

Listening to the Land: Exploring Indigenous Place–Thought through Eco–Somatic Art

CAIRI JACKS 

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a twenty-minute-long audio artwork that invites you to listen whilst taking a walk in an outdoor green space. The artwork guides the listener through a series of exercises for expanding sensory awareness and increasing embodied and intuitive engagement with their surroundings. As background this paper briefly explores the concepts and methodological pointers offered by scholar of Indigenous Studies Watts' description of *Indigenous Place–Thought*; the understanding that the earth is animate and that humans are an extension of the earth. The paper also draws on the emergent field of eco–somatic art which focuses on the body as a site of connection and knowing. Therefore the artwork is an invite into a different kind of relationship. Listening to it helps to explore what happens to the way we feel about, and behave towards, the land if we take Indigenous frameworks, and the shift in perspective they offer, seriously.

CONTRIBUTOR

Cairi is an artist, facilitator, researcher and PhD candidate at UWE Bristol.

Email: cairi@cairijacks.co.uk

CRYNODEB

Mae'r papur hwn yn cyflwyno gwaith celf sain ugain munud o hyd sy'n eich gwahodd chi i wrando wrth fynd am dro mewn man gwyrdd awyr agored. Mae'r gwaith celf yn arwain y gwrandäwr trwy gyfres o ymarferion er mwyn ehangu ei ymwybyddiaeth synhwyraidd a chynyddu ei ymgysylltiad corfforol a greddfól â'u hamgylchedd. Mae cefndir y papur yn trin a thrafod yn gryno y cysyniadau a'r awgrymiadau methodolegol sy'n cael eu cynnig gan yr ysgolhaig Astudiaethau Brodorol Watts a'u disgrifiad o'r Lle-meddwl Brodorol; sef y ddealltwriaeth bod y ddaear yn fyw a bod pobl yn estyniad o'r ddaear. Mae'r papur hefyd yn defnyddio celf eco-somatig, maes sy'n dod i'r amlwg ac sy'n canolbwyntio ar y corff yn safle o gysylltiad a gwybodaeth. Felly, mae'r gwaith celf yn wahoddiad i fath gwahanol o berthynas. Mae gwrandao arno yn ein helpu ni i ystyried sut mae'r ffordd rydyn ni'n teimlo tuag at y tir, ac yn ymddwyn tuag ato, yn newid os ydyn ni'n cymryd fframweithiau Brodorol, a'r persbectif newydd maen nhw'n ei gynnig, o ddirifrif.

KEYWORDS

Participatory art; Indigenous Place–Thought; Eco–somatic art; Listening to the land; Grounded relationality.

Initial submission on: 14th January 2024

Accepted for publication on: 23th May 2024

Publication on: 4th December 2024

Article 1.11



INTRODUCTION

I grew up deep in the mountains of North Wales, UK, a place that imbued me with a sense of wonder, and a love and affinity for the land. With one foot in a worldview that celebrates the cycles of nature and our relationship with the earth and one foot in the modern Western framework, my work seeks to bridge these perspectives and explore the insights they can offer each other. My past works include: *Yew Tree Copes* (Jacks 2015), a site-specific audio walk around a woodland in Hampshire in England, UK, and; *Story String: Conversation Piece* (Figure 1), a work that brought people together to share knowledge about a collection of common plants found beside a well-used route on the edge of Stroud in England, UK. These pieces connect people to specific places, through sensory interactions, and to each other through the sharing of knowledge and stories.

The artwork linked to this paper was developed from my practices of spending time with the land and the methods and insights that practice reveals, and from many years spent as a Nature Connection facilitator. To participate, download the audio from the available link onto a phone or mp3 player. You will also need a set of headphones. Take yourself to an outdoor space of your choosing, preferably one with trees, although any green space where you feel you can relax will serve. When you have found a place you feel comfortable, I invite you to press play.

CALLS TO DECOLONISE

There is a loud call from Indigenous scholars around the world to decolonise knowledge-making practices. This, they insist, means overcoming the perceived separation between ontology and epistemology, a colonial construct imposed onto Indigenous peoples (Todd 2016; Watts 2013), reconnecting to our ‘pre-colonial minds’ (Hill 2012), and beginning from a view of land and the human relationship to it expressed by Coulthard and Simpson’s ‘grounded normativity’ (2016), Byrd et al.’s ‘grounded relationality’ (2018) and Watts’ ‘Indigenous place-thought’ (2013).



Figure 1 Story String: Conversation Piece. Photo credit: Cairi Jacks, 2019 (CC BY 04).

This call is to those of us raised in the worldview described by Newtonian physics, what quantum physicist Barad refers to as ‘the metaphysics of individualism’; the belief that ‘the world is composed of individual entities with individually determinate boundaries and properties’ (2007: 107) that can be measured by the knowing Cartesian subject. This is a ‘culturally contingent belief’ that quantum physics undermines, a ‘Cartesian habit of mind’ (Barad, 2007: 49).

By contrast, in her paper *Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans* Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe scholar of Indigenous Studies Watts describes *Indigenous place-thought* as ‘the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts’ (2013: 21). Thought and being are indistinguishable, and inseparable from the agency of the earth itself. Grounded relational indigenous worldviews understand land as ‘a source of relation with an agency of its own’ (Byrd et al. 2018: 9) as opposed to the conception of ‘land-as-property or land-as-resource’ (Curley et al. 2022: 5). Relationships to land are grounded in ‘deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place’ and are fundamentally ‘nonauthoritarian, nondominating, [and] nonexploitive’ (Coulthard and Simpson 2016: 254). This relationality is in the form of ‘polymorphous kinships, human reciprocities with and of land, and the other than human’ (Byrd et al. 2018: 5), which are considered to have ‘agential significance’ (ibid: 9), and out of which ‘ethical way of knowing and being’ (ibid: 10) and political systems are generated (Coulthard and Simpson 2016). Therefore, to decolonise means to root our inquiries in an awareness of interconnectedness and acknowledge that ‘the human mind is a conduit for the consciousness of the land to be expressed in language’ (Marker 2018: 545). It means practising living and making knowledge from a framework that could signpost towards an interconnected way of being.

To do this, and to heal the damage done by colonisation, Watts urges that it is ‘incumbent upon us to remember’ how to listen to the land ‘speaking up through our feet’ (2013: 32). To consider the land as an animate collaborator, full of ‘vitality, life, and meaning’ (Ghosh 2021: 197). Whilst to ‘tune one’s consciousness’ to the ‘interpenetration of metaphysical and physical reality’ is a difficult shift in perspective for the Western mind, it does not relinquish us from ‘the task of trying’ (Marker 2018: 459). It is a methodological position that will help us be part of an ‘intellectual de-laminating from colonizing ontologies of landscape’ (Marker 2018: 462). This artwork aims to unsettle Cartesian habits of mind by exploring what it could look like to tune our consciousness in order to listen to the land.

THE LIFE / NONLIFE DIVIDE

Whilst this endeavour may seem a challenge to our Western cognition, it is important to remember two things. First, that ‘animism is normative consciousness’ (Schrei 2020), for 98% of human history, throughout the globe, it would have been normal to see the earth as possessing agency and to relate to other-than-human persons as ‘relations’ (Harvey 2017), and secondly, that the British Isles also had an animistic worldview until not so long ago.

The separation of the world into ‘Life and Nonlife’, between what is considered to have agency, and what is not, is the division upon which colonial capitalist governance, or what Povinelli (2016) calls ‘geontopower,’ is based, and Marxist feminist scholar Federici (2007) argues that it began in

Europe with the enclosures and the witch-hunts. The reframing of nature as mechanical, and of human beings as separate from the earth, was not an accident. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Amitav Ghosh (2021) traces the brutal history of the use of this framing of the land as inanimate resource as both justification and tool for extraction, domination, colonialism and genocide. The tactical severing of people from the systems that sustain them, both physically and spiritually, impedes their capacity to 'think with the land' and undermines their capacity for self-determination (Watts 2013).

It is vital that practical tools for cultivating feelings of nature connectedness and revealing our entanglement with the earth, are developed. Empirical research indicates that '[s]ubjective nature connectedness and the incorporation of the natural world into our sense of self identity (Capaldi et al. 2014) has a 'positive effect' on human capacities and emotional states (Hartig et al. 2014). Feelings of 'shared identity' are also the key motivators for environmental protection (Milton 2002). This addresses the interconnected issues of personal and planetary health; the rise of global mental health issues (Maller et al. 2005), that in many cases stem from feelings of existential loneliness and disconnection (Hertzog Young 2023; Roszak et al. 1995), and ongoing colonialism, environmental destruction and climate breakdown caused by certain forms of human activity, which many argue are rooted in the worldview that separates 'Life from Nonlife' (Ghosh 2021, Povinelli 2016).

LISTENING TO THE LAND

This artwork explores how we might begin to peel back the sedimented layers of history and reconnect with our own ancestral relationship to the land that is still laced through our stories and myths (Morus Baird 2023). Luckily, there are many Indigenous scholars willing to aid us by 'sharing patterns of knowledge and ways of thinking' that will help us to remember our own ancestral lineage (Yunkaporta 2019: 89). These patterns are common to Indigenous cultures across the globe, including here in Wales, and provide us with a useful road map (Wilson 2008). Many scholars and creative practitioners are engaged in a process of reconnecting to this lineage, such as author and pan-Celtic mythologist Blackie insisting that '[w]e have our own guiding stories, and they are deeply rooted in the heart of our own native landscapes' (2016: 18).

This artwork is an invitation to experiment with what 'listening to the land' might look like in practice. What happens if we take *Indigenous place-thought*, and the shift in perspective it offers, seriously, as an invite into a different kind of relationship? Indigenous scholarship makes clear that 'methodology cannot be extracted from place' (Marker 2018: 338). Therefore, the suggestion is to take the audio outside, to a place you would like to be in relationship with. The purpose of this exploration is not to investigate the 'truth' of any particular worldview, but to explore what happens to the way we feel about, and behave towards, the land when we begin from this premise. When beginning from a Western form of cognition, the effects of these practices are not 'provable' (Burns 2020: 302). This work requires a commitment to a different framework. Western science has 'no means' of evaluating an Aboriginal 'analytics of existence' (Povinelli 2016). These practices, therefore, ask us to be willing to undergo an 'osmotic mind move' (Marker 2018: 457) in order to attune ourselves to different dimensions of place.

ECO-SOMATIC ENCHANTMENT

In developing these methods, I have drawn on my experience as a Nature Connection facilitator and on the emergent field of eco-somatic arts which helps ‘embody decolonial praxis’ because it undermines the very dualisms that systems of oppression are based on. It aims to ‘expand our felt sense of self’ by ‘awakening sensory perception’, connecting us to our bodies, and re-sensitising us to our body’s connection to the ‘greater body of earth’ (Rozek and Cudney 2023). Eco-somatic arts practice connects to ‘ecological consciousness’ but through an ‘incarnated process’ of encountering ‘the flesh of the world’ (Rufo 2022: 2). Through somatic investigations and states of ‘deep attention’ our perceptions of self and world are expanded (Sanger 2022: 269).

Burns’ artistic practice of ‘material poet(h)ics’ in participation with the land uses sounding, repetitive movement and dance to make herself ‘porous’ to multiple dimensions of place (2020: 310). Sanger’s dance has developed a form of inquiry through movement he calls ‘eco-somatic enchantment’ (2022: 264), which is both a state of being and an activity. Influenced by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it explores how ‘practices of enchantment restore agency to a muted landscape’ (Sanger 2022: 272) and offers opportunities to transform our relationship with the more-than-human world through our perception’s interplay with the agentic environment.

Ideas about enchantment provide methodological openings for revealing the human entanglement with the land. Bennett describes enchantment as spellbinding moments that temporarily suspend the usual ongoings of time and space, or as a state of ‘acute sensory activity’ or ‘interactive fascination’ in which noticing is sharpened, magnified and intensified (2001: 5). Experiences of enchantment disrupt habitual sensory disposition, making them capable of enabling fresh perspectives and making our bodies ‘porous’ to their surroundings and the ‘radically reciprocal touch’ of the earth, opening up opportunities to explore ways of being in the world ‘out of which an unknown, anti-colonial future could emerge’ (Burns 2021). Participating in this artwork is an opportunity to begin experimenting with what listening to the land might feel like for you, and what it might do for the way you view the world around you and your part in it.

Ethics and consent

Not applicable

Funding Information

PhD funded by UWE Bristol/Digital Cultures Research Centre.

Competing Interests

The author(s) has/have no competing interests to declare.

REFERENCES

- Barad, K.** (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bennett, J.** (2001). *The enchantment of modern life: Attachments, crossings, and ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Blackie, S.** (2016). *If women rose rooted: The journey to authenticity and belonging*. Tewkesbury: September Publishing.
- Burns, L.** (2020). *Towards a material poet(h)ics of nonhuman-human witnessing*. PhD thesis, London: Goldsmiths College.
- Burns, L.** (2021). Practices of reciprocity and witnessing in more-than-human collectivities. *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices*, 13(1), 167–178. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/jdsp_00045_1
- Byrd, J.A. Goldstein, A. Melamed, J. & Reddy, C.** (2018). Predatory value: Economies of dispossession and disturbed relationalities. *English Faculty Research and Publications*, 36(2), 1–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-4362325>
- Capaldi, C.A. Dopko, R.L. & Zelenski, J.M.** (2014). The relationship between nature connectedness and happiness: A meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5(976), 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00976>
- Coulthard, A. and Simpson, LB.** (2016). Grounded normativity / place-based solidarity. *American Quarterly*, 68(2), 249–255. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0038>
- Curley, A. Gupta, P. Lookabaugh, L. Neubert, C. and Smith, S.** (2022). Decolonisation is a political project: Overcoming impasses between Indigenous sovereignty and abolition, *Antipode*, 54(4), 1043–1062. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12830>
- Federici, S.** (2007). *Caliban and the witch: Women, the body, and primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.
- Ghosh, A.** (2021). *The nutmeg's curse: Parables for a planet in crisis*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press
- Hartig, H., Mitchell, M., de Vries, S., and Frumkin, H.** (2014). Nature and health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 35, 207–228. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-032013-182443>
- Harvey, G.** (2017). *Animism: Respecting the living world*. 2nd ed. London: Hurst.
- Hertzog Young, C.** (2023). *Spinning out: Climate change, mental health and fighting for a better future*, London: Footnote
- Hill, S.** (2012). Storyteller's Conference. SUNY at Buffalo. Retrieved from <https://www.buffalo.edu/news/releases/2012/03/13257.html>
- Jacks, C.** (2015). Yew tree copes. Cairi Jacks: Retrieved from <http://cairijacks.co.uk/yew-tree-copse/>
- Maller, C., Townsend, M., Pryor, A., Brown, P. & Leger, L.** (2005). Healthy nature healthy people: 'Contact with nature' as an upstream health promotion intervention for populations'. *Health Promotion International*, 21(1), 45–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dai032>

- Marker, M.** (2018) There is no place of nature; there is only the *nature of place*: Animate landscapes as methodology for inquiry in the Coast Salish territory. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 31(6), 453–464. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1430391>
- Morus Baird, G.** (2023). Celtic Source. Retrieved from <https://celticsource.online/the-celtic-rites-and-sacred-time/>
- Milton, K.** (2002). *Loving nature: towards an ecology of emotion*, London: Routledge.
- Povinelli, E.** (2016). *Geontologies: A requiem to late liberalism*, London: Duke University Press.
- Roszak, T., Gomes, M.E. and Kanner, A.D.** (eds) (1995). *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, healing the mind*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Rozek, M. & Cudney, J.** (2023). What is eco-somatics? Retrieved from <https://www.wayofbelonging.com/post/what-is-ecosomatics>
- Rufo, R.** (2022). Somatic arts and liveable futures: (re-)embodying ecological connections, *International Forum for the Eco-Embodied Arts*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7629756>
- Sanger, A.** (2022). Gaga and naming as eco-somatic practices of enchantment. *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices*, 14(2), 263–75. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1386/jdsp.00086.1>
- Schrei, J.** (2020). The emerald podcast: Animism is normative consciousness. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/show/1OwFblqZ7FikLSW4rvbJEF>
- Todd, Z.** (2016). An Indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29(1), 4–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>
- Watts, V.** (2013). Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (first woman and sky woman go on a European world tour!) *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2(1), 20–34.
- Wilson, S.** (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*, Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.
- Yunkaporta, T.** (2019). *Sand talk: how Indigenous thinking can save the world*, New York: Harper Collins.

AGO AD

A Journal of Spatial Theory

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Agoriad (meaning *Openings* in Welsh) is a diamond open access journal exploring theoretical and philosophical ideas in Human Geography and associated fields, published annually. Each volume explores a key theme, linked to the annual Gregynog Theory School which is hosted by the Welsh Graduate School of Social Sciences.

Agoriad is edited by postgraduate and early career researchers with oversight and support from a managing editorial team. Its aim is to publish high-quality research on key theoretical debates, as well as to provide a supportive publishing process for researchers at all levels.

As an open access publication, *Agoriad* is available without charge to the user and their institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.

To discuss publication or to submit a paper please contact: Agoriad@cardiff.ac.uk



The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



MANAGING EDITORS

Dr Julian Brigstocke, Reader in Human Geography, School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, UK

Dr Angharad Closs Stephens, Associate Professor in Human Geography, School of Biosciences, Geography and Physics, Swansea University, UK

Professor Marcus Doel, Professor of Human Geography, School of Biosciences, Geography and Physics, Swansea University, UK

Dr Mitch Rose, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, UK

ISSUE EDITORS

Dr Fabiana D'Ascenzo *Cardiff University*

Dr Aled Singleton *Cardiff University*

Rachel Solnick *Aberystwyth University*

Cole Singh Virk *Sheffield University*

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

Professor Dave Clarke *Swansea University*

Professor Deborah Dixon *University of Glasgow*

Dr Catrin Edwards *Aberystwyth University*

Dr Franklin Ginn *Bristol University*

Dr Paul Harrison *Durham University*

Professor Sheila Hones *University of Tokyo*

Dr Ihni Jon *Cardiff University*

Dr Aya Nassar *Warwick University*

Professor Anna Secor *Durham University*

Agoriad is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers. cardiffuniversitypress.org