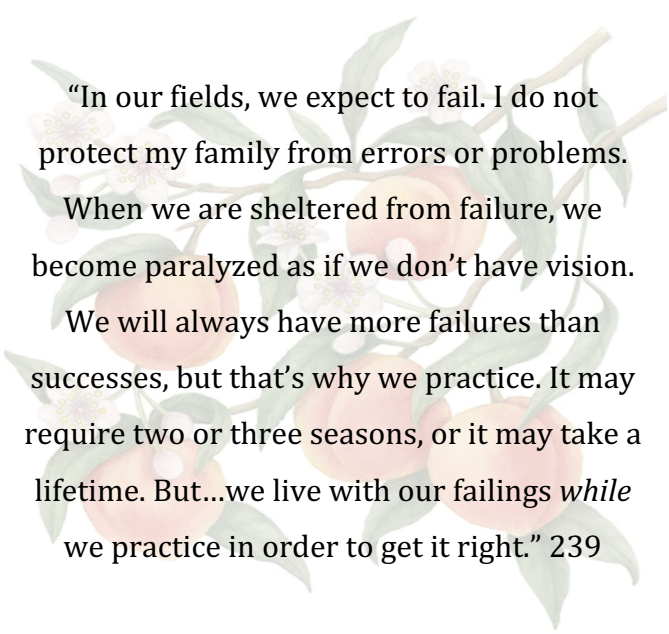
entrenched in the Western philosophical genealogy,²² and antibiological critique has been a way for ‘disruptive’ theoretical movements to gain traction in the academy. Elizabeth Wilson has been sharp in her critique of feminist theory’s antibiological tendencies and undaunted in exploring what biology “might be able to do for—do to—feminist theory” (2). In her book *Gut Feminism*, Wilson explores feminism’s simultaneous obsession with the body and aversion to its empirical exploration.²³ In her discussion of “the condensation of viscera and mood,” or “the alliances of internal organs and minded states,” she forges a method for thinking about “minded states as enacted not just by the brain but also by the distributed network of nerves that innervates the periphery” (5). She calls this method “‘gut feminism’—a feminist theory that is able to think innovatively and organically at the same time” (17). Embodied ecocriticism, invested in the cultivation of embodied cognition

²² To grasp knowledge, Plato infamously suggested that “the god-like rational soul should rule over the slave-like mortal body,” and goes on to (rather dramatically) claim that, “if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself...the wisdom which we desire and upon which we profess to have set our hearts will be attainable only when we are dead, and not in our lifetime” (“Phaedo,” in *The Collected Dialogues*, 49). The logic of this dualism is often reinscribed with added layers of racialized and/or gendered difference. Examining this asymmetry in the mid 1990’s (formative years for third-wave feminism), in “Is the Feminist Critique of Reason Rational?,” Linda Martín Alcoff writes that: “reason has been defined in opposition to the feminine, such that it requires the exclusion, transcendence, and even the domination of the feminine, of women, and of women’s traditional concerns, which have been characterized as the site of the irreducibly irrational particular and corporeal” (8). Sadly, not much has changed. In, “Teaching while Black: racial dynamics, evaluations, and the role of White females in the Canadian academy in carrying the racism torch,” Beverly-Jean Daniel writes that, “In the early 1990s, authors such as Linda Carby, Roxanna Ng, and Himanni Bannerji, some of whom were my professors, were writing about the experiences of racialized faculty in the academy. What experiences populate the landscape of teaching for Black educators in academic institutions today? Have the burdens of race lessened? Have the ivory towers become places where racialized faculty members can grow and flourish without everyday racism and racial micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions? Unfortunately, more than 25 years later, for those of us who have decided to enter academia as faculty members and have varying shades of Black skin, the experience can parallel the practice of ‘driving while Black’” (21).

²³ “In the last thirty years, feminist have produced pioneering theories of the body—they have demonstrated how bodies vary across different cultural context and historical periods, how structures of gender and sexuality and race constitute bodies in very particular ways, how bodies are being fashioned by biomedical and technological invention. Yet despite its avowed interest in the body, this feminist work is often reluctant to engage directly with biological data. Most feminist research on the body has relied on the methods of social constructivism, which explore how cultural, social, symbolic, or linguistic constraints govern and sculpt the kinds of bodies we have. These theorists tend not to be very curious about the details of empirical claims in genetics, neurophysiology, evolutionary biology, pharmacology, or biochemistry” (3).

and active theorizing, is indebted to Wilson’s work and the work of other feminist scholars and philosophers of science, materiality, ecology, and metaphysics who “work the equipment, theoretical and experimental, without any illusion of clean hands and [who] unapologetically express their enthusiasm and amazement for the world and the possibilities of cultivating just relationships among the world’s diverse ways of being/becoming.”²⁴

Never shying away from the inherent complications of enfleshed and attentive analysis, embodied ecocriticism cherishes the indivisibility of body and mind, personal and political, science and mysticism, theory and practice, small-scale and universal, individual and environment. Rather



“In our fields, we expect to fail. I do not protect my family from errors or problems.

When we are sheltered from failure, we become paralyzed as if we don’t have vision.

We will always have more failures than successes, but that’s why we practice. It may require two or three seasons, or it may take a lifetime. But...we live with our failings *while* we practice in order to get it right.” 239

than consolidating contradictions or solving for X, an embodied approach carves out ways of caring for the unique contours of ongoing and emergent relationships. This is not about being right: it’s about working-toward. Unfolding as one re/consideration of being, body, and environment, this project proposes careful noticing and participation in materialesemiotic intra-action toward the facilitation of equitable, generative relationships. To be sense-able and response-able is slow and uncertain work. But what else is there? Within the fast-tracked timelines of Anthropocene living and dying, embodied ecocriticism proposes a critical de-acceleration, deepening, and digging-in. Learning to feel and reflect

²⁴ Karen Barad, “On Touching,” (1).

so we can pivot, reconfigure, and adjust when needed not only results in (more) attentive and in-touch scholarship, but also, in individuals and communities whose actions are more closely aligned with their ideas, values, and visions.²⁵ There is much to be cultivated here.

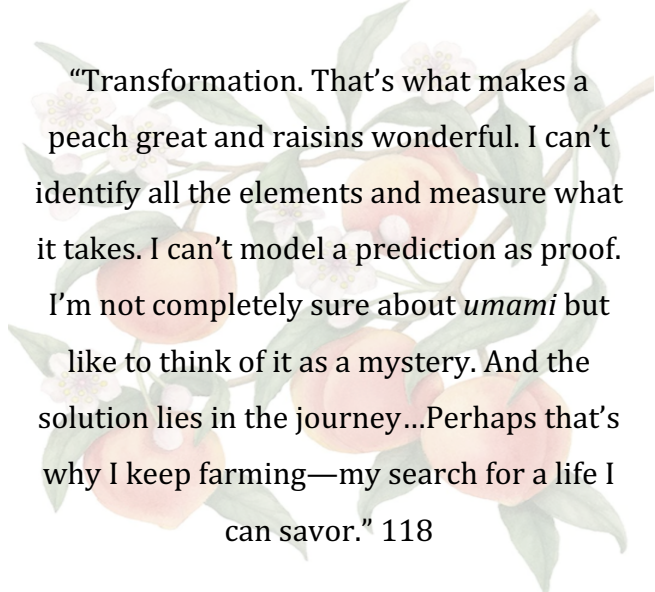
2. From being to *becoming-with*: putting theory to practice

*Make no bones about it: this is spiritual work. This is magic. This is a conjuring. Even though the following section presents as a rather straightforward materialist account of shifting perspectives, it is simultaneously a deep and reverent bow honoring the fundamental and fundamentally undefinable forces that bind and move and make us. Whether these forces are thought of as energy or interconnection, god or tao, animism or relational epistemology, re/building sustainable relationships with the more than human world requires the acknowledgement and cultivation of collective magic that compels and constructs an actionable ethics of care. This is not the so-called sustainability of capitalist greenwashing, deployed to cover exploitation and violence.²⁶ This is sustainability as deep and inter-dependent connection, with an eye on future generations of human and more than human kin and an ear tuned to the songs of plants, soil, fungi, minerals, water, and wind. It is the fundamental lesson of ancestral wisdom, local survival, and Indigenous knowledges. Such sustainability indicates an alternative way of being, but it is by no means a new or foreign one. As David Landis Barnhill writes in his introduction to *At Home On The Earth: Becoming**

²⁵ "About Us," Generative Somatics. <https://generativesomatics.org/about-us/>

²⁶ As Natasha Myers writes in "How to grow livable worlds: Ten not-so-easy steps," capitalism has come into high gear "in its efforts to 'go green' and 'save the world.' Don't believe the hype of sustainability rhetoric. The worlds built by colonialism and capitalism are unlivable for us all...Refuse to be lured into those climate change edutainment complexes, those gleaming glass, metal, and concrete infrastructures whose capital- and labour-intensive designs exquisitely expose the ruse of sustainability as an aesthetic maneuver grounded in Edenic visions of nature. This is not the kind of green that will save us" (2).

Native to Our Place, “we are engaging with an ongoing struggle, a search for a new relation



“Transformation. That’s what makes a peach great and raisins wonderful. I can’t identify all the elements and measure what it takes. I can’t model a prediction as proof. I’m not completely sure about *umami* but like to think of it as a mystery. And the solution lies in the journey...Perhaps that’s why I keep farming—my search for a life I can savor.” 118

*to the earth. It is also an old relationship: to be in and of place, to truly inhabit the land rather than just to live on it...all of life is a mutual co-arising: everything conditions and is conditioned by everything else” (13).
Time to dust off your icons and brush up on your spells, the ceremony is about to begin.*



It makes little difference whether we place the golden spike of collective eco-denial alongside Guy Stewart Callendar’s 1938 publication connecting CO₂ and global warming,²⁷ in 1962 with the release of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, or in 2018, when the special report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that the world is not on track to limit temperature rise to 1.5°C. Perhaps it occurred in 2020, when a global pandemic forced the world to shelter in place with no end in sight. Regardless, for nearly a century the American public has had access to facts proving anthropogenic climate change, with evidence mounting even faster than the bodies.²⁸ For just as long, we’ve known that capitalism is destroying the world even as it creates it, and now, in addition to all the

²⁷ In 1938, Callendar published research showing that the Earth’s land temperature had increased over the previous fifty years. He also suggested that the production of carbon dioxide by the combustion of fossil fuels was responsible for a large part of this warming, which became known for a time as the ‘Callendar Effect’ (Hawkins and Jones, 2013).

²⁸ In 2007, a statement from Mr. Ahmed Djoghlaif, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Environment Programme plainly offers, “We are indeed experiencing the greatest wave of extinctions since the disappearance of the dinosaurs. Extinction rates are rising by a factor of up to 1,000 above natural rates. Every hour, three species disappear. Every day, up to 150 species are lost. Every year, between 18,000 and 55,000 species become extinct. The cause: human activities.”

regular consequences—exploitation, exhaustion, inequality—the wings are beginning to shake: the impacts of compounding climate, food, energy, and finance crises are leeching into the bedrock, destroying the very world that has been formed in capitalism’s image. In *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, Jason Moore writes that, “Global warming poses a fundamental threat not only to humanity, but, more immediately and directly, to capitalism itself” (278). Ours is a moment of incredible precarity and incredible possibility, as cracks in the foundation make way for new life even as it compromises the integrity of our entire world ecology (Moore 15). And yet, it doesn’t seem to matter whether we brand these ecosocial facts as inconvenient or irrefutable; they don’t seem to possess the power to alter our behavior. For many individuals, the affective state of the Anthropocene is simply overwhelming; infuriated and depressed, it’s easy to feel powerless. For states or corporations, the overwhelming element is often simply greed. These crises are more than climatological: they are cultural, spiritual, and embodied. In “Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities,” Hannes Bergthaller writes that, “The ecological crisis is not only a crisis of the physical environment but also a crisis of the cultural and social environment—of the systems of representation and of the institutional structures through which contemporary society understands and responds to environmental change or fails to do so: hence the crisis” (262). The systems of representation by which we know ourselves and our environments are inextricable as they are inept. How can we dream of ameliorating our behavior when the basic understanding of our existence remains unexamined? And so, before we begin asking ourselves what to *do* regarding environmental crises, we must first address how to know ourselves as and within the world.

The fragile state of our naturecultures²⁹ demand that we unlearn being and practice knowing ourselves as *becoming*, an interstitial state along the path leading to eventual awareness and engagement of *becoming-with*. Becoming denotes multifaceted processes of deterritorialization³⁰ surrounding participating players, networks, and fields; lines of flight exist not only between actants but within them, so that “[o]ntology and epistemology, subject and object, theory and practice, and all manner of binary configurations no longer operate so finitely” (Bayley 56). The goal is not to swap being human for being animal or being plant, but to fundamentally transform our understanding and experience of being as discreet, singular, organic, whole, mappable, or fixed in any way. To do away with this isolated experience of being in the cultivation of becoming is to embrace involution, adaptation, multiplicity, a proliferation of ways of being.³¹ Becoming signifies “different possibilities occurring at each moment” and a coming into existence through “the fusion of social and material phenomenon, which are not distinct entities” (Cassar 1). To recognize and cultivate this lively indistinction or entanglement, we must acknowledge and engage the distinct and even contradictory influences that comprise us. Willfully cultivating such multiplicity, even when it is uncomfortable (“such as becoming one with the other and

²⁹ Nicholas Malone and Kathryn Ovenden define natureculture as, “a synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed” (1).

³⁰ “Deleuze and Guattari use the word deterritorialization to investigate how bodies, organisms, or organisations resist fixity. Deterritorialisation is a process by which systems demonstrate their creativity by freeing up relations that have been coded into rigid meanings, and reordering them into new organisations. This is a process of decoding, which ‘strike[s] out at the self same codes that produce rigid meanings as opposed to translating meaning’ (Parr 2005, p. 68). Thus deterritorialization is a process that destabilizes or disrupts fixed meanings, rather than something that sets out to produce a translated, correspondent or commensurate meaning. In other words, it complicates the idea that anything at all is inherently and indefinitely stable” (Bayley 37).

³¹ “Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation. Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, ‘appearing,’ ‘being,’ ‘equaling,’ or ‘producing’” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 239)

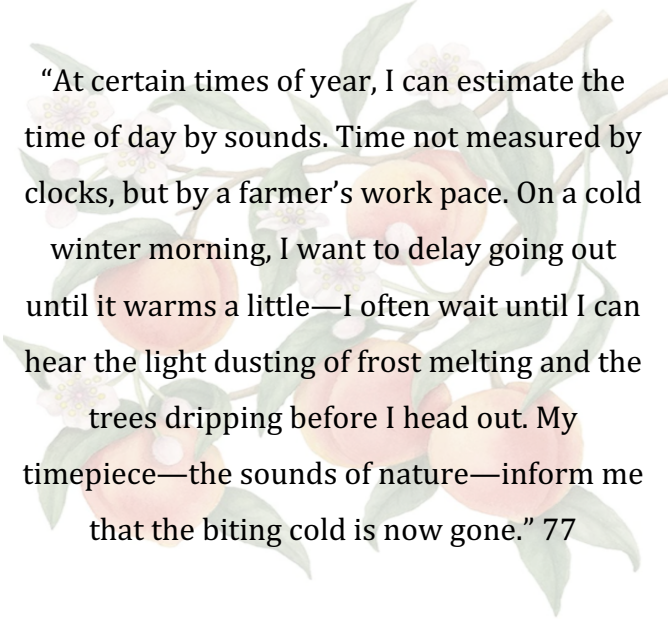
feeling estranged simultaneously” (Cassar 1)), allows us to grow our capacities for knowing and being; it is necessary for healing trauma, cultivating empathy, and regenerating good relationship with human and more than human others.³² In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Karen Barad describes how ontological entanglement determines an ethics of becoming, in that we “(but not only ‘we humans’) are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled,” and so, “ethics is therefore not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” (393). Becoming demands a practice and re/negotiation of responsibility and accountability; no part or role is pre-determined, so we must take time and space to carefully notice, consider, and adjust to the diverse configurations of connectivity and relationality we pass through (materially, semiotically, physically, spiritually, etc.). In doing so, we begin to see the opportunity to up the ante yet again.

Knowing the whorl of becoming as always already *becoming-with* is to reckon with the ongoing and ever-shifting response-abilities of intra-action and co-creation.³³ In “Fables of Response-ability: Feminist Science Studies as Didactic Literature,” Martha Kenney identifies response-ability as a term that denotes the ongoing development of “relational

³² In his book *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies*, trauma specialist, somatic teacher, and therapist Resmaa Menakem writes that “Healing trauma involves recognizing, accepting, and moving through pain—clean pain. It often means facing what you don’t want to face—what you have been reflexively avoiding or fleeing. By walking into that pain, experiencing it fully, and moving through it, you metabolize it and put an end to it. In the process, you also grow, create more room in your nervous system for flow and coherence, and build your capacity for further growth” (165).

³³ Barad uses intra-action (as opposed to interaction) to underscore the dynamism of forces that make matter and meaning: the primary ontological units are not “things” but phenomena—dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world. And the primary semantic units are not “words” but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted. This dynamism is agency. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming” (141).

ethics and politics enacted in everyday practices of living in our more-than-human world” (7). Kenney goes on to explain that what counts as response-ability “is not known in advance,” but that it “emerges within a particular context and among sometimes unlikely partners, who learn how to



“At certain times of year, I can estimate the time of day by sounds. Time not measured by clocks, but by a farmer’s work pace. On a cold winter morning, I want to delay going out until it warms a little—I often wait until I can hear the light dusting of frost melting and the trees dripping before I head out. My timepiece—the sounds of nature—inform me that the biting cold is now gone.” 77

affect and to become affected by one another” (7). Not only humans call, and not only humans respond, so how we pay attention determines whether and how we hear and reply. *Becoming-with* is a form of attentive awareness that honors the ethics of entanglement. In “Becoming-With: Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities,” Kate Write explains that *becoming-with* broadens “the frames of what registers to us and so what matters to us (in part by recognizing what matters to others)” (279). This political ecological approach to epistemology (in that it is concerned with the inter-relation of actants as well as the relation of actants with their physical and social surroundings) allows us to know ourselves and especially our bodies as the contact zones in which physical-emotional / material-semiotic capacities and contingencies emerge as relations with other human and more-than-human counterparts. Write sees this as “a metaphysics grounded in connection, challenging delusions of separation...from the Earth’s ecological community” (278-279). Staring down the barrel of the Anthropocene, *becoming-with* attends to the connections

that comprise us and, in a heightened state of physical and discursive awareness, feels out ways for us to act sense-ably and response-ably in turn.

Moving from being to becoming and from becoming to *becoming-with* requires a shift in focus from the agency of the individual to the power of the assemblage and from the power of assemblage to the infinite potential of emergence. It requires stepping out of a self-centered mode of being (even if this is developed as a survival strategy) and into one that centers the relations that enable an unfolding of emergence. In her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, author and activist adrienne maree brown describes emergence as, “the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions” (3). It is a concept that acknowledges the alchemy of relationship to co-create “beyond what the sum of it’s parts could even imagine,” and the magic that transforms small bonds into patterns, into ecosystems, and societies (3). brown provides examples of emergence in nature—mycelial networks, the multiplicity of wavicles, quantum entanglement, the murmuration of starlings—to argue that emergence “is another way of speaking about the connective tissue of all that exists,” and yet, is also a concept and method for organizing provides an accessible model for recognizing and facilitating social bonds (brown 47). By relating collective organizing to patterns in the natural world, brown’s demonstrations how emergence—an Aristotelian scientific and philosophical concept that is now of interest to quantum chemists, molecular biochemists, and systems theorists—provides a model for personal and collective liberation in the face of ecosocial catastrophe:

[Emergence] is another way of speaking about the connective tissue of all that exists—the way, the Tao, the force, change, God/dess, life. Birds flocking, cells

splitting, fungi whispering underground. Emergence emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and mind. With our human gift of reasoning, we have tried to control or overcome the emergent processes that are our own nature, the processes of the planet we live on, and the universe we call home. The result is crisis at each scale we are aware of, from our deepest inner moral sensibilities to the collective scale of climate and planetary health and beyond, to our species in relation to space and time. The crisis is everywhere, massive massive massive. And we are small. But emergence notices the way small action and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for. (3)

Conjoining dependence and autonomy, emergence is the mediation of dualism and reductionism (O'Connor 1), it is that which is irreducible and non-deductible,³⁴ and it provides a model “for humans to practice being in right relationship to our home and each other” (brown 24). With its eye ever-trained on emergent possibilities, *becoming-with* traces a line of flight fusing ontology and materiality and in doing so passes through the body as we sense and shape the universe. Awareness of being caught up in intra-action enables the development of “our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long

³⁴ “To whatever degree we might imagine our knowledge of the properties of the several ingredients of a living body to be extended and perfected, it is certain that no mere summing up of the separate actions of those elements will ever amount to the action of the living body itself” (John Stuart Mill, *A System Of Logic, Ratiocinative And Inductive*, 460).

for” (brown 24). When we *become-with*, we notice and care for the specific ways emergence manifests and relationalities are congealed in discreet and diffractive bodies, events, and actions.³⁵

Considering *becoming-with* as a conscious facilitation of regenerative emergence allows us to comprehend ourselves as orchestras of matter and meaning, of plant, animal, fungal, bacterial, cultural, historical, and political co-creation, and to take response-ability for our part in the song. If we wish to intercede in our world’s ecosocial crises, we must assume an active role in the dynamic entanglements that make it, dedicating our time, energy, and labor to human and more-than-human liberation. I am by no means the first to suggest this, and in recent years, thinkers and doers from many fields have worked to center “affect, the body, and materiality” in environmental and political theory, a movement Laura Ephraim calls “the worldly turn” (6). The trans/feminist, new materialist, somatic, green, environmental, and social justice contributions to this turn all “rebuke traditional portrayals of material reality as an essence, cause, limit, or other to politics,” recasting reality as, “the often unpredictable outcome of embodied, agonistic encounters among diverse human and nonhuman beings” (6). The products of this conjuring are “at once material and meaningful, organic and artificial, corporeal and discursive” (6). We can think of this work as world-building politics³⁶ or simply as worlding, “an active, ontological process...informed by our turning of attention to a certain experience, place or encounter

³⁵ “We become-with life as it is manifested through the body of another, and lives are always connected to worlds. This multispecies becoming-with leaves us open to the responsive capacity of all earthly life, and this has important implications for ethics” (Wright 280).

³⁶ “By ‘world-building politics,’ I mean the embodied practices through which scientists and citizens struggle with and against each other to engage the material reality of their environments and bodies and compose a common world from these heterogeneous elements. World-building practices instantiate relations of proximity, affinity, resemblance, or repulsion among disparate human and nonhuman beings, excluding some from the assemblages that secure the power, prestige, affinity, and visibility of others” (Ephraim 4).

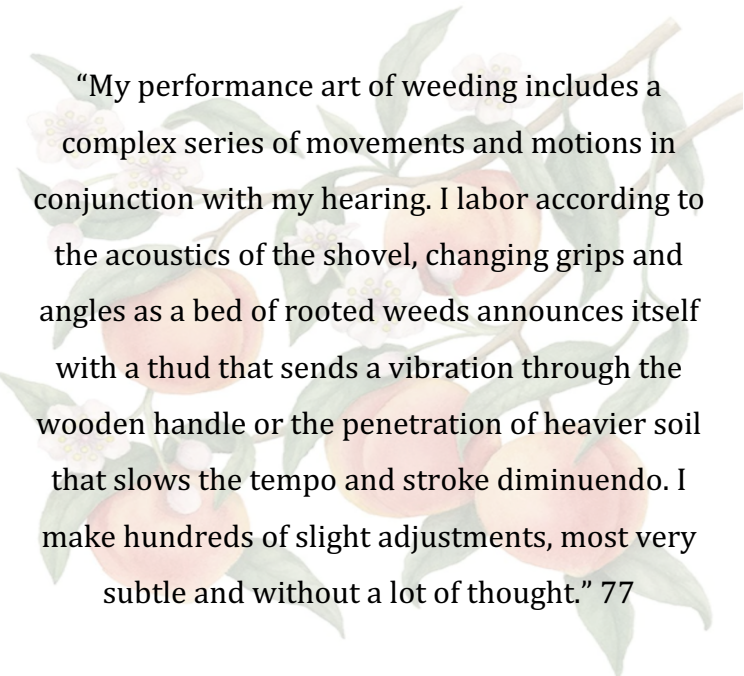
and our active engagement with the materiality and context in which events and interactions occur” (Hunter and Palmer 1). Worlding is not theoretical, but fully embodied and enacted in the world: a lived-out *becoming-with*.

One possible path toward a “whole-person act of attending to the world” (Hunter and Palmer 1), is what the remainder of this essay sketches out. We don’t have to change the whole world; this is simply beyond our power. What we *do* have to change is the way we attend, notice, care for, facilitate, and shape the ongoing (re)configurations that comprise our everyday lives. For a select few, perhaps that does include taking on the power players of capitalism and human exceptionalism, but for most of us, it’s about dismantling these systems, their co-conspirators, and removing them from the fabric of our everyday relationalities. If we wish to change our stories (as individuals, communities, or a planet) we must focus on co-authoring multispecies ethnographies that prioritize symbiotic co-creation and emergence. What better place to begin than in our own backyards and in our own bodies? Our most intimate, everyday experiences are complicated dances of multispecies intra-action, and they’re *right here*, available (even eager) for us to notice, know, and *become-with* them.

3. Somatics and improvisation: feeling the difference

Nearly all of my twenty-five years of dance training and experience existed in a “mind over matter” regime in which the mind made commands and the body was trained to comply. This isn’t to suggest that I didn’t enjoy those years of ballet, jazz, and modern dance—I loved them—but because these movement genres rely on the separation of mind and body, boundaries between effort and exhaustion or strain and pain are easily blurred and blatantly ignored, and so for myself and my peers, injury and anxiety ran rampant. In this way, my

formal dance training unwittingly prepared me for modern biopolitical and necropolitical social systems. And yet, from an early age I suspected there was another way: the dances I made up in my backyard and bedroom were another animal entirely. They allowed me to quiet the programming and tap into intuitive motion. I would squirm and roll and rove, feeling and moving in the heightened, nearly psychedelic state of awareness I would



“My performance art of weeding includes a complex series of movements and motions in conjunction with my hearing. I labor according to the acoustics of the shovel, changing grips and angles as a bed of rooted weeds announces itself with a thud that sends a vibration through the wooden handle or the penetration of heavier soil that slows the tempo and stroke diminuendo. I make hundreds of slight adjustments, most very subtle and without a lot of thought.” 77

eventually come to associate with improvisation. Building on formal movement education but most profoundly influenced by time and space shared in/as contact improvisation, I have developed a movement practice that is focused on sensing and awareness: as I move in my milieu (internal and external), the

volume is increased on those tacit, bodily forms of attention and knowledge that too often go unheard. Sometimes my movement looks like stretching or ballet or yoga. Sometimes it looks like a baby rolling on the ground, jaw-thrusting. Sometimes I try to mimic how it feels to be floating in water, or to be water itself. All the while, I notice. I am aware of the consistency of the ground; how my heels sink in or are bashed away. I am mindful of the difference between pointed toes and flexed feet. Why? When? How? As I feel the breeze on my skin, I play with who is leading and who is following. I detect my arms hanging in my shoulder sockets, feel how intentionally moving one unintentionally moves the other. I apprehend patterns in my movement; at times trying to break them, at times I submitting to them completely. I move

alongside and in response to all this noticing: learning about, investigating, tweaking, exploring, re-creating, and experimenting with all I perceive. Concentrating on the feelings and patterns of / within / around my body results in an expansion of awareness beyond the soma and into the surrounding environment. None of these bodies end at the skin.³⁷



Even as we read grim statistics, sweat through warmer-than-usual summers, or smell smoke in the air, our bodies have the power to convert this information into empathetic, regenerative re/action and response, which in turn has the power to alter the original source of the data: our environments. In their capacities to transform sensory inputs into sensitive behavior, our bodies present us with infinite opportunities to engage the dynamic intra-actions that mold existence. Neuroscientists have aptly named the reflexive relationship between what we perceive and how we behave the perception-action cycle: a “circular cybernetic flow of cognitive information that links the organism to its environment,” in which sensory inputs are processed and “the result of that processing leads to actions, which induce changes in the environment” (Stuss and Knight 102). The loop is continuous as it is malleable; as we take in, process, and test out that which we sense, our re/actions alter the environments and actants we were responding to in the first place.³⁸ Enhancing our awareness of these interactions establishes communication with our ecosocial surroundings, and while the experience of these embodied engagements is

³⁷ Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.”

³⁸ “Perception and action are intricately linked. Perception provides the requisite information for selecting and guiding actions adaptively... Possibilities for action—what Gibson termed ‘affordances’—depend on the current fit between the physical properties of the body and the physical features of the environment... Affordances change from moment to moment because the body and environment are continually in flux” (Franchak et al. 2758).

incredibly intimate, the scope of their influences and repercussions is exponential. To mindfully explore and engage in the ways our bodies are shaped by our materials-semiotic or sociocultural surroundings marks the body as “a wellspring of contingency, disruption, and creativity, rather than a site where casual determinism seeps into and compromises the freedom as politics” (Ephraim 25). As our bodies environ us—transcorporeal³⁹ actants within larger environmental, social, and political systems—paying attention to and involving ourselves in the whorl of embodiment incites personal and collective awareness toward a practicable theory of change.⁴⁰

The ongoing intra-action, transaction, or entanglement between human and more-than-human counterparts identifies the body as synecdoche for the larger systems in which it is co-created/creating. In *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism*, Shannon Sullivan writes that, if “bodies and their various environments are dynamically co-constituted, then each is crucial to and connected with the other...the best way to understand and improve bodily existence is to concentrate on the environments and situations that effect bodies and, reciprocally, *that the best way to attempt to change the world is to transform a body’s transactions with it*” (10-11, emphasis added). The reciprocal relationship between the body and its environments has been explored in diverse fields, from natural sciences to political ecology, from urban planning to

³⁹ Stacy Alaimo has defined transcorporeality as “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment.’ Trans-corporeality, as a theoretical site, is a place where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle in productive ways...Crucial ethical and political possibilities emerge from this literal ‘contact zone’ between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from “the environment” (*Material Feminisms*, 238).

⁴⁰ “Somatics is a practicable theory of change that can move us toward individual, community and collective liberation” (Generative Somatics, “Why Somatics for Social Justice and a Transformative Movement?” 2011).

ecofeminism. But much of this work—crucial as it is—often retains a critical distance from experimentation, practice, or application. Changing the world, *becoming-with* it, cannot be done from a distance. One way of diving into this mangle of practice⁴¹ is to participate in critical somatic work, which understands the body as contact zone between material and social forces, and engages it (emotions, sensations, and physiology) to cultivate more mindful and proactive relationships with these forces.⁴² Officially coined in the 1970's by Thomas Hanna but articulating a timeless investigation of physical and extraphysical being, somatics represents a collection of body-mind theories and practices that prioritize the first-person perspective and experience of the body.⁴³ Somatic exploration is invested in understanding and accessing the body's tacit knowledges and "regard[s] the process of becoming aware of the body as a path towards change, enhanced bodily functioning, and self-understanding" (Rouhianien 58). This work is undertaken for physical and psychological therapy, expression and creativity, education, and social organizing, in which practitioners combine bodywork with critical theory to explore how eco/social systems shape embodied experience and in turn, how engaging physical experience might fortify, deconstruct, or transform those systems as they are lodged in individual and collective bodies.⁴⁴

⁴¹ In his 1995 book *The Mangle of Practice* Andrew Pickering offered "an ontological vision of the world and our place in it, a vision in which both the human and the nonhuman are recognized as open-endedly becoming, taking on emergent forms in an intrinsically temporal 'dance of agency'" (*The Mangle in Practice* 1).

⁴² Generative Somatics, About Us, "Mission." <https://generativesomatics.org/about-us/>

⁴³ "When a human being is observed from the outside—i.e., from a third-person viewpoint—the phenomenon of a human *body* is perceived. But, when this same human being is observed from the first-person viewpoint of his own proprioceptive senses, a categorically different phenomenon is perceived: the human soma...The soma, being internally perceived, is categorically distinct from a body, not because the subject is different but because the mode of viewpoint is different: It is immediate proprioception -- a sensory mode that provides unique data" (Thomas Hanna, "What is Somatics?", Somatic Systems, www.somatics.org)

⁴⁴ Carol Swann's "Social Somatics," and Staci K. Haines and Spenta Kandawalla's "generative somatics" are trailblazers in this field.

As eco/cultural norms and their apparatuses shape habits, ways of relating, action, and non-action, what *feels* (identified by sensations in the body) ‘normal,’ or ‘right,’ may not line up with what we believe or how we see ourselves (generative somatics). Conversely, positive experiences of growth or healing, such as working through internalized racism and misogyny, or grappling with what an “eco-friendly” life might actually entail, often feel uncomfortable and could even produce a traumatic response.⁴⁵ Understanding bodies as “a combination of biological, evolutionary, emotional and psychological aspects,” which are “shaped by social and historical norms and adaptive to a wide array of both resilient and oppressive forces,” somatic frameworks guide practitioners through sensation and action in order to safely understand and potentially re/shape embodied influences. “It is a resilience-based method that helps us change embodiment or ‘shape’ moving *from reaction and increasing choice*. It acknowledges the deep wisdom in our survival strategies and adaptations and offers many ways to transform what’s become automatic and no longer useful.”⁴⁶ As we become aware of our embodied triggers, patters, and coping mechanisms, we can investigate their origins and train them into more intentional expressions, so that “the sense organs of the body... are not merely passive receptacles for the raw material of subjective experience, but active, creative powers, capable of drawing hitherto imperceptible phenomena above the threshold of perception and organizing unprecedented solidarities” (Ephraim 26). Worlding in the flesh, this work is undertaken not only transform personal physical experience, but also, to address and even alter the

⁴⁵ “Trauma is not a flaw or a weakness. It is a highly effective tool of safety and survival. Trauma is also not an event. Trauma is the body’s protective response to an event—or a series of events—that it perceives as potentially dangerous. This perception may be accurate, inaccurate, or entirely imaginary” (Menakem 30).

⁴⁶ Generative Somatics, “Why Somatics for Organizing, Movement Building, & Action?”, emphasis added).

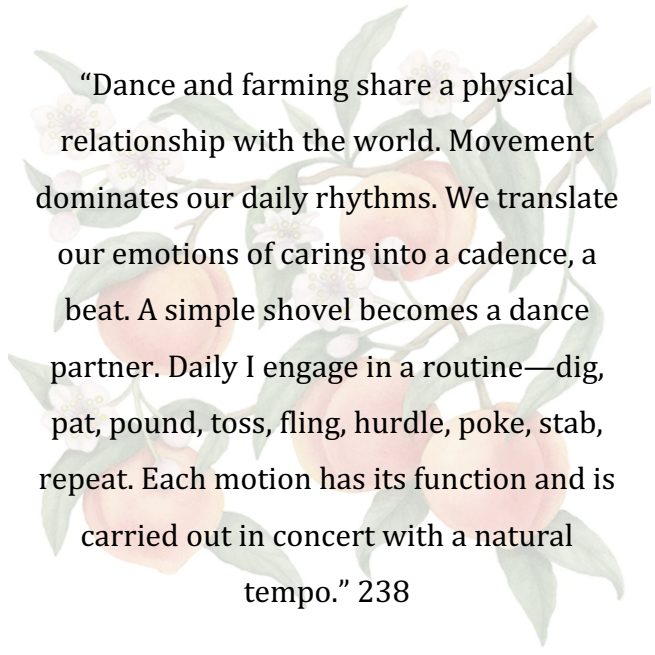
conditions that ongoingly influence us. Tending to bodily sensibility as a way of acknowledging the disciplines, histories, system, relationships, apparatuses, and wisdoms embedded there provides a way of transforming the functions of daily physical existence into active and intentional dances of emergence.

As transcorporeal actants comprised of contingent environmental, social, and political systems, whether we're paying attention or not, our ecosocial surroundings are embodied and/as our bodies alter the surroundings. Somatic work provides one way of enhancing bodymind awareness, which in turn begets bodymindenvironmental awareness as we learn to discern the materialssemiotic forces that shape our individual and collective selves. And while our bodies will never fully separate from the systems they are formed and felt within, exploring how they are formed or disciplined provides an opportunity to tweak some aspects of the programming.⁴⁷ As Dana Luciano has stated, "the most compelling contribution of the new materialisms is not conceptual or analytic, strictly speaking, but sensory...In re/awakening criticism to alternate sensory dimensions, it holds the potential to expand and enliven—though crucially, not to replace—'old' (historical) materialisms."⁴⁸ Addressing, engaging, and exploring those forces is hard work, but without

⁴⁷ This definition represents an applied take on the paradox Butler identifies in Foucault: that "bodies are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes," and yet exist within a genealogy "which conceives the body as a surface and a set of subterranean 'forces' that are...external to that body" ("Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions," 602). This gap between the physical body and the culturally constructed body leaves room for exploration, empathy, and resistance.

⁴⁸ Cécile Roudeau, "How the Earth Feels: A Conversation with Dana Luciano," *Transatlantica*, August 2015. 'New materialism' gained traction in the 1990s as a way of categorizing the turn in cultural studies away from the traditional dualisms that had defined modern humanist traditions. For the '[New Materialism\(s\)](#)' entry in *Critical Posthumanism's "Genealogy of the Posthuman"*, Karmen Sanzo writes that, "The discourses catalogued under new materialism(s) share an agenda with posthumanism in that they seek a repositioning of the human among nonhuman actants, they question the stability of an individuated, liberal subject, and they advocate a critical materialist attention to the global, distributed influences of late capitalism and climate change" (2018).

it, we cannot expect change. In “Restructuring the Self-Sensing: Attention Training in Contact Improvisation,” Nita Little explains how paying attention to physical experience and attention broaden dancers’ awareness and capacities within improvisational exchange: “Embodied attention is key to the emergent potential in dancers’ experiences that makes available new possibilities in their relations. How dancers locate themselves within microdurations is determinative of the interpersonal politics of the dance. Political actions arise within potentials” (252), but of course, this isn’t confined to the dancefloor. Little makes pains to illustrate how “the fleshy giving of attention” radically changes the potential of *all* relations, and that “political practices are bound and unleashed by our relational experiences of one another” (252). The effects of such sensual exchange play out in everyday extra/inter/personal exchanges, as well as in sweeping sociocultural movements. In his book *My Grandmother’s Hands, Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies*, trauma therapist and author Resmaa Menakem explains how anti-racist work must address embodied relationality: “Social and political actions are essential, but they need to be part of a larger strategy of healing, justice, and creating room for growth in traumatized flesh-and-blood bodies” (15). This is because “white-body supremacy” is embedded in the bodies of all Americans; in our cells, DNA, blood, and nervous systems, and we will “never outgrow white-body supremacy just though



“Dance and farming share a physical relationship with the world. Movement dominates our daily rhythms. We translate our emotions of caring into a cadence, a beat. A simple shovel becomes a dance partner. Daily I engage in a routine—dig, pat, pound, toss, fling, hurdle, poke, stab, repeat. Each motion has its function and is carried out in concert with a natural tempo.” 238

discussion, training, or anything else that's mostly cognitive. Instead, we need to look to the body—and to the embodied experience of trauma" (45). Our histories are embedded in our bodies, their consequences effect flesh and blood bodies, and the healing happens there as well. Socially analytical somatics understands that individual transformation is a requirement of systemic transformation; "they are inextricable and support each other."⁴⁹ When we *become-with* our bodies—their emergent parts, forces, and surroundings—we might cultivate separation from some of our co-creators, or a thickening bond with others. Attending to how we sense, relate, and experience grows our capacity for choice. Herein lies the bond between somatic inquiry and social and environmental justice.

The perception-action cycle's neat definition might suggest that the feedback loop of the sensory-motor system (that we cannot sense without acting, and we cannot act without sensing⁵⁰) is relatively cut and dry, but training intention and attention in the facilitation of choice expands the possibilities of perception and action. Our attention is often held captive by the political, social, or environmental upheaval du jour, and so our perception of and engagement with the world becomes constrained.⁵¹ Many somatic practitioners have explored the bonds between attention, perception, and action, in that the manipulation of attention results in the manipulation of action. In his article "Contact Improvisation: A Question," dancer Daniel Lepkoff explains how stagnant attention hinders his work: "When my attention stops moving, my interpretation of what is happening becomes fixed and my vision becomes conventionalized, and thus the questioning disappears. Perception follows

⁴⁹ "We define transformation as the ability to take actions that are aligned with our visions and our values even under the same old pressures. It shows in our actions, ways of being, relating, and perceiving, both individually and collectively. Transformation is change that can sustain over time" (Generative Somatics).

⁵⁰ (Thomas 198). *The Body of Life*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

⁵¹ The more overwhelmed we are, the less we feel able to act or intercede, allowing problems to continue unchecked, which makes us feel even worse, which makes us even *less* likely to act. Shit's fucked.

attention” (40). To right the ship, Lepkoff practices contact improvisation, a form of somatic inquiry characterized by spontaneous physical exploration ranging from seeming stillness to vigorous collaboration:⁵² “Through my physical senses I can gather information directly from my environment, [and] by using my own powers of observation I can shift my perspective, have new perceptions, and free myself from my own conventional and habitual ways of seeing” (Lepkoff 40). The same lesson applies for larger ecosocial efforts: when we are exhausted, broken, and all we see is horror, we must once again come home to the body, allowing our senses to re/introduce fresh perspectives and alternate encounters. “Giving attention as an embodied practice generates new senses of the self, opening up creative relational dynamics: dynamics that have healing effects” (Little 250). Reallocating attention to the patterns, influences, and intra-actions that support us paves the way for improvisational re/action with/in them.

The indeterminate nature of improvisational sensory experience provides an opportunity to re-set cybernetic circuits by upends the patterns and habits that confine perspective and action. Grounded in strategy, information, and technique (the known), improvisation deviates from its foundations in and as response to the unique demands of each encounter (the unknown). This dialectical continuation and cessation of the un/known results in the production of difference; physical and temporal spaces in which being and becoming and *becoming-with* are re/configured in the flesh.⁵³ Learning how to

⁵² In the 1970’s, Steve Paxton and other early participants in the genre described contact improv as a form of encounter in which “alertness is developed in order to work in an energetic state of physical disorientation... It is a free play with balance, self-correcting the wrong moves and reinforcing the right ones, bringing forth a physical/emotional truth about a shared moment of movement that leaves the participants informed, centered, and enlivened” (Paxton, 1979).

⁵³ “[T]he *transition* from the marked to the unmarked...constitutes the originary gesture of art: the imitation of a *movement* that, as Benjamin affirms, “interrupts” the given and produces difference” (Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, 4).

linger in difference—cultivating and growing comfortable within it—allows improvisers to develop a positive relationship with spontaneity, indeterminacy, and precarity, all of which happen to be defining characteristics of our present socioecological predicaments.

Embracing such an extemporaneous mode might sound counterproductive to the development of long-term socioecological regeneration, but an improvisational outlook reveals the multifaceted intra-actions that connect humans to their physical and cultural surroundings (Lane 48) and invites us to become more attentive and careful in our engagement with them.

As transactions occur between improviser and medium, improviser and other improvisers, or improviser and surroundings,⁵⁴ the embodied and re/actionary nature of improvisational attention activates a foundation of improvisation-specific (genre of dance or music, social expectations, form of multispecies encounter, etc.) skills so that participants recognize the parameters of the exchange and act accordingly.⁵⁵ This heightened awareness is a requirement because, despite the misconception, improvisation is not a makeshift mode connoting lack of preparation, order, talent, routine, or skill.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ “To think of bodies as transactional, then, is to conceive of bodies and their various environments as co-constituted in a nonviciously circular way. It is to realize that bodies do not stop at the edges of their skins and are not contained neatly and sharply within them...This does not mean that organisms transact in physical, chemical, or material senses only. While these are important examples of how transaction occurs, it is no less important that human transaction with the world takes place in social, political, and cultural senses as well. The suggestion that bodies and environments are transactionally co-constituted is not restricted to ‘natural’ environments, as the word ‘environment’ often is interpreted; ‘environment,’ in this case, includes the wide variety of cultural situations and surroundings that also make up the world...” (Sullivan 1-2).

⁵⁵ To “act accordingly” doesn’t necessarily mean following along, and may even result in an intentional refusal to follow the rules of the engagement. What matters here is the embodied understanding of what is expected, and the conscious-physical *choice* of how to react, rather than simply moving through the encounter without awareness or choice.

⁵⁶ “According to the misconception of *improvisation*, improvisations involve events that are not prepared and not defined. Such an understanding relies on a rigid distinction between a plan, such as a musical composition, and improvisation. In contrast to performances of compositions and to actions executing detailed plans, it is assumed that improvised performances are not rule governed, are spontaneous, and come, as it were, out of the blue” (Bertinetto and Bertram 203).

Instead, it represents an intentional and dialectical foray into the un/known. To be successful, improvisers develop a foundation of referential knowledge and prepare themselves technically, materially, and socially, so they can creatively act within, upon, and beyond the constraints of their performance.⁵⁷ In this way, improvisation is never improvised: “Jazz musicians obviously improvise not because they cannot read music, or because they have temporarily mislaid the music. They have a completely different perspective and set of values,” in which there is no “one correct way of doing things, one score, one right set of notes to play, one order, but rather,” the ability to “collaboratively create through the interaction of constraints and possibilities rather than either order or disorder” (Schiaffini 576, Montuori 246). At its core, the “phenomenology of improvisation” is a dialectical paradox oscillating between and occupying two poles: upholding tradition and breaking from it, “standing out as an individual voice and being supportive of others’ voices,” trusting your gut and unlearning your instincts, gleaning from the past and using what you’ve gathered to construct an entirely different future (Montuori 249). Inhabiting an improvisational dialectic allows for co-creations that are rooted but roving, educated but agile.

Practicing improvisational awareness produces a methodology⁵⁸ that centers sensitivity and sense-ability: careful sensory noticings inform our understanding of a situation, and by engaging these senses, we are able to respond in kind. On either side of this circuit, actants connect to broader sensory and semiotic networks, so that actions (input and

⁵⁷ Constraints themselves are avenues for possibilities (Ceruti, 1994).

⁵⁸ Improvisation is inherently practice-based, as “the preconditions of improvisation are not external to the improvisational practice as some kind of self-standing foundation. Rather, they are formed and, at the same time, put into question and transformed, within and through the practice of which they are the precondition... improvisation generates unexpectedness (and does not presuppose it)” (Bertinetto and Bertram 205).

output) create opportunities for further exchange. For example, in the context of physical theatrical improvisational, actions are “re-actions to what others do, and they in turn provide affordances for the others’ actions” (Bertinetto and Bertram 207). This cycle-to-system transaction can also be modeled in eco and social systems, in which actants are at once “producers and receivers” as they re/act to materials-semiotic surroundings which in turn, influences those surroundings. In this way, all action is improvisational, but generally unaware of itself as such.⁵⁹ By *intentionally* grappling with the dynamic-situatedness and cyclical-systems of knowledges, bodies, cultures, and environments, improvisation transforms perceptions of individuals, influences, or networks as static or secure and reveals the ways in each configurations absorbs and exerts power. This practice-based understanding of ‘context’ reveals the messy and multifaceted rivers of events and actants we are always-already involved in re/arranging, and so marks improvisation is a diffractive methodology—“a critical practice of engagement, not a distance-learning practice of reflecting from afar” (Barad 90)—as it fully submerges our bodyminds in the flow. In this way, improvisational awareness and careful re/actions command a shift in perspective and politics: once everyday encounters are experienced as polyvocal, intra-active dialogues, the pressure to be perfect is somewhat lifted even as the duty to participate in an informed, sense-able, and response-able manner is made clear.⁶⁰

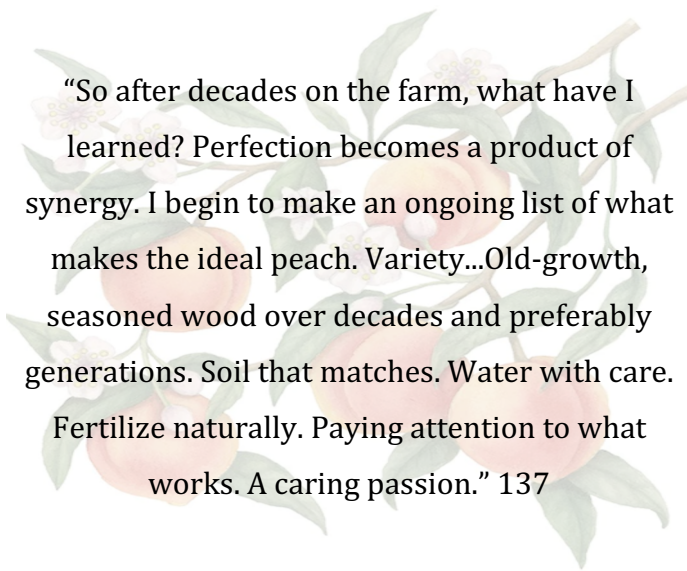
⁵⁹ “They [humans] have to be improvisers by dint of sheer existence. They have to improvise in ordinary and original circumstances, in successful and unsuccessful settings, on risky and banal occasions, in good and bad situations. They have to improvise all their way through their lives, even when they think a routine is settled and structures are defined, because the complexity of nature and culture, of individuals and societies, of time and space, will again and again invade and disrupt experience and expectation” (Coessens 2).

⁶⁰ There is a curious simultaneity of relief and renewal in improvisational *becoming-with*: every encounter feels important, complicated, and layered, but we also realize that we’re not the only ones ‘acting;’ individual importance fades even as individual responsibility is realized. In introduction to *At Home on the Earth*, David Landis Barnhill explains this paradox dramatically, in that, “The way we interact with the earth direct affects how it interacts with us...But there is a political dimension here, for nature responds generously to all,

4. Marginal emergence: fieldwork as fieldwork

My interest in earthwork—a general term, intentionally similar to ‘bodywork,’ for the disparate schools and practices of mindful farming that go by names like small-scale agriculture, garden or hobby farming, permaculture, agroecology, biodynamics, regenerative farming, etc.—is absolutely basic: I want to grow healthy food and food systems for my family and community. It is also deeply profound: nothing less than the fate of the world rests in the balance. Earthwork consists of the “mundane revolutionary practices,” that Stacy Alaimo describes as “posthuman resilience;” processes that foster “the resilience of ecosystems, the survival of species, the just distribution of health, wealth and opportunity, and the desire to more generally ‘unfuck the world’” (1-2). I write this, I often flee to the garden, the orchard, the chicken coop, and even the compost heap to clear my head and physically remember what I’m trying to get across. Just like my movement practice, earthwork allows me to notice. The difficulty of the labor prompts me to take stock of the workings of my bodymind, but I also sense an initiation into the ecological and ecocultural networks that comprise place-based farming and place-based being: a sacred tradition of stewardship. I build fellowship with the things I have planted and the animals I raise, but I am equally connected with the weeds, predators, water systems, weather patterns, useful tools, and local opinions that make this place. To rush this work or to go about it as though it were just a set of tasks to fill a day would be to ignore the obvious fact that I am not the only one ‘at work’ when I am laboring with the land. This is reminiscent of what María Puig de la Bellacasa, in Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds, describes as a permacultural ethics of care,

including the efforts of the military-industrial complex to generate deadly substances. The land’s responsiveness requires us to be responsible” (12).



“So after decades on the farm, what have I learned? Perfection becomes a product of synergy. I begin to make an ongoing list of what makes the ideal peach. Variety...Old-growth, seasoned wood over decades and preferably generations. Soil that matches. Water with care. Fertilize naturally. Paying attention to what works. A caring passion.” 137

which is “based on the perception that we are embedded in a web of complex relationships in which personal actions have consequences for more than ourselves and our kin. And, conversely, these collective connections transform ‘our’ personal life” (146). Countless others shape me as I shape them, and to

collaborate effectively, there is much to be noticed, tended to, and done. Every plant has a history and every animal, a cultural inheritance. It is my duty to learn my surroundings’ bio-social properties as well as their intimate, everyday expressions, which can only be apprehended through direct engagement. When I practice embodied, improvisational, care-centered agricultures, I explore the extent to which agri/cultures cultivate me and my perspectives in turn. Earthwork’s direct connection to sustainability, community-building, multispecies collaboration, climate crisis, food sovereignty, anti-capitalist production methods, and personal wellbeing make the farm an ideal location for embodied ecocritical ‘fieldwork,’ but earthwork is also a winnowing; it allows me to put my delicate academic theory into dirty, messy practice, separating the grain from the chaff.



Farming is often discussed as a game of margins, and indeed, margins hold incredible significance in American agricultural history. Centuries of sustainable American-Indigenous farming techniques and traditions have been relegated to the agri/cultural

margins as the myth of ‘untouched wilderness’⁶¹ continue to the fuel fantasies of neo-colonial settlers⁶² and history-averse conservationists alike.⁶³ In the midst of the horrors of slavery, enslaved people cultivated sacred foods, medicine, and traditions in border gardens on the margins of plantations.⁶⁴ Regenerative, life-affirming farming has been *consistently* practiced in modern American agriculture—both by those dedicated to cultivating good relationship with nonhuman kin and those simply interested in long-term,

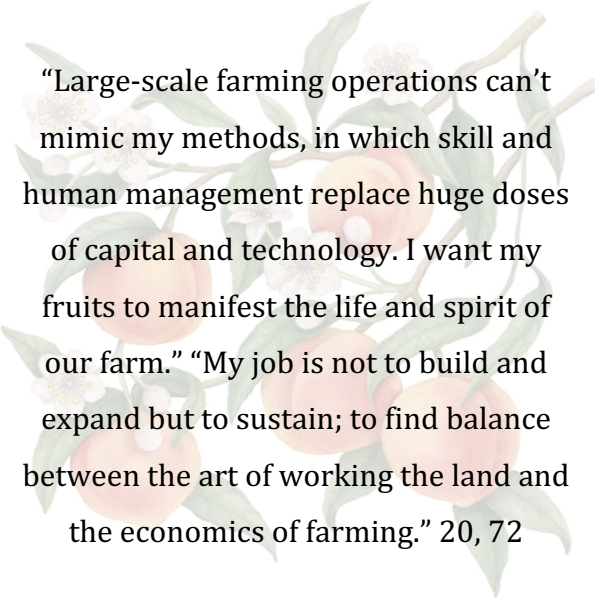
⁶¹ As Gary Paul Nabhan writes in “Invisible Erosion: The Rise and Fall of Native Farming,” “America before Columbus was not a wasteland, nor an untouched wilderness. It held home ground for farmers, vast territory for hunter-gatherers, and places where farming and foraging fused themselves into the same cultures feel at home here, to learn from our predecessors on this continent, each of us must kneel on the ground, put an ear to the earth, and listen,” (555). Aware of the great distance and difference that have been cultivated between traditional farming and “American Ag,” and akin to Robin Wall Kimmerer’s “Becoming Indigenous to Place,” Gary Snyder’s “reinhabitation,” and bioregional theory and practice, Nabhan’s invocation calls for intentional action, a wholehearted and wholebodied means of living and working with the earth.

⁶² As of 2021, the Gates’ own nearly 269 million acres of land, of which 242 million is farmland, and in 2020 and 2021, as the pandemic ravaged individuals and economies worldwide, tech millionaires and billionaires made headlines for buying up large tracts of land in New Zealand and rural America.

⁶³ William Cronon’s *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, has been an essential text for the modern intersectional environmentalist. In his chapter “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” Cronon famously confronts the misguided principles of ahistorical ‘wilderness’ lovers, explaining that, “The time for us to rethinking wilderness,” because “[f]ar from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it’s a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made. Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires. For this reason, we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture’s problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem” (69).

⁶⁴ In “Slave Gardens in the Antebellum South,” Dwight Eissach and Herbert Covey write that, “Slave gardens, or ‘patches,’ were typically located near slave cabins, or even occasionally, near the most remote brambled boundaries of the plantation where clearing had never been done” (12). Many scholars have written on these gardens, usually remarking on their value for supplementing insufficient food rations. But addition to nutritional benefits, Eissach and Covey argue that the men and women who tended these leftover spaces in leftover moments (before or after sixteen-hour workdays, or on Sundays) were tending to their cultural sovereignty, which included food, medicine, and community with the more than human world: Enslaved people adapted to their bonded circumstance out of necessity but in ways that embraced their African cultural heritage, and their gardens not only added value to their lives and improved their diet but also reflected African customs and mores that illustrated their beliefs... [Gardens] provided opportunities for people to express African and Caribbean-based traditions, whether spiritual or cultural, and were part of African American folklore and traditions” (12, 20).

reliable returns⁶⁵—and yet reparative, ecology-inspired, collaborative approaches are classified as ‘alternative’ agricultures; marginal within the grand legacy of American agribusiness. And those willing to do this work, to sacrifice their bodies and time for little money and no guarantee... well they must be on the margins of society. This is a sleight of hand, an intentional disenfranchisement of sustainable agricultures and the *becoming-with* it entails by those who profit from an exhaustive industrial model.



“Large-scale farming operations can’t mimic my methods, in which skill and human management replace huge doses of capital and technology. I want my fruits to manifest the life and spirit of our farm.” “My job is not to build and expand but to sustain; to find balance between the art of working the land and the economics of farming.” 20, 72

At the beginning of the 19th century, over 90% of the American population was classified as rural, but by the beginning of the next century, more Americans lived in and around cities,⁶⁶ a shift that increased drastically as the Great Depression, World War II, and postwar technological and economic booms made farming margins tighter and city life

⁶⁵ “‘Organic farming’ was an African-indigenous system developed over a millennia and first [institutionally] revived in the United States by a Black farmer, Dr. George Washington Carver, of Tuskegee University in the early 1900s. Carver conducted extensive research and codified the use of crop rotation in combination with the planting of nitrogen-fixing legumes, and detailed how to regenerate soil biology. His system was known as regenerative agriculture and helped move many southern farmers away from monoculture and toward diversified horticultural operations” (Penniman 3). But as Wes Jackson writes in the forward to *American Georgics: Writing on Farming, Culture, and Nature*, “The ‘look to nature’ as a source of practicality for humans has been around for millennia...from Job to Virgil and the *Georgics*, 36-29 BC, through Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and finally Alexander Pope...” (xiii-xiv). After the slight detour known as Romanticism, which prioritized the human mind employed nature as a primarily symbolic figure, the early twentieth century saw the return of nature as a standard against which agriculture might measure itself: “Liberty Hyde Baily, with *The Outlook of Nature* in 1905 and *The Holy Earth* in 1915, boldly advanced the notion that ‘a good part of agriculture is to learn how to adapt one’s work to nature.’ A quarter century later, in 1940, Sir Albert Howard wrote in *An Agricultural Testament* that we should farm as the forest does, for nature constitutes the ‘supreme father’” (xiv).

⁶⁶ In 1920, the urban/rural divide was 51/49%, and by 1930, 56/44%. “Population—Urban and Rural, No. 38—Urban and Rural Population, By States,” *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce, 1930.

more appealing. In 1955, former USDA assistant secretary of agriculture John H. Davis coined the term *agribusiness*,⁶⁷ and by 1973 the idea was producing fruit as infamous Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz urged farmers to plant commodity crops “from fencerow to fencerow,” and warned that they’d better “get big or get out.” While Butz certainly earned his notorious reputation, he was simply a figurehead for the genetic modification of farming in America as embodied agri/culture became disembodied agri/business. In *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, Wendell Berry argues that industrialized agriculture is only one aspect of a broader capitalist hegemony: “Orthodox agriculture is part of the larger orthodoxy of industrial progress and economic growth, which argues the necessity of pollution, unemployment, war, land spoilation, the exploitation of space, etc.” (173). Despite poisoned land and water, the intentional collapse of small family farms, and the increased debt and diminished returns for those somehow able to hold on, industrial “agriculture experts and ‘agribusinessmen’ are free to believe their system works because they have accepted a convention which makes ‘external,’ and therefore irrelevant, all evidence that it does not work” (172). For this reason, agricultural practices that reflect “the theme of settlement, of kindness to the ground, of nurture” (191), *must* be made marginal: there can be no plausible, serious alternative, they would be too threatening. Caught in the gears of a zero-sum game, agribusiness entities from the USDA to small-town farmers dismiss, decry, or diminish ‘alternative’ models; to admit their alternative ag’s viability or proven successes would be to admit failure from the individual to the systemic. Berry explains that “this fear makes the specialist scientist not merely willing to define a

⁶⁷ “The future of agribusiness...would see technology and corporate power unleashed in the farm economy...For critics of the industrial model that had overtaken American agriculture by 1955... agribusiness spelled the doom of the family-owned farm and the rise of untrammelled corporate power” (Hamilton 561).

possibility, but *desperate* to define the *only* possibility. Only this desperation can explain the venomous contempt with which agricultural establishmentarians dismiss suggestions of other possibilities, old or new” (173). And so the margins will remain marginal until change is no longer optional. When something like global climate crisis, global pandemic, global hunger, or global unrest (or perhaps all four at once!) forces our backs against the wall, “if change is to come, then, it will have to come from the outside. It will have to come from the margins” (174).

The crises combined under and/or referred to as the Anthropocene is a crying out for change, for revolution from the margins, and if we look closely, we can see that the call is already being answered: the illusions of stability, sense, normativity, and futurity upon which Anthropocene apparatuses rely are being actively composted by divergent agri/cultures. Many farms focus on cultivating liberation and sovereignty alongside the tomatoes and corn as queer, trans, and BIPOC stewards build community and divest from violent systems.⁶⁸ This is not to say that our patterns will not be hard to break. The Dark Mountain Project’s *Walking on Lava: Selected Works for Uncivilised Times* discusses how familiarity masks instability and lulls us into a false sense of security: “The pattern of ordinary life, in which so much stays the same from one day to the next, disguises the fragility of its fabric... So long as it repeats... we are able to plan for tomorrow as if all the things we rely on and don’t think about too carefully will still be there” (6). Just as the fatal flaws of agribusiness require it to marginalize potential alternatives, ecosocial precarity underwrites performances of ongoing dependability no matter how superficial or

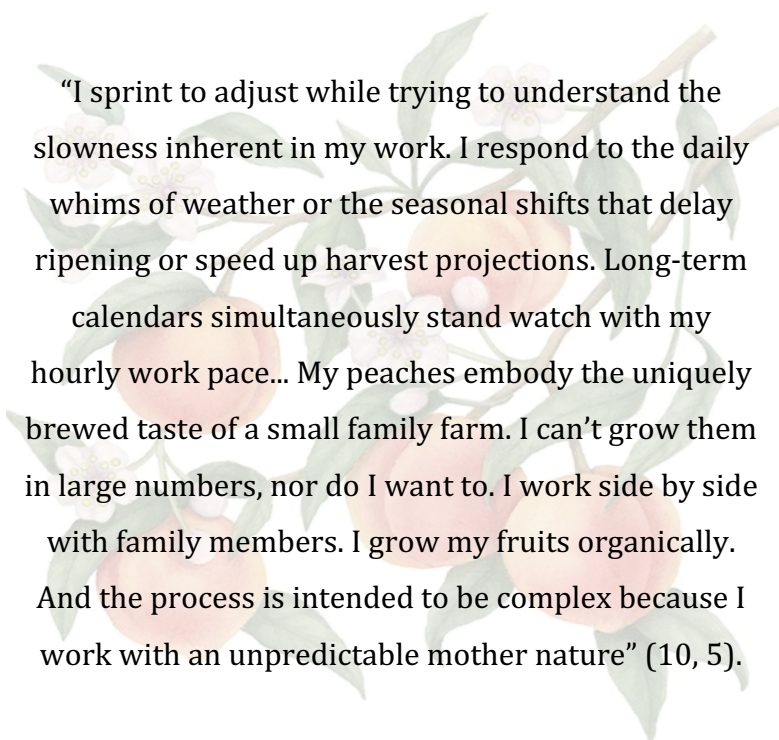
⁶⁸ See Soul Fire Farm, Queer the Land, Grand Risings Farm, The 40 Acres Project, Acres of Ancestry Initiative, and more.

ineffective. Earthwork—the practices that comprise small-scale, sustainable, regenerative, restorative farming—shatters this illusion. Day in and day out, earthworkers put their knowledge of weather patterns, soil structures, water availability, seed health, nitrogen and phosphorous cycles, seed status, and all manner of surrounding flora and fauna to the test. Often, they must also determine how to move products or promote programming in an increasingly digital market, balancing the books against the fickle desires of on-demand consumerism. The demands of these everyday encounters, which are in fact complex materialsemiotic and multispecies coordinations, require careful, sensing, embodied attention and diminish any distinction between theory and practice. Faced with the ever-shifting challenges, joys, and sorrows of farm life, earthworkers are masters of multispecies improvisation.



Until this year, I was a landless farmer stitching together experience in whatever borrowed space and time I could find. I apprenticed, gardened, and gleaned on the lands and under the wings of others, sometimes in person and sometimes through written accounts. Many of the agricultural authors I've assumed as guides—Sue Hubbel, Mike Madison, Mary Rose O'Reilly, Patricia Damery, Wendell Berry, David Mas Masumoto—take up a seasonal, cyclical format, dividing their narrative into four parts to honor the seasons and the work and play that go along with them. But as winter melts into spring and bleeds into summer and stretches into fall and turns into winter and creeps into spring and so on, these earthworkers' accounts hint that time and space and place are not so easily categorized. Like the mobius strips linking perception and action, sense and response-ability, becoming-with and emergence, the seasonal circuit reveals porous boundaries, slipping signifiers, and emergent intra-action

more than four distinct units lined up side-by-side. As Mas writes, “farmers mark calendars, but work commences only when nature dictates. Even conventional, business-oriented farm managers pay attention to blossoms” (34). To be careful and attentive—a core requirement of



“I sprint to adjust while trying to understand the slowness inherent in my work. I respond to the daily whims of weather or the seasonal shifts that delay ripening or speed up harvest projections. Long-term calendars simultaneously stand watch with my hourly work pace... My peaches embody the uniquely brewed taste of a small family farm. I can’t grow them in large numbers, nor do I want to. I work side by side with family members. I grow my fruits organically. And the process is intended to be complex because I work with an unpredictable mother nature” (10, 5).

divided into planning, planting, labor, and harvest; a nod to the seasonal base and narrative superstructure that so many before me have adopted. My pace is slow but the game is long as I settle into this life-place⁶⁹and imagine how care will braid me into this soil, these trees, this water, and all the life they sustain, for the rest of my days.



Planning: multispecies futures

⁶⁹ “The bioregional or ‘life-place’ concept suggests the efflorescence and emplacement of *biophilia*, our innate affection for the totality of life in all its forms. Although by no means a unified philosophy, theory, or method, the bioregional approach suggests a means of living by deep understanding of, respect for, and, ultimately, care of a naturally bounded region or territory” (Thayer 4).

My partner and I are rooting into 10 acres in Southern Oregon, about fifteen miles from the coast. We are living in the Planthropocene here, “an aspirational episteme, not a time-bound era, one that invites us to stage new scenes and new ways to see and seed plant/people relations in the here and now, not some distant future” (Myers 4). We are, transform the landscape of an apocalyptic Anthropocene right outside. This land has been clear cut and subdivided from it’s surrounding 60 acres, and while the home and outbuildings remain intact, the old growth forest that formerly enveloped the homesite was cut down and carted out. Right up to the house, right up to the property line, right up to the road, everything that could be cut was, and more. “Just think,” Natasha Myers poses, “If you had to consult the plants to ask permission to use them, industrial agriculture, strip mining, clear cutting, and the expanding concrete of urban sprawl would be inconceivable. Just ask, they will tell you” (4). Clearly, no one here thought to ask. Stumps gleam like white crosses at the Arlington National Cemetery (what the official website deems this nation’s most hallowed ground). Every couple of acres, 60-foot slash piles stand as unlit pyres. The ravines are clogged with trees cut down and left, and the springs that used to run freely through them, irrigating the land and watering the people and animals who lived here, are buried under feet of debris; their courses interrupted and flows dispersed. Our neighbors tell us we’re lucky never to have seen the magnificent forest that was, now that it’s gone. We ache to hear it, unable to stop ourselves from asking about it anyways; curious orphans who never met their parents. We measure the gigantic stumps with our bodies, feel their elder spirits, and wonder every time, “Did they have to take this one?” The loss weighs heavy. There are responsible, selective, sustainable ways to log. This wasn’t it. And what of the previous owner, the self-proclaimed ‘environmentalist’ who sold this land off to the

logger with the worst reputation in this small logging community? He must have known, he lived here ten years. We've lived here less than a month, and our anger on behalf of this land bubbles up like the lost springs.

And yet, we are manifesting a different realm, some separate peace and place. Approaching the multispecies encounters of our everyday life in ways that facilitate emergence means we cannot dwell in a violent past or stillborn future. Acknowledging the dire realities that exist but choosing to find and make alternatives within them, Natasha Myers suggests that we see and seed relations that ground us in the ground under our feet, seeing and feeling fully all the potential that lives there: "Rather than circumscribing the terrors we face now, the Planthropocene is an invitation to root ourselves into a way of doing life that would break the frame of Anthropocene logics" (4). We would be fools to lose ourselves in mourning, and so we try to let our sorrow evaporate along with the morning's marine layer. The deer and elk and cougar and bobcat, possum and raccoon and rats and mice, birds and lizards and snakes and insects have all carried on. Apples ripen untended, flowers spring up from secret bulbs, and herb gardens, woody with age, perfume the air. Even now, young saplings begin to measure themselves against their parents' stumps as comfrey, catnip, lemon balm, and foxglove pave the way. Yes, enterprising blackberries stretch out hungry arms, but they too will eventually become nourishment for tomorrow's forest. This is no cemetery, and not exactly a birth, but more like a reincarnation in process, Michael Marder in *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* describes this as "Vegetal afterlife, facilitated by the passage, the procession of the dead (including the decomposing parts of plants themselves), through roots to the stem and on to the flower, is a non-mystified and material 'resurrection'" (67). Anyone who's tended a

compost bin or marveled at a nurse log knows this deep magic. Our job now is to move forward, honoring this land as it is, as it wants to be, as it can be one year from now, ten years from now, ten generations from now. We cannot waste what has held on, cannot afford not to trust the photosynthetic ones that make this place.⁷⁰ Our job is to build systems that allows us to depend on the land for nourishment, and equally, that allow the land to depend on us for restoration, regeneration, and nourishment in turn. And so, we plot and plan and plant.

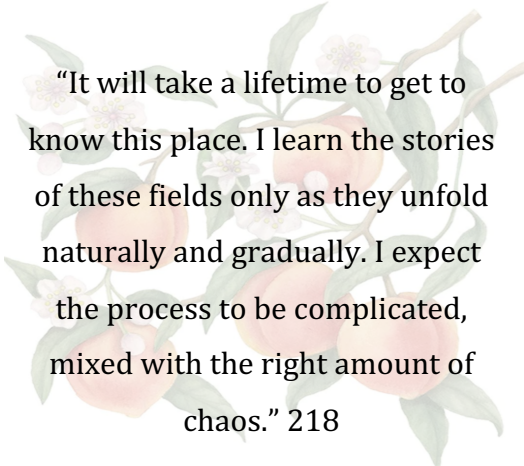
“Observe, observe, observe!” declares the primary permaculture principal, advising that practitioners observe and interact with land for at least one year before making any significant alterations or additions.⁷¹ This allows time to learn the path of the sun, weather patterns, microclimates, the types of soil present, what animals and insects and neighbors might need accounting for, and more. In my rush to pick apples, plant starts, clear blackberries, care for the animals, and process firewood, I worry that I’m not observing carefully enough. And yet, if I stop and close my eyes, I know these sounds and where they’re coming from – the insects and birds and wind rustling through the trees are already becoming familiar. I need to trust that this is a gradual process, a language I’m learning through immersion, practice, attentive presence. Part of this learning is my twice-daily routine. Every morning and every evening I walk over to the coop to care for our eight

⁷⁰ As Natasha Myers writes in “How To Grow Livable Worlds: Ten Not-So-Easy Steps,” “Once you have detuned your colonial imagination and vegetalized your sensorium the world will look and feel a lot different. You may begin to sense things you have never perceived before. You may get the feeling that you are being watched everywhere you go. Indeed, the plants and trees are not indifferent to you: they are paying very close attention to all the beings that ingather around them” (7).

⁷¹ “Bill Mollison speaks of an embodied immersion in ecological cycles that involves a long period of ‘thoughtful and protracted observation’ before acting on the land and its processes. This principle, known as ‘TAPO,’ is a rule of technical design and an ethical principle in training in permaculture practice (Ghelfi 2015)” (de la Bellacasa 201).

chickens and two ducks, head up to the goat barn to feed and water our five goats, play with the barn cat (and dispose of the rodent bodies he presents to me proudly—good boy), and come back to open or close the greenhouse and water all the plants. In the morning, I do this before I make coffee, slipping out of the house without waking anyone, and by the time I'm back our pitbull Hamlet is awake and ready for her walk. In the evening, I do my rounds when the sun is just setting, respectful of those predators that would make quick work of our flocks. Even as I try to come up with ways to simplify or automate these systems and routines, I'm reluctant to edit myself out of these everyday intimacies.

When I'm done with my morning rounds, I often pour myself a cup of coffee and look over the shopping cart full of flower seeds I've gathered at Johnny's Seeds online. After apprenticing on our friends Lee and Lauren's flower farm, I'm convinced that flowers are a good cash crop, being easier to grow and more lucrative than vegetables. I remember when Lauren ordered the first experimental batch for Rainwater Ranch: over five thousand starts and bulbs. We got about six hundred in the ground each day, but first, the land had been tilled, composted, and shaped into rows. We had rolled out and cut irrigation tape, staked the tape down, poked holes for starts, and finally snuggled the seeds and corms and bulbs into their beds. When I look out over this property, I see the weeks, maybe months of work that needs to be done before we even get to that point, so for now the online cart remains full. How long will it take us to find our footing here? I am eager to meet farmer friends and neighbors, and I miss Lee and Lauren and our community in



"It will take a lifetime to get to know this place. I learn the stories of these fields only as they unfold naturally and gradually. I expect the process to be complicated, mixed with the right amount of chaos." 218

California that was always ready with good advice and a piece of fruit whenever I had a question.

And yet, whether we're ready or not, our small orchard of apples grow heavy under branches unpruned for many years. Last night, one split in half under its own delicious weight. I feel guilty for not picking it sooner, for the splintered trunk, for those beautiful fleshy orbs bruised and busted in the fall. These will have to be for the goats. The rest we'll gather, along with the other trees' offerings, and try to sell them at the farmer's market, the co-op, and the local fruit stand. This unexpected crop is giving me a sense of harvest temporality or orchard time, a slow and steady burn until harvest, which breaks fast and hard: there are so many apples to pick! Where will we store them? What if more trees break? Will anyone buy the apples? Some trees are ripe right now and some aren't quite ready, but can we really afford to wait? This first year, I don't have any answers. I wonder if, no—how!—things will be different by this time next year.



Planting: caring in place

In our first week here, we planted every inch of available space in the greenhouse, including some bedraggled old plug trays and containers we found under the potting bench. Turning on the water activated hundreds of dormant broccoli and tomato seeds, which I thinned out from the lettuces, mustard greens, herbs and squash we planted, once I could tell the difference. I wonder how long they've waited there—retaining life, blowing on internal embers to keep the flame alive, waiting for the perfect conditions. I've heard that some puncture vibes can lay in wait for one hundred years—perhaps an old farmer's tale—but lambsquarters and bindweed have successfully germinated after forty and fifty

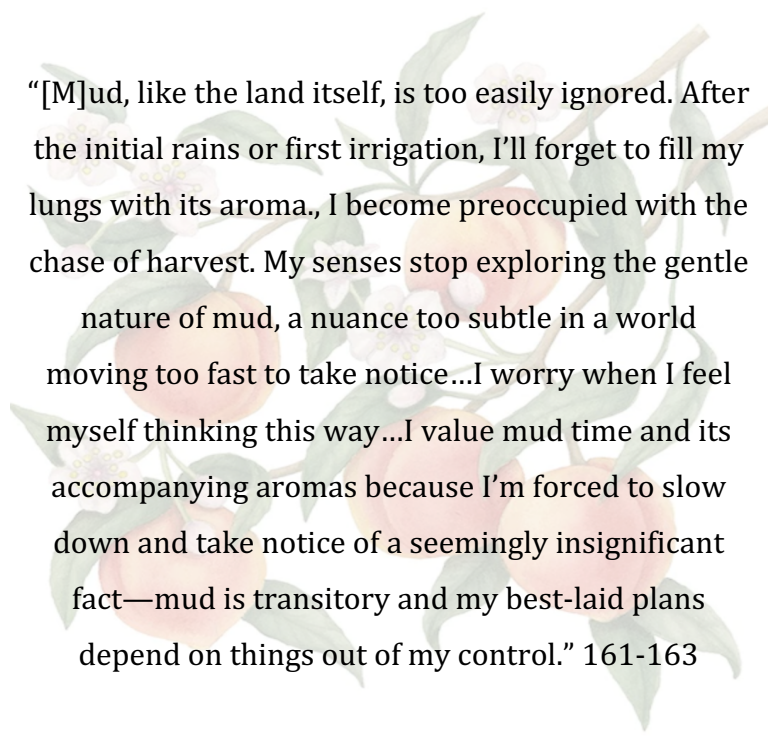
year dormancies,⁷² so who knows. I can't believe how well the greenhouse works; beets, broccoli raab, onions, and carrots are ready to be transplanted outside, but I'm not as fast as they are. To get them into the ground, I need to clear away a three-inch mat of weeds and grasses that cover the old garden terraces. It comes up easily enough, except for the blackberries (My fingertips are speckled with thorns that sneak through goat skin gloves and break off in my skin. I'm going to have to figure out how to make my peace with these survivalists.) Once these heartier starts are in, I'll cover the unplanted beds with mulching plastic we found in the goat field. By spring, the thick layer of weeds will have been transformed into worm food and provided nutrients for our next plantings. We'll supplement everything with more compost, straw, and other organic matter. I wish I could get everything in the ground now, but not only do I not know how the fall and winter will go (annual weather reports only tell you so much—what I've planted I'm prepared to lose), I'm also not sure what our soil needs.

For all farmers—industrial and alternative alike—tending to soil is part of the game. For some, increasing yields and minimizing weeds is the goal; adding amendments or fertilizer is about as far as they go.⁷³ For others, strengthening the living ecosystem of the soil, enhancing the soil's ability to sequester carbon and, yes, increasing yields, is what motivates care. This requires intentional and attentive soil management, including

⁷² Oregon State University Extension Service, "How Long Do Seeds Survive in the Soil?"

⁷³ "Human agricultural practices have exhausted soils across the world well before industrialization (Hillel 1992), pushing human populations to leave depleted soils behind in search of fertile grounds. In the current global productionist regime, options are recognized to be narrowing, as the extension of agricultural land by forest clearing is a documented factor of climate change, and the intensification of production in available land is destroying the resource... And yet soil exhaustion is also blamed across the board on industrialized and unsustainable forms of agriculture, and so many see intensifying food production through technoscientific innovations as a misled perilous response to food security (Tomlinson 2011; McDonagh 2014)" (de la Bellacasa, 172-173).

conservation tillage (low and no-till methods), crop rotation, companion planting, and careful grazing practices. It takes time, space, and energy to get to know and care for soil this way. In this way, care is “an intrinsically radical concept as it asks that we understand the world in a certain way, guided by *personal contact* with the earth and the values learned therein” (Major 77, emphasis added). And still, there is no guarantee. Soil is a living network—affecting and affected by many factors—not an equation to solve or code to crack once and for all. My friends who run a small farm in Louisiana (Compostella Farm) were confounded when, after three years of responsible, regenerative farming, their



“[M]ud, like the land itself, is too easily ignored. After the initial rains or first irrigation, I’ll forget to fill my lungs with its aroma, I become preoccupied with the chase of harvest. My senses stop exploring the gentle nature of mud, a nuance too subtle in a world moving too fast to take notice...I worry when I feel myself thinking this way...I value mud time and its accompanying aromas because I’m forced to slow down and take notice of a seemingly insignificant fact—mud is transitory and my best-laid plans depend on things out of my control.” 161-163

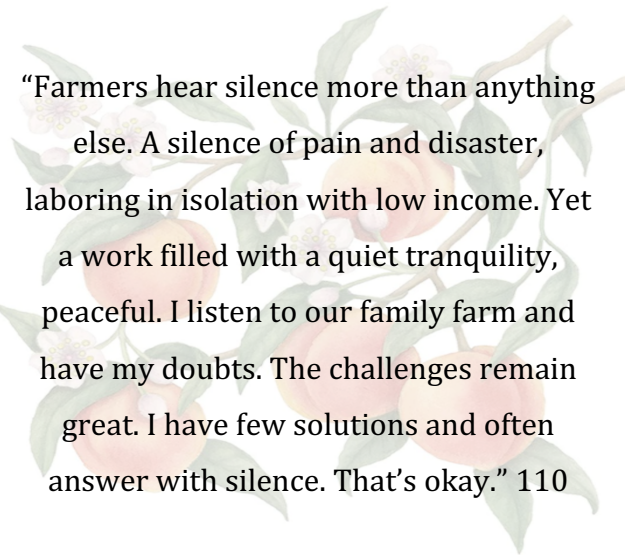
ground simply stopped being able to produce. Cover crops, composting, and crop rotations are helping, but incrementally. They’re still not sure what happened and wonder whether they’ll be able to continue farming the land they settled on expressly for this purpose. In *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than*

Human Worlds, María Puig de la Bellacasa turns to soil to investigate “the recalcitrance of the temporality of care to productionist rhythms,” and the power of care to “make time” that acknowledges and carves out space for “the web of more than human agencies” (171). Puig de la Bellacasa studies earthworkers who slow down to get to know their soil, who observe, feel, smell, and even taste how their actions affect it, and who remain open to

adjusting their plan. These folks understand that soil is not just a medium, but that it is a vital co-creator. In the time and space that could be employed for more immediate returns, slow soil care “insists on perpetuating, maintaining, and intensifying the life of existing cycles;” an ethico-political disruption of “technoscientific futurity” (215). Just by looking and feeling, I can tell that the soil here contains a lot of clay, but I’m still going to send a sample to a local lab for comprehensive testing. Regardless of the findings, I know that adding composted manure, kitchen scraps, green waste, and animal bedding will build up the soil, and minimizing the disturbance of microbial and mycorrhizal networks will ensure that we protect and rebuild even as we disturb and redistribute soil for our crops. It’s a long process. It’ll be months before the first batch of compost is ready to be worked in. Puig de la Bellacasa is certainly right that the pace of soil care disrupts the flow of productivism, but here, some version of production still needs to occur. We need to find ways to grow efficiently with this land—either to sell directly or for our own consumption, saving money on the other side. This is necessary for us to continue living with and caring for the land. I know that people don’t get into small-scale farming for the money—hell no. But can’t we strike a balance? Or am I just talking the talk of an earthworker while I walk the walk of the logger?

Honoring and working with the land as a living entity isn’t always easy when you’re doing it for a living. The challenges encountered never make sense economically or even ecologically: “Solutions from the established industry,” even with the best intentions, “need to be questioned; many of us have learned firsthand about the limits of conventional scientific research” (Masumoto 8). But *becoming-with* means that we accept the roles we didn’t plan on and the outcomes we didn’t anticipate. It’s not only up to us. Leah Penniman

writes that when the founders first arrived on the land that would become Soul Fire Farm, they wanted to renovate an overgrown swamp into a pond for swimming and irrigation. When she asked for permission from the spirits of the land using a divination tool from the Yoruba Ifa tradition, the answer was a “firm no” (54). They ended up waiting for 10 years, and only then received a conditional yes: “In order to have their blessing for the pond digging, they required us to put certain safety features in place to protect children and also to make regular offerings to Nana Buruku, the grandmother of the universe whose energy dwells in forest wetlands” (54). Facilitating emergence is frightening and *becoming-with* is scary. They require a relinquishment of control, a breaking of the temporalities and myths and mindsets



“Farmers hear silence more than anything else. A silence of pain and disaster, laboring in isolation with low income. Yet a work filled with a quiet tranquility, peaceful. I listen to our family farm and have my doubts. The challenges remain great. I have few solutions and often answer with silence. That’s okay.” 110

we were made in. But that’s exactly what I want, it’s exactly what we need. This is a precarious endeavor, and sometimes the more-than-human actors I collaborate with will have a different vision than I will, will have different needs than I do. I will be disappointed. I will fail. But I will grow. I will be held and composted and reinvigorated by the networks that surround me. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Anna Tsing writes that “Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves...Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible” (20).



Labor, or: how I learned to stop worrying and love the work

Many consider a life of labor something to outgrow or overcome, and success means using the brain rather than the body to make a living. Today, the most common well-paying jobs require seated office work, and yet, as detailed in the *Uncivilisation* manifesto, the higher salary doesn't necessarily guarantee a positive outcome:

“Today's generation are demonstrably less content, and consequently less optimistic, than those that went before. They work longer hours, with less security, and less chance of leaving behind the social background into which they were born. They fear crime, social breakdown, overdevelopment, environmental collapse. They do not believe that the future will be better than the past. Individually, they are less constrained by class and convention than their parents or grandparents, but more constrained by law, surveillance, state proscription and personal debt. Their physical health is better, their mental health more fragile. Nobody knows what is coming. Nobody wants to look.” (7-8)

Many Americans are proud of distancing themselves from working class ancestors, but what exactly did we get in return? Along with the broken promise of our great American dream, our increasingly sedentary lives have bestowed horrific physical ailments.⁷⁴ The majority of my working life has consisted of sitting at a computer, and at the tender age of thirty I experience sciatic nerve pain, lower back pain, eye strain, and rib dislocation

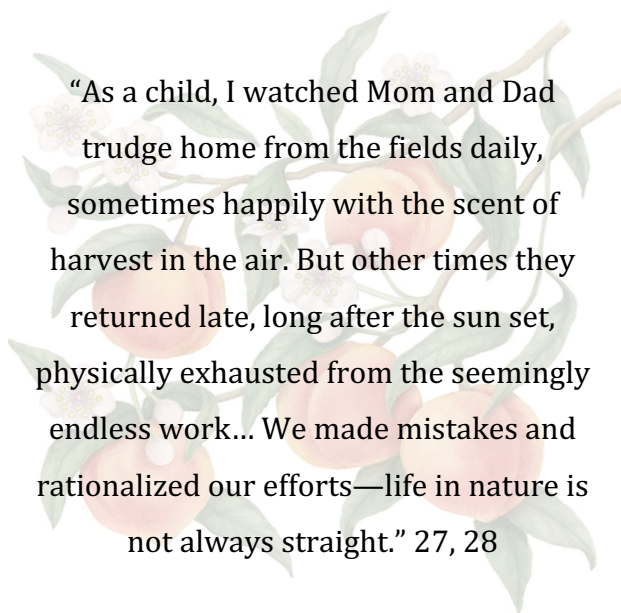
⁷⁴ In their 2002 publication “Sedentary Lifestyle: A Global Public Health Problem,” the World Health Organization reported that “levels of inactivity are high in virtually all developed and developing countries. In developed countries more than half of adults are insufficiently active,” and that, “physical inactivity increases all causes mortality, doubles the risk of cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, and obesity. It also increases the risks of colon and breast cancer, high blood pressure, lipid disorders, osteoporosis, depression and anxiety.”

whenever I sit for more than thirty minutes. Could it be that our aversion to physical labor might be more physically painful than the labor itself? I don't mean to suggest that it's pleasant or easy to be a laborer in America: overwhelmingly, it is not. Without livable wages, opportunities to organize, affordable healthcare or worker protections, it is an invisible and often deadly path. And yet, if we have the chance live a life working with the land in which we are safe and our needs are met, we have the opportunity to rewrite our realities—our bodies, environments, and that which binds them together—into something whole, healthy, and good. I know that many would bristle at this statement, uneasy with suggesting that any body or experience is either “healthy” or “unhealthy,” and making value judgements between them. But, just as we must judge the health and wellbeing of plant and animal bodies in order to adequately care for them, we can also direct this care-oriented logic lovingly inward. In Wendell Berry's discussion of the relationship between the body and the earth in *Unsettling America*, he reminds us that our bodies are not distinct from the bodies of other people, the bodies of plant ants and animals, or the heavenly bodies, and that “to be healthy is to be whole” (103), a wholeness he links directly to a working relationship with the earth: “While we live our bodies are moving particles of the earth, joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures... there should be some profound resemblances between our treatment of our bodies and our treatment of the earth” (93). We cannot be in good health without being in right relationship with the earth, and we cannot be in right relationship with the earth if we are not willing to work with it and for it.

Of course, work and labor are burdened environmental topics. Work—agricultural and otherwise—has provided the context for much environmental destruction. As William

Major writes in "The Agrarian Vision and Ecocriticism," "work is exactly where humans and nature have traditionally had the most contact" and while much of it has been abhorrent, "in our rush to denigrate the value of human impact on the land we fail to appreciate that there is a longstanding environmental ethos inherent to a working relationship with the land" (61, 52). Robin Wall Kimmerer also warns against an 'all is lost mentality,' writing that she was shocked to find that, "Nearly every one of the two hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix...I was stunned. How is it possible that in twenty years of education they cannot think of any beneficial relationship between people and the environment?" (6). Alienated from our bodies and their labors in our technocapitalist milieu, not wanting to repeat environmental mistakes of the past, and afraid of working hard and breaking a sweat, we've swung too far the way of 'saving' nature from ourselves. Of course, this reinforces that old lie that we are separate from nature, an idealization that neglects what William Major calls the "very foundation of life, of culture: the truth that we all do in fact live from and use the land" (59). Major and other agrarians, calling on the practice-based wisdoms of ancestors and earthworkers alike, suggest that the only way to "inhabit this truth is by assuming a harmoniously instrumental relation with the world" (59). From the most intimate environment of the body to the ones that we share with all manner of human and nonhuman others, we have to find ways of making our home here: we have to get to work.

Until now, my earthwork wasn't directly associated with my livelihood, and I was able to conduct it with the sole purpose of cultivating health in myself (through food and exercise and being outside) and in my surroundings. But that doesn't mean it was always pleasant. Working with the earth is hard, labor intensive, frustrating, lonely, and without guarantee. I think back to installing drip line on the Bolden property last summer. I had set out what felt like miles of the crinkly old tubing, rigging it up in what I thought was an elegant pattern that required few connections. I used garden staples to make sure everything was snugly in the ground, nearly invisible under the plants, checking and re-checking connections. When I stood up and looked at the system, it looked great, but when I turned on the water and heard the small, shrill noise that confirmed everything was on, I knew something was wrong. In all my planning, laying-out, and pounding into the soil, I had failed to take gravity into account. The bottom section of hoses was running uphill, and that



“As a child, I watched Mom and Dad trudge home from the fields daily, sometimes happily with the scent of harvest in the air. But other times they returned late, long after the sun set, physically exhausted from the seemingly endless work... We made mistakes and rationalized our efforts—life in nature is not always straight.” 27, 28

half of the property wasn't being watered at all. Like so many farmers before me, I had tried to get water to run uphill and been defeated. I was annoyed with myself for not considering the slope of the garden ahead of time. I was annoyed for waiting so long to put this system in (it was already mid-summer). I was annoyed at myself for using so many fucking garden staples. I was hot and tired and smelly, but I pulled up, re-ran, and re-connected all the hoses, working into the night. In a few short months, it would be time to pull everything up in preparation for winter, but I dismissed the thought from my mind.

For now, everything worked, and for the rest of the summer, the garden was hydrated and lush.

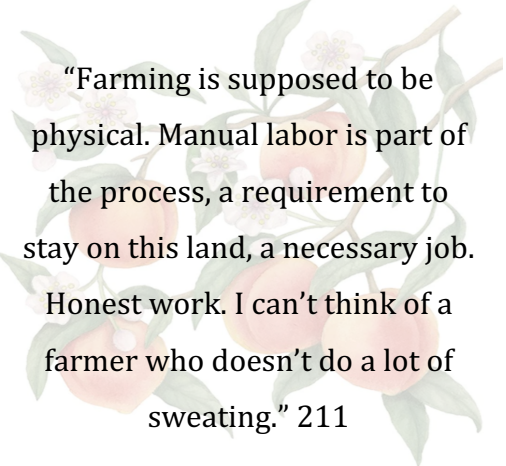
I think back of learning to build with cob. Cob is a natural building material made of clay, sand, straw, and water. Building with cob is an ancient tradition akin to building with adobe or mud, and cob structures are famously fire resistant, seismically sound, and low-cost. The process is labor intensive as the materials are heavy, but considering the fact that some of the oldest known man-made structures are made of cob (Afghanistan), and that other cob homes have been continually inhabited and are still standing strong after five-hundred years (France), it seems like a worthwhile trade. Parker and I wanted to make a simple cabin in the woods. We cleared the site, leveled the ground, and dug the foundation trench. We filled the trench with gravel, busted up concrete, and large pieces of rock. We decided against a domed structure and cut trees for roofbeams, stripping the bark and cutting them to size. We dug holes to set the beams and filled them with concrete. We began cobbing the stem wall and created a threshold, driving up to the neighboring quarry and collecting the largest stones we could.

I say that “we” did all these things, but really, Parker did ninety percent of the work. I was dismayed by my lack of strength! I could haul, lift, stir, schlep, and toss so little! Everything we did seemed to require incredible wrist and forearm strength, and mine were burning and weak, often cracking as they strained. How could a five-gallon bucket be so heavy? How could walking out to the worksite with a small stone seem like such a long and arduous journey? My back ached and my wrists were stiff, but the soreness at the end of these days was welcome. It was different than the pain I feel from sitting, the pain of feeling myself degrade. As I watched thick calluses form on my palms and finger pads, I knew that

that was the pain of a working body, a body getting stronger, and a body building something with the earth.

I think of work I do now and the work I will do in the future, especially now that there is a financial incentive (requirement) for the work to be productive. I think of the land I am clearing and composting for the vegetable garden and flower farm. The blackberries I remove, the goats I shepherd, the apples I pick, the wood I chop. I think of the compost I mix, the water I haul, the weeds I pull up by hand. The skin on my fingers will continue to crack from contact with the soil. My back will continue to ache at night. My wrinkles will deepen and I will likely get skin cancer from all the time spent under the sun.

Certain crops will fail; other will flourish. I am and will be frustrated and defeated. I am and will be happy and at peace. Whether we displace the labor or embrace it as our own, we are all dependent on working the soil. Wendell Berry writes that, “No matter how urban our life, our bodies live by farming; we come from the earth



“Farming is supposed to be physical. Manual labor is part of the process, a requirement to stay on this land, a necessary job. Honest work. I can’t think of a farmer who doesn’t do a lot of sweating.” 211

and return to it, and so we live in agriculture as we live in flesh” (97). We have much to gain if and when the bodies and energies we live by are our own. It is hard work, and it is an incredible privilege: it is work that does not advance ongoing narratives of progress / it is uncivilized. It does not intend to produce scalable strategies / is provisional. It has no truck with “seductions to organic wholeness”⁷⁵ / it is partial. The practices I entrain are necessarily local, personal, and specific: they have to work here, on this ground, in these

⁷⁵ Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” 2.

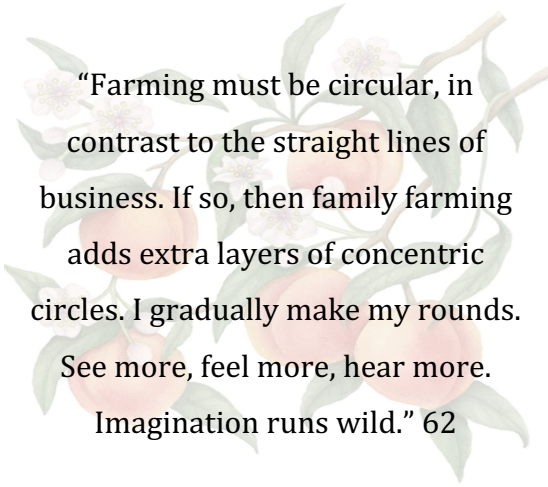
conditions, with this body. And yet, following the logic of thinking globally and acting locally, they respond to universal crises. In his farm guide *Fruitful Labor: The Ecology, Economy, and Practice of a Family Farm*, Davis, CA farmer Mike Madison writes that, “All agriculture is local, and the particular details of my operation might not be applicable elsewhere, but the basic variables are universal, and every farmer has to solve the same set of problems in whatever way works” (1). We are united by the problems but forge intimately personal paths—with these bodies, this land, and the dedicated labor between them—for finding solutions. It’s hard work, but it’s worth it.



Harvest: what does it mean to be done?

I dream of future harvests: drying sheds filled with lavender, herbs, and tobacco, the cold room crowded with curing meat and canned goods and root vegetables. I dream of sharing fresh garden bounty with our neighbors and friends. I dream of the people who will come here to work and live, of the healing and joy this community will cultivate. I dream of chipping away at the slash piles, clearing the canyons, turning fire hazards into mulch. Some harvests are removals: the reduction of waste or harm, turning trash into treasure. Some harvests are emergent: building small connections that will eventually form complex patterns, movements, and opportunities that may or may not come to fruition in this lifetime. Some harvests are gleanings: gratefully accepting the fruits of someone else’s labor; physical goods or place-based lessons and experience.

A Planthropocene harvest is already seeding, sprouting, spreading. In many ways it always has been, and it is our duty to tune-in, tend to, and cultivate; to facilitate future harvests on their way. In this sense, every harvest is also planning and planting and labor—



“Farming must be circular, in contrast to the straight lines of business. If so, then family farming adds extra layers of concentric circles. I gradually make my rounds. See more, feel more, hear more. Imagination runs wild.” 62

winter melting into spring. It is the sensing, looping, and feedback that allows ecosystems to regulate and adapt. It is training perception to lead to actions that will breed new preceptions and actions. It is sensing and moving carefully in our bodies so we might learn to do so in the world. It is starting small and passing it on. In her

new introduction to *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer muses, “It’s as if we can see the world we want to live in just over time’s horizon; the question is how do we get there?...whatever we wish to see on the other side of the narrows of this ecological and cultural crisis, we must pass lovingly from hand to hand.”⁷⁶ Considering how we might co-create and share the vision and coming-to-fruiting of future harvests, Kimmerer returns to the story of Skywoman Falling. There are many versions of the epic, and while some details remain consistent, others vary. One key difference between tellings is just how Skywoman transitioned from one world to the next: “The common version is that she slips...But in other tellings, this was no accident. In one version, she was pushed. In another she was thrown...In every version I’ve ever heard, Skywoman was an accidental and possibly an unwilling traveler to the next world, like a seed on the wind.” Kimmerer confesses that as

⁷⁶ These Kimmerer quotations are from her new introduction to *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which I encountered as an online op-ed published by Emergence Magazine; hence the lack of page numbers.

she looks around “at the strong women I know, Indigenous and newcomer, survivors and thrivers, teachers, artists, farmers, singers, healers, mothers, nokos, aunties, daughters, sisters holding together families and communities and leading the way to a new world,” she has a hard time believing that Skywoman would ever be such an “unknowing and passive emissary.” So Kimmerer re/members the story: she envisions Skywoman standing on the edge of the abyss, staring down into the darkness, “her belly planted with new life,” and, breathing deeply, she sees her stepping willfully over the edge. “What if,” Kimmerer demands, “with full agency, she spreads her arms, looks over her shoulder, feels her child stir within and then—what if she jumps?” Like Skywoman, we cannot reach the harvests we envision without taking a leap, but as I wrote much earlier in this essay, we already have what we need. There are many paths forward and there are many roles in the revolution. “Propelled by love, ready to work, we can jump toward the world we want to co-create, with pockets full of seeds. And rhizomes” (Kimmerer).

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