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INTERMEZZO I

In Sickness and in Health: Reflections on Our Commitments To Nature, Nurture, Care, and Caretaking—As Artists and Citizens—During Climate Crises

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With everything having life, with everything having the power of speech,
with everything having the power to breathe,
with everything having the power to teach and guide,
with that in blessing will we live.

River Junction Curly, *The Blessingway.*[1]

All image credits: Samuel James

Pre-lim(b)inary Thoughts

My opening gambit is to juxtapose two things: Navajo elder River Junction Curly's quote--an exhortation to recognise the vibrant, urgent agency of all living beings-- and the photograph my trusted collaborator takes of my body, bowed into the charcoals of a fire-ravaged place. Not much left standing. Two bodies: the body of a scorched earth, and the body of a dancer, grieving together, taking stock of what is dead or dying and what is still lucky to be alive.

[1] Wyman, Leland C. *Blessingway*, recorded and translated by Father Berard Haile. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1970.

> *In what ways is the dancer a passage or channel between life and death? Does the power (of life, teaching and guiding) to which Curly alludes also have death as its eternal companion, and a companionship that never really ends? In what ways is this a useful consideration, as we create work in response to climate crises?*

In this Intermezzo, I discuss artistic work created in response to the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-20, in collaboration with my colleague Sam James. The fires devastated some 24 million hectares (an area roughly equal to the terrestrial U.K.) of urban and rural habitat around Australia.[2] Over the whole summer period, the fires disrupted travel and commerce, claimed the lives of 33 people, and destroyed over 3000 homes.[3] They served as a prelude to multiple climate disasters, including the horrific floods and fires of 2023 in the northern hemisphere. As we approach more anticipated scorching summer seasons in Australia and elsewhere, we prepare for more catastrophes of our own.

To produce work as a performance-maker in relation to these and coming events, challenges what I think I am doing on aesthetic, intellectual, ethical, cultural, and interpersonal levels. I wish to consider what the body is and becomes through such experiences, and grapple with several key ontological questions such as: what exactly is there to care for, of ourselves and the landscape, after episodes of such deep trauma? And in terms of our arts industries, how do our performance languages and outcomes meet the pressing demands posed by such catastrophes? How do we know when we meet/have met those demands?

I propose that our bodies, as ecosystems within larger ecosystems, are the primary tool(s) of inquiry to find answers to these questions, because they already understand systemic relationality, volatility, and adaptation. They include and refer to the lands we inhabit, and they are the lens through which we experience the world. I suggest that their/our inter-relationality and sensibilities can potentially help us find ways forward, through and beyond the crises—both ones we have already experienced, and those ahead of us, into uncertain futures.

I here explore how working and creating in such circumstances asks deep questions of our notions of agency, impact, authority, and of the calibre of our listening. I examine whether our

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[2] https://news.mongabay.com/2022/02/as-australia-faces-new-fire-reality-forest-restoration-tactics-reevaluated/

[3] https://www.uwa.edu.au/-/media/Faculties/FABLE/Docs/UWA0001_After-the-Fires-Survey-Report_Exec-Summary_Infographic.pdf

relations with nature are merely 'marriages of convenience,' or ones that embrace how to respond and relate to environment both *in sickness and in health*, across species and identities, and in definitions that stretch beyond the confines of catastrophic survivalism towards where we might, collegially, thrive. Towards the end of this intermezzo, I come to a series of touchstones which arrive out of this investigation—not by way of offering definitive conclusions, but as ways that might prove helpful to other artists, educators, ecologists and ethicists as ways to remain open to the demands of our enquiries—which include deep questions such as: how thoroughly do we work? What do we ignore? How adaptive can we be? At time of publication, 2023-24, as *El Nino* (prone to fires) supplants *La Nin*a (prone to flooding), we hold our breath(s) to see what transpires. As our agencies purportedly become delimited by these shifts, we struggle to grasp the consequences of both our actions and inactions in these critical times.

I also, specifically, consider our notions of response/abilities--to ourselves, and to the more-than-human beings with which we co-inhabit our worlds. I suggest this requires new models of citizenship, and also of care. As 'earth citizens,' we want to belong in our communities, our habitats, and our futures, but the Western concept of *polis* can connote a somewhat passive way of being 'afforded' rights and protections. We also have moral obligations as active agents, upholding the vigour and health of the environments and organisations on which we co-depend.

Our lands and our bodies are not so far distant from each other as we might think. Our bodies have language: but we have, largely, learnt not to hear. Our countries have languages; but can we recognise the voices that speak? We can re-learn how to listen to, and perhaps reconstitute, the languages presenting around and within us, but only, I assert, if we decolonise our listening. We are, after all, creatures of the earth. Somewhere, we share language. It just may not be in English.

In this Intermezzo, I refer to both Western and First Nations understandings of cultural and land-care practices and reflect on some key learnings from my personal engagements with First Nations Elders, without presuming the equity of our knowledges. At a time of such precarity, my own hope is to contribute to a responsive, process-oriented methodology, rather than pose brittle solutions to conditions that could break us apart (as will the weather, and the geographies around us) as we move into uncertain futures.

In the first instance, I do so by reflecting on what I was doing with my collaborator at the south coast, after the fires. I reflect on the communications that arose from stepping in to *the dance*.

Performance Diary. February 2020. Coastal Region, South-east New South Wales

I travel to the south-east coast of New South Wales, six weeks after the most savage of the Black Summer burns have calmed. My trusted companion is photographer/film maker Samuel James. My body returns to a (supposedly familiar) cellular dialogue, crossing the bridge my dance creates between human and more-than-human worlds. That mountain we climb; that banksia; the burrawang[4] which I have long considered an ally. I imagine, I sense, I believe (or project my belief?) that we are already in collegiate interrelation with each other.

From Ash to Ash

Yet Sam and I are both caught short, made breathless by the scarring, the charcoal, the burns. There is meters-thick ash at the feet of impossibly thin remnants of once-proud trees. Where in one copse, the forest sprouts recovery fronds, in others, there is…*nothing*. No juice, no green. Groundcover, tree roots, topsoil melded so deep by fierce heat that they are subsumed, alchemically, into a thick, black glass.

Can I even breathe?

Yet, there are still conversations. My body is being moved by some sort of communication. How can this be amongst such degradation and collapse?

Perhaps I heard the landscape's call and was asked to come witness, to dance, *to be moved*, by the last breaths of the ash-strewn horizon. At the risk of sounding naïve, how can I account for these experiences that *seem* part of a direct dialogue with the more-than-human world of which I am also apart?

I am alive; it is not. And yet, and yet…
Maybe the problem is my conceptualisation of life, death, individuality, and rejuvenation. And how I sit in time.

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[4] ***Macrozamia communis*** is an Australian cycad found on the east coast of New South Wales. The common name for the species is **burrawang**, a word derived from the Daruk Australian Aboriginal language. The plants grow in open forests.[3]Individual specimens take 10–20 years to mature and may live for up to 120 years.[4]

I step into a swamp toxic with charred asbestos remains, the asbestos a run-off from houses decimated in the flames:

http://bodyecology.com. au/dark-and-light-angels-grief-dances/

Is crying a form of communication to the dead, as well as to the living?

My body becomes a long, deep wail…

Sam and I work for twenty hours over two days. I dance, he films; we edit, we discuss. We encourage *no choreography*.

It's not dance,

says Sam,
quietly.

The camera is not seeing dance. It is more elemental. It is a prayer. I am grateful for his perceptions, and for his permission to accept what is happening.

One billion animals have also died, both quickly and slowly, in the weeks following the fires.[5] The forests are, essentially, funeral pyres. What notion of dance, what language, can mark these cremations?

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There was a stampede at McKenzie's Beach, flames burning right to the fringe of the shore. A sea of people swarms into the ocean; *as if,* for safety. Does saltwater quench, or does it burn? No one is sure. A woman with babe-in-arms is swept into the panic despite her instincts and protests, terrified.

Does water itself remember: the swarming, the screaming, the burning around it, its toes on fire? Does it matter that I feel for/with this mother, the water, the flames, the shore? How would I know? Does my imagining, my empathetic reasoning, have any consequence at all?

I still get a shock when I drive past the inlet now, after more than two years. There is still so little recovery. We know that trees hold memory of climactic events in their concentric rings; if we do not believe this, why not? Do we have to cut down a tree to know its own knowing? Doubting Thomases, do we always have to 'see'?

Perhaps we *do* know, how to listen. Perhaps we have known from a long time ago but forgotten. Lost languages—apart from the languages of sight, and/or writing--need recovering. Perhaps our mutual survival depends on it.

An Earlier Learning

There was a warning, a prescience, when I drove my younger daughter on a 600-kilometre round trip to a university orientation a few, very hot, months before.

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[5] Lewis, Dyani. "'Deathly silent': Ecologist describes Australian wildfires' devastating aftermath." *Nature*, vol. 577, no. 7789, 2020, p. 304. Accessed 8 Mar. 2021.

We are caught on our return, the fires just breaking out, not ten cars from the first of the blockades. To our left, a darkling vortex; every which way turns back onto that huge black billowing. *I am her mother*, I think, *keep calm keep her safe*, although I do not know if I can protect her from my own fear. There becomes only one decision: to stop driving, stop guessing, head into the sanctuary zone--a community hall with a concrete floor, where volunteers field sandwiches and tend the urns. One fire fighter all but tells a kind, older attendant, to *piss off* as he heads out the door. Everyone so raw.

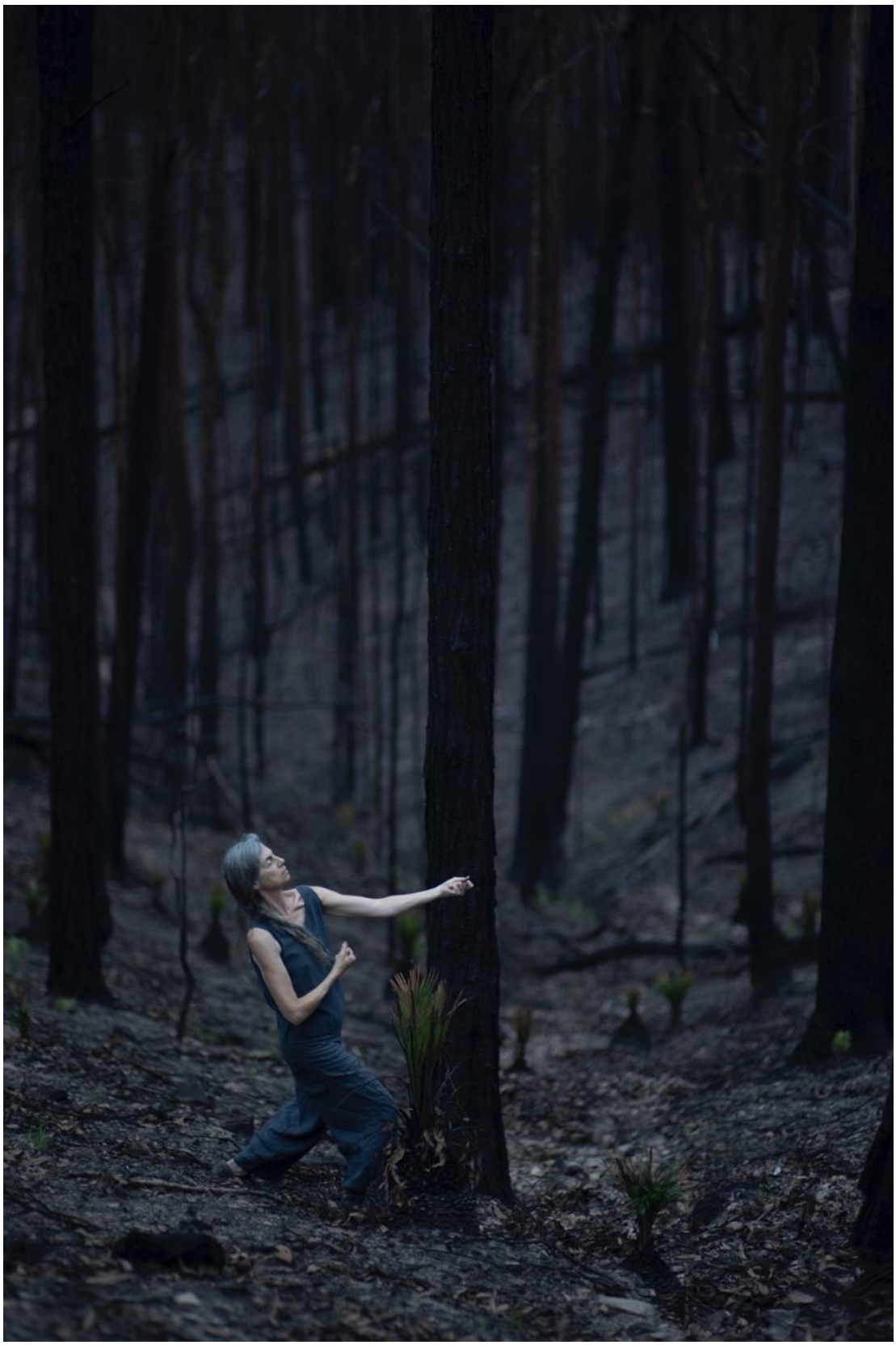
My daughter overhears locals say they don't know if they still have a home. At least, for the moment, I know we have one to return to. We do find our way back, eight hours later than planned, for showers, dinner, linen sheets, silken pillows (silk!), the next day's appointments. How lucky to have any such plans at all.

A friend, a National Parks ranger, tells me that at the coalface, rangers and firemen fought each other over how best to put out the fires. My friend was concussed, in a moment of everyone's inattention, by the falling of a huge branch. No-one saw it coming. Rangers and fireys distracted by their beliefs, fighting over different trainings, ways of listening and observing, fighting for their memes.

How and when do we stop fighting—fires, and each other. Is fire the enemy, or have we made it the enemy by not paying attention to land, its limits, its daily needs, which differs from what we want to make of and in it?

Eight weeks after the fires. I follow a sense of obligation to go listen to the blackened forests. What do I think I am doing.

Please, yourselves: look, listen, feel into what you are seeing.



Land, Laws, Embodied Knowing

Uncle Paul Gordon, a Ngemba elder from Brewarrina in the far-north coast of New South Wales, differentiates the tragedy and horrors of First Nations peoples displaced from their language and their lands, from the fact--his *knowing*--that land, regardless of our abuses, still holds its wisdoms.[6] That land still speaks, still calls us to hear. It is one of the key reasons he and other Elders from whom I learn, invite us white fellas into dialogue. The land always wants to teach us.

Colonization takes language away from land, and from Elders who speak Land, wanting to share it with their people.

Why can't 'we' speak land? What prejudice and block are here? I wonder that we allow that horse whisperers 'speak horse.' Temple Grandin (a vegetarian) *speaks cow* so well that she uses those skills to improve the sensed experience of cows in slaughterhouses in America, a job she has persuaded abattoirs to pay her to do.[7] The evidence of the success of her work may be that the marketed meat becomes more tender, rather than stringy with fear; from her point of view, she'd rather the animals die peacefully than in fear.

Grandin is an autist; how curious that she has the great gift of an alternate language—of perceiving what others (claim we) don't feel. Does colonization suppress our relations to the sensed world, and to its reciprocating generosity and care? Is the suppression of speaking horse, land, kangaroo, echidna, granite, river, rock--removing them from the dictionary of sensible, sensory languages--one of the great tragedies of our collective colonization? How can we reconstitute these languages, including the rape of landed language suffered by our First Nations peoples? Do we have to be classified as autists to be accorded rights to speak land or animal(s)?

I believe we baulk at our relationship to coexistent beings for several reasons. One may be, that we hold them as *lesser-than.* The other may be, that their sum is so vast that we can't begin to bring that vastness into measure. As we veer from arrogance to meekness, our measures, rules and regulations, laws and limiting 'lores,' blind us to our own capacities to understand *measure* as fluid, reciprocal and vast. But I contend we can be equal to the task.

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[6] Uncle Paul Gordon, Senior lore man and custodian from Karulkiyalu Country in north west New South Wales, ran a workshop about Aboriginal approaches to teaching and learning to a group of educators at the Centre for Sustainable Communities, University of Canberra, Friday 30 April 2021.

[7] See Rohan Todd and Maria Hynes (2017), pp 729-741.

First Nations peoples share understandings that humans have an obligation to manage natural sites to the benefit of all co-participant life-forms, including ourselves. *Caretaking* (as opposed to *regulating*) is a process of stewardship that assists plants to flourish and be sustained, animals to have enough food and shelter to be sustained, and most components, including the human, sustainable with no one co-participant overrunning another. There is human self-interest in this, as it aims to provide what is needed in relationships based in principles of mutual sustenance and care.

But how do we know **how** to intervene? I suggest it requires a deep understanding of our embodied presence(s), and a *sensory literacy* (such as I offer in my touchstones) to inform us in what we are doing. This requires training, practice, and…decolonisation. The human is always, already, both less- and more-than-human; however, our bodies have been captured. We need to re-learn ways to listen and act with what our bodies hear.

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I am part of a collective that caretakes a 38-hectare wildlife reserve on the coast in southern New South Wales. The whole 38 hectares were nearly obliterated during the Black Summer firestorms, but for an 11th-hour change of wind. Despite all the planning and praying, the devil was at the threshold, the property almost incinerated.

Since the fires, the Cooperative's committee has consulted extensively with National Parks Rangers who advise the removal of many trees, especially those close to cabin eaves; but we also take advice from local Yuin nation elders on how to conduct cultural (low-temperature, fuel-reducing) burns. Their educative role is not about returning to 'old ways,' but about stepping into continuously renewing ways of observing and responding in active, ongoing inter-relation between humans and more-than-human-beings.

As explained by Bidjiga educator Adam Nye,[8] when land is congested, it is sick and vulnerable. We have obligations to take care of it, make it into a space that we can navigate, move it away from its vulnerabilities (as an overcrowded tinder-trap) to something *more spacious* that can survive the threat of fires and support and sustain all its cohabitants. This requires engaging with it as caretakers--ironically, using fire (in the form of cool cultural

[8] Adam Nye, a member of the Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) and one of the Walbunja Rangers led the cultural burn at Burrawang, a collectively owned Nature, and Wildlife Reserve on the south coast of New South Wales on 25 August 2023.

burns) to pre-empt wildfire, reducing the fuel load for the summer season whilst caretaking the resources and resourcefulness of country to provide for all its cohabitants.

This is not knowledge from a past-tense, ancient Dream*time* but a responsive, contemporary, and reciprocal contemporaneous relationship (Dream*ing*)[9] in dialogue with current conditions.

> When I first came to stay here, I thought this environment was pristine. It seemed 'untouched,' a haven, and something we should keep that way. But the Elders have shown us that this ostensibly 'pristine' environment is highly vulnerable: too much fuel open to savage burns. What seems lush is instead entirely out of balance (David, a [non-Indigenous] member of the Burrawang membership group).

I am interested in the relationship between such knowing and sensing, with the framework established by Feminist Care Ethicists (FCE) in the past thirty years. Compared to 60,000 years of Indigenous knowing, FCE is but a blimp on the radar, but I think it is a good and honest one--in part because it understands and can tackle the sharp teeth of capitalist exploitation and white supremacy in the face of the vulnerable being of self and others in our beautiful and volatile green world. In Feminist Care Ethics, care is configured to materialize through complex and contiguous care actions that need to be grounded in concrete, embodied capabilities (cited as *attentiveness, responsibility, competence,* and *responsiveness*) that enable care-full relations, in both the immediate sense—for the immediately sick, or unwell, or incapacitated, or just plain youthful or uninformed--and for the longer-term (Joan Tronto, 1993, p.127). Tronto emphasises that these 'key ethic elements' are not just 'dispositions' or conceptual moral ideals, but relevant both in the present tense and into the future. I think of the way First Nations peoples, around the world, posit that their actions need to caretake and be accountable to ***the next seven generations,*** not just in the 'now.' Care Ethics recognises the significance of both acting in the present moment, and of *anticipatory* care—looking ahead, attuning, understanding, adjusting and imagining.

Sometimes it almost seems we need emergencies to activate these 'dispositions.' But we don't have to wait for disaster to learn how to listen. We can, and need to, perform care via deep listening in our daily interactions. And, I suggest, we can know, or re-learn, how to do it.

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[9] First nations Peoples ask us to understand the differences between a 'dreamtime' and a 'Dreaming,' which belongs to a continuous present that refers to past, present, and future as temporally co-existent. To care for land now is to care for its and all our futures.

We all have bodies that sense, move, receive, and give. As a dancer, I dance; in our Western culture, dancing is a thing apart from everyday life for most people: dancing is something others, professionally, 'do.' But in so many cultures around the world, everybody moves, everybody dances. We move, we breathe, we listen, we gesture, we respond, we give and are gifted to, by and within and amongst and in reciprocation with our environments. We are received. Oh, brave new world that has such creatures in it.

The dancer and researcher Franca Tamisara notes that, amongst the Yolngu (Arnhem Land) community with whom she dances, physical knowledge is linked to other forms of knowledge, including landedness, and by virtue of this practice, she learns to take up the responsibility of performance as it pertains to cultural Law (Tamisari, 2014, p.101). Dance, and other forms of art that do "the actual work of social change" (Thompson, 2009, p.11) are necessary because they move knowledge through us, through our embodiment, and through our expressive embodiment(s) to others. For communities who dance, they together become enculturated to Law. For communities who witness the dance, we can sense the 'irreducible enormity' which calls to our care.

We dance not just to express ourselves (*egoically*), but because in this condition of movement, motility and receptivity we also receive knowledge: we become response-able, response-enabled and need to be responsive to what we have received. Of course, by this definition of 'dance' we could think of several other forms of reciprocation, including: right action, right judgment, good decision-making--as all are manifestations of processing-through-movement, whether we speak of the movement of thought, bodies, or minds. It just so happens that our bodies can manifest by *moving through* these concerns, whether or not we consider ourselves to be 'dancers.'

***Responsiveness*: Right Time, Right Actions**

When I attend the 'cultural burn' led by Adam Nye a month ago, I am one of the twenty or so, both young and older bodies moving *with,* walking *with,* dancing *with fire*, which has been lit, and thence guided, by the reciprocal communication between the bodies of earth and humans and climactic conditions. Regarding the burn, the elders advise: 1) Do it when the land shows you it needs it; 2) do it when the temperature, ground moisture level and wind is right; 3) do it when community can be on hand to shepherd the burn. The actions take place in a situation of shared authority, each contributor vulnerable, or open and receptive, to each other. The actions require a collective cooperative knowledge--or willingness to learn--and also engage the *response-ability* (both known, and emerging) of each contributor. And the actions require our willingness to move through, with, and alongside this learning. This is what I nominate as a shared, co-creative *vulnerable authority*. We know what we know and don't know, together. We also acknowledge what we intuit, or hear, as vulnerable knowledge, that perhaps belongs

to languages and authorities that precede us, from the vast world of ancestors, of the land, and of embodied time.

Such awareness is a challenge: it requires patience, tolerance, faith in a number of discourses not necessarily human, and a faith in the wise agency of these diverse agents. For us as humans, it specifically requires a capacity to *yield*. As an improvising performance artist, I have had the 'privilege' experience the pain of a truncation of such inter-relationship: where 'I' take over and no longer care about the rest of my companions (the devilish equal to *cogito, ergo sum*: "I create," therefore I am). And I have also had the privilege, of sorts, to experience the liberative, invigorative joy of embracing the prompts, depths, griefs and provocations of the more-than-human world where we 'create together.' The demands of sunset (not sunrise), of drought (rather than wet), of snake-in-the-grass, of this-flower's-bloom, of another's failure-to-bloom, all exert pressure by dint of their exigencies. The dance is co-designed. This is 'hard yakka.' I am required to stay alert, and be searingly honest, and *never, ever make things up.* Land wants conversation, not dictation.

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In the performance I document in this intermezzo, the co-creator is a scorched and extremely damaged earth, bruised, burnt, ravaged, but not-dead-yet. The south-coast is in a very slow recovery, a process of regeneration that, even thirty months later, is not yet visible. We *want* it to be lush and well. How do we sit with such an extremity of slowed time—a slowness of time we cannot control--without wanting it to be what *we* want it to be again?

> The objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them (Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* ([1892], 1988: 21).[10]

Bergson implies that our perception of the things around us is dependent on the body's capacity to recognise and transform them. But we can also ask this question in reverse; whether our earth's perception *of us* relies on what we reveal to it that we can do. If we marry the earth to our convenience (in *fast time*), how effectively can it function? If we cripple it by our own conceptual relations, what is the nature of our marriage?

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[10] Bergson, Henri, *Matter and Memory*. New York: Zone Books, 1988. I first read of his theory of materiality from Jonathon A, Hale, University of Nottingham, An Architectural Exhibition: "Bench with the Film of its Own Making" http://www.lancs.ac.uk/palatine/s-v-presentations/halepaper.htm; accessed 14/06/2006.

Whilst it is ironic that care is (most often) generated in iniquitous situations (as Tronto says, 'care is about inequality,' is 'always requiring something from us,' and is 'always infused with power' [Tronto, 2015, pp. 1&3]), yet the concepts of agency, authority, and rights include the right to decide, to choose, at times to be 'left alone' but also to be *accompanied or shepherded into* positive interventions, such as in one's capacity to recover, or grow-forth.

We should note that immediate, definable outcomes of 'successes' (and immediate recoveries) are not necessarily signs of good care. The complex 'webs of care' (de la Bellacasa, 2017) into which we are drawn include what may be invisible, the damaged, the non-evident, the delayed. It is easier to think of the latency of a toddler than the latency of an aged parent, or of an earth-in-recovery. Yet where we don't listen, learn, and accompany, what wisdoms are we missing?

Our Bodies Listen

We can guard our languages and awareness against colonization (by the tropes of science, commerce, 'progress,' 'culture,' 'dance,' 'acting,' being acted upon) to remain in relationship, in a state of wonder about what we know and what we do not yet know. To the life that lives despite death all around us. To evaluate and give value to what does not pay (yet), or which may never pay in silver, gold, or petroleum, but in other values. If care is part of our embodiment, then learning how to live with, sense in, and actively embrace the complex nature of our embodiment is critical to care practices.

As performance practitioners, we learn to tolerate and ride the waves of changing sensations, needs and circumstance, whilst remaining in relationality whilst embracing the unknown. As coexistent beings in a landscape where First Nations peoples managed their affairs and thrived for tens of thousands of years preceding European colonization, I also say (having learnt from more-than-human minds older and wiser than me): *pay heed,* weep, learn, return. The land precedes us all.

We need to re-learn how to listen**.** because hearing belongs to ears; listening belongs to soul. Many emerging First Nations leaders I speak with say their grandmothers exhort them to 'shut up and listen.' It is hard to sit still and listen. And, as the writer Kim Mahood, who grew up in the Tanami desert, says, "Listening is harder than you think"[11] (Mahood, 2008).

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[11] Mahood is a writer of Lebanese-Australian background and continues her relationship to the childhood of her birth in ongoing practices with First Nations community and artists.

Impossible Conclusions

I return to a critical question I suggested in the earliest part of this intermezzo: In what ways might the dancer be the passage or channel between both life and death?

In every moment that I breathe, cells in my body both live and die; for First Nations peoples (and many others) around the world, death is not a finitude but a transition. Death leaves not only residues but resonances, and hence communications, that continue beyond our presence in human or animal form.

Does the power (of life, teaching and guiding) to which River Junction Curly alludes also have death as its eternal companion, and a companionship that never really ends?

Sometimes all we can know is what we don't know, but entertain the possibility that others, including the earth herself, knows, both similarly, and differently.

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As I indicated at the start of this intermezzo, I conclude in a series of touchstones. Each touchtone necessarily refers to certain precepts: How do we understand our embodiment? What accompanies us in it? To what is it (inter)related?

The disciplines and trainings of my embodied practices, which include dance and therapeutic relationality with clinical patients, have provided 'ground' to ride the wisdoms of the body, the variability of sensations, and to embrace the invisible and the unknown. Whether we have learnt to sense these truths is partially due to whether we have had validation from our trainings, our circumstances, or in our institutions. Yet these kinds of validations might be the opposite of what we need.

Here are the touchstones:

(Conceptual)

1. Respect **presence** (observe what is here, what is known as well as not-yet-known; seek complexity).
2. Deepen our sensory engagement with the world.
3. Tolerate **difference**.
4. Be **fluid**.
5. Develop **vulnerable authority**; explore the paradox that links openness with decision-making; with porousness to 'what is,' to standing up to and against injustice, to

recognize and act against imbalance with a profoundly sense of wise knowing that comes from inter-relationality and listening.

6. And sometimes, just keep your feet bare in the grass, knowing you don't know the questions the larger circumstance is asking, questions which might be beyond us.

(Pragmatic; sensorial)

7. Be present to our impulses. Listen and develop dialogic relations with them. Embrace our "**interdependent entanglements**" (Stengers, 2013, p.42; de la Bellacasa, 2017, p.155) with others. Our own impulses are only a part of the impulses of the others with whom we are interwoven.
8. Embrace **creative tension**. Value what unnerves us. Value what irritates us, including in ourselves. Develop tolerance for deviance.
9. **Be patient with time**—including when our environment gives us 'burnt offerings' and its own, slow, recovery processes.
10. **Trust** to intuition.
11. Remember that the success of an artist's work is sometimes '**to yield**.'
12. Work across the senses. **Become** '**decentered**' in our 'multiple agencies' (Rose, van Dooren, & Chrulew, 2017).
13. **Disarm**. We can't listen if we are carrying weapons. We can't listen if we are under threat. This includes being at war, internally, with ourselves, or if we feel we are not worthy of receiving care, equity, nourishment. *Mea culpa*: this realisation cuts deep for me personally; how often have I not felt worthy of receiving care, because of the inheritance in my body as one of the daughters of war?

Yet I am also not *only* this…which allows me to

14. Take a deep breath; then continue, and…
15. ***Be quiet within the noise***.
16. Remember: all beings are our ancestors. If Darwin is right, we were once fish. If First Nations people are right, the mountains are our great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandparents.
17. Act for the future (at least, for the next seven generations ahead of us).

18. Act as if there is no tomorrow. Each moment counts.

> *I have intuitively called these dances 'dark and light grief dances.' I had an instinct to dress in grey and white; to reflect on death and hope; on loss and regenesis. As with all beings, to our last shared breath together, as long as we breathe, we live. And what do we hope for, as long as we live?*

Postlude

River Junction Curly's *Blessingway* ("with everything having life") is a call to attention, a call to arms and to dis-arm, to re-arm us to re-organ(ise) our awareness, to calibrate our decisions, to be aware of what is present, what is passing, and of what we forget. It is unsentimental, tough, exacting, demanding, but also an act of grace.

We will always be human, but we are also animal, vegetable, mineral. As an artist and performer, I am tasked to understand and interrogate those similarities and differences. We play with these, we dance, we write, we make. There can be no fact in isolation of others. As *ethicists* we are obliged to go deep: to listen to structure, networks, webs, the invisible. What may be invisible to us but is always already there.

We can learn to attune our primary instrument, our sensing body, to be this subtle. We can then make a gesture, a decision, that will be better *informed*—that is, if we remember the

organism, what it is, what we are. Our authority--our strength, our decisiveness—is informed by this shared co-vulnerability.[12]

What I want to do, at this conclusion, is to issue a reminder of what we don't know, of what we cannot presume or preclude. To give respect and recognition to all that is living and dying in and around us. Even where our practices may be under *constraints* (which Isabelle Stengers (2003) discusses as necessary, because they make things apparent, rather than hidden[13]) we should never stop asking questions of what is being asked of us.

And I swear to this: I have felt it, this mutual respect and recognition, in pristine mangrove swamps, in arid western Desert areas; in dried-out lake beds; in ashen remains after firestorms, and sometimes, in my own backyard. Especially when life has fallen apart all around me.

Above all, I have learnt that, intertwined with each other, in both arid and lush, parched and flooded, zones…

the world still wants to meet us.

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[12] I thank Ian Nesbitt for pointing me to his conversation with film maker Sarah Taylor, documented on November 9, 2022.
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[13] As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017; p, 153) writes, constraints 'are not negative—enforcing—aspects of a practice; on the contrary, they 'enable' the practice, they make it specific, and develop in close relation to ways of being and of doing.'

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About the Author

Dr Zsuzsanna (Zsuzsi) Soboslay (http://www.bodyecology.com.au) is an independent writer, researcher, educator and performing artist. She has collaborated across art forms for over 30 years. A major focus is living and working in reciprocal relations amongst humans and with

more-than-human beings. Her work spans professional and community-based/participatory theatre, dance and music events. A major concert event she co-directed with Synergy Percussion at Angel Place, Sydney won the ABC Limelight Award for Best Concert (2011). She has contributed writings and workshops to Entelechyarts participatory arts in London and been awarded grants and Residencies including at Bundanon, ACT Artists-in-Schools, and the National Film and Sound Archive. Projects include *Under Milk Wood*, *The Chain Bridge*, *Anthems and Angels: The Compassion Plays*, *The Shoehorn Sonata* and the creation of major intercultural and intergenerational projects such as *The Culture Hub*, *Moon Stories*, and *TheStoryChapel*, an artists-lead story sharing platform due to launch next year. Her solo on the life of Jane Avril, muse to Toulouse-Lautrec, has played at the National Gallery of Australia and for DANscienCE Weeks in Canberra and Brisbane. She has delivered Dance for Parkinsons' classes and for special abilities groups and performance teaching in over a dozen tertiary institutions around Australia. She is currently part of a team teachin delivering immersive arts education programs at Bundanon, on the Shoalhaven River in NSW. Both of her parents were Hungarian nationals who emigrated to Australia as refugees at the end of the Second World War.

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