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Essai

What is river?

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Introduction

What is River? is a short audio-visual documentation of and a written reflection on a score that Ruth Bell and Maria Kapsali did as part of the workshop *Upstream: Practising Places* led by Simon Whitehead and Kirstie Simson in Abercych, West Wales in July 2023. *Practising Places* is ‘based on the premise that we are always active in processes of making places’ and ‘explores the significance of embodied practice as an approach to unearthing key questions around ways of being with ourselves, each other and belonging to the earth’ (Maynard Abercych website 2024).

Both Simson and Whitehead come from a postmodern dance background and the workshop included studio-based explorations informed by Simson’s life-long involvement with Contact Improvisation as well as out of doors explorations, deriving from Whitehead’s extensive work in configuring body-land relationships through different art forms. A fundamental part of postmodern dance practice as well as more recent ecosomatic approaches, scores constituted a key tool in the workshop. In dance and music, a score is often understood as a form of notation, which, as Susan Kozel explains, serves ‘as the translation of music or dance into words or symbols so that it can be recorded, preserved and performed once again’ (Kozel et al. 2014, 79). In Whitehead’s work, scores are not aimed at producing repeatable or predetermined outcomes, yet they maintain the kind of codification (of instructions in language) that allows them to be passed on and repeated. According to Whitehead, they are viewed as ‘affective systems’, which invite the practitioner ‘to think through the world in movement and to open up to encounters with other beings and materials’ (2021, 290). As such scores can become nodal points for the encounters of different materialities, intentionalities and histories and ‘offer us stories and practices that reimagine the dominant Anthropocene narrative and

reconnect us to each other and with our surroundings with loving care' (Whitehead 2021, 290).

In *Practising Places*, the score with which Bell and Kapsali worked was given verbally to the participants on the second day of the workshop in an area of the Pembrokeshire countryside where the river Cych bends and flows. It involved the following instructions: two partners drift within the designated area until they find a spot by the river that attracts them. One person moves in the river and the other witnesses their partner's movement. Then they swap over. After having done the score, Bell and Kapsali returned to the location the day after and repeated it. This time Bell witnessed Kapsali's movement through the camera and this provided the footage for the film. The material was edited by Bell and is presented in the third section of this *essai*. The film is also accompanied by two pieces of text written by Kapsali: a presentation of the broader conceptual context that underpins engagement with the specific score; and a documentation of the thinking-feeling process that unfolded during its realisation. The film and the text have three interrelated aims: to offer a glimpse into one of the workshop activities, as this was experienced in the moment of doing; to position the workshop in relation to current thinking on the intersections between embodied practices and environmental awareness; and to open larger questions in terms of the value/validity/purpose of this kind of work as a form of training. What can an exploration by/with/in a river achieve? What can it train? In what ways can such an exploration serve as training ground towards addressing the challenges of the climate crisis?

Approaching these questions in depth would require a much longer exposition than the one attempted here. The intention of this piece is to offer one example of the way a co-constitutive relationship between embodied experience and surrounding environment can be understood as a kind of training in terms of the capacity of training practices to enable processes of self-formation. The word training is used here in a double sense. As the third section demonstrates the river and surrounding environment constituted focal points towards which Bell's and Kapsali's attention were 'trained' in the way a trail of ivy trains up a tree. This flow of attention was interrupted by discursive thought concerned with the score which unreflectively had been given priority as the site of training. As the writing hopes to articulate, it was in the tension between the instructions of the score and the affordances perceived in the surrounding environment that a moment of training as a form of knowing an other and as a kind of (re)forming the self was generated.

Contextualisation: almost dipping a toe

A key point in current environmental thinking, shared by scientists, activists and philosophers, is that addressing the climate crisis needs not only scientific data and policy interventions, but also an ongoing and active practice of relating with the (natural) world, its many processes and inhabitants, on the basis of intimacy, astonishment and respect. Nature writer Barry Lopez argues that 'intimacy with the physical earth apparently awakens in us, at some wordless level, a primal knowledge of the

nature of our emotional as well as our biological attachments to physical landscapes' (2023,13). Accordingly, embodied practices are considered a productive means for practising this kind of relations in a secularised world (see for example Kramer 2012; Whitehead 2021; the 'Embodying eco-consciousness' (Kampe et al. 2021) Special Issue of the *Dance and Somatic Practices Journal*). The first-person perspective and self-determined movement that is at the heart of somatic disciplines serve as an entry point for exploring relationships with human and non human others, which can shift dominant understandings of what and who the perceiver and perceived are. The film and the text presented here invite the reader-viewer into this intimate relationship between human and river attempting to put into images and words part of the 'diffuse, ineffable pleasure' of such experience (Lopez 2023, 13).

Although there is a plethora of writers, artists and scholars who advance accounts on relationships between human and non-human others, Barry Lopez is singled out as a key reference in the contextualisation of this piece in terms of environmental scholarship for two reasons. The first reason is that I found out about Lopez's work during the workshop and through Whitehead, who occasionally mentioned Lopez and read out extracts from his texts in the reflective discussions. The aim in positioning my experience of Whitehead's score alongside Lopez's thinking is to weave the experiential and discursive threads that emerged during the workshop and create a space for the work(shop) to continue its work on me and hopefully on others. The second reason for engaging with Lopez's thought is that Lopez was a celebrated 'nature writer' whose articles for the *National Geographic* and other high-profile journals introduced remote habitats and rare species to metropolitan audiences. The collection of essays (Lopez 2023) that has been published posthumously provide in stark relief Lopez's ability (and privilege) to occupy and operate within two epistemologies. A Jesuit education as well as attendance at prestigious higher education institutions in the US offered the appropriate acumen that enabled Lopez to accompany scientific expeditions in remote places and write about them in an accessible manner for a mass audience. Some of the essays collected in the book (predominantly the ones in the second part entitled 'Thresholds', 2023, 87–200) demonstrate Lopez's competence in occupying the standpoint of the white, male, rational subject relating the adventures/endeavours of (white, male) explorers, armed with scientific knowledge and equipment, to gather knowledge about far off lands. Other essays in the same volume, however, capture other kinds of relationships. In these essays, Lopez narrates his experience of the drastic changes that the landscape and culture of his native San Fernando Valley in California underwent in the 1950s; his engagement with indigenous peoples in hunting practices; his wonder about the manifestations of weather and sky; his experience of sexual abuse, and his relationship to land as a coping mechanism.

If anything, Lopez's writing is remarkable in demonstrating how both these standpoints (the scientific-detached and the subjective-intimate) can be mobilised and complement each other as ways of knowing. Indeed, Lopez's career exemplifies that a person trained in the worldview of

scientific Enlightenment need not be impervious to wonder and astonishment. This is of particular interest to me. As an academic working in English language and operating within the epistemological frameworks of a UK Higher Institution, I often ask myself how wonder, astonishment and intimacy can become not only actively accessed and exercised but also a privileged site for generating knowledge. I am drawn, therefore, to writers who come from an educational background and operate in cultural contexts similar to mine in order to figure out how they manage to switch between different lenses and registers and how this change has been narrated to and validated by others. More specifically, I am interested in the ways in which embodied entanglements with materialities, such as the ones undertaken in *Practising Places*, may allow us to reconfigure concepts of selfhood beyond the separate, autonomous individual. More broadly, I wonder whether training may activate a process of self-formation which is not informed by an understanding of subjectivity as an exclusively human process and which, instead, takes seriously the idea that selves can be in-formed by and in relation to non-human others. The question, that emerges (like mist) from my encounter with the river Cych on that warm day in July, is what are the contours and effects of such relating? How can such process be communicated? What claims to knowledge or transformation can such process make?

The section that follows, written in present tense, starts with a description of the way in which I began to relate with the river in response to the instructions of the score. It then focuses on a specific moment of decision-making during which rational/analytical thinking became juxtaposed with the flow and pull of sensory experience. It concludes with a sense of resolution both in terms of the completion of the score as well as in terms of my sense of belonging within the environment. The experience narrated here and documented in the film does not aim to showcase a performance of the score nor to highlight a *form* of training. It rather intends to capture the way in which the work Bell and I undertook as part of *Practising Places* invited a way of relating which led me to question the two components of the score that I had originally taken for granted: what is river and what is I? The aspiration is to create out of my encounter with the river an amulet [to use Eugenio Barba's (1997) definition of exercise], a processed and, by necessity, distilled remembering, which nonetheless may continue to be operative in the body-minds of the workshop participants but may also be impactful on those who did not experience the workshop directly.

What is river?

<https://youtu.be/0KfNAFik3LQ>

Entering river

Each time it is my turn to enter the river I don't know what I am going to do but I trust that my sensory system will encounter a great variety of

information, some of which will become more prominent and could eventually lead to a pattern of interaction. This might become consolidated and externalised to a degree that makes the interaction observable to my partner. One of my first entry points involves standing and walking in the riverbed, against the current, at a place where the water is running vigorously just below my knees. My feet automatically engage in an ever-renewing contact with the slippery surface of the stones, responding through minute adjustments to the power, direction and texture of the water as it rushes past and under them. My feet and lower legs are foregrounded in my awareness as the key part of my anatomy that enables standing. (I suppose from the river's perspective they are an obstacle, an obstinate mass, around which the water splits). Staying with and observing the meeting point between these two trajectories (my investment in standing and the river's investment in flowing) enables a relationship to emerge, a relationship felt in an absorbing here and now, which could quickly and unexpectedly turn into something else: standing could become falling, dryness could turn into wetness, crisp sensation could become sogged with discursive thinking. Once this interaction is sensorially inhabited and the right amount of challenge and trust between stones and feet, current and legs, dryness and wetness is established, I begin to search for a further set of possibilities specific to the abilities of my body (on that day) and the behaviour of the river (on the same day). My awareness spreads out, my gaze surveys the surrounding environment. I am waiting to receive the next invitation.

During one of these waiting moments, I am drawn to a part of the river about ten feet upstream from where I am standing: a low mound of ground covered in grey slate which is in the middle of the current and currently dry. I feel the urge to go there but at the same time I become aware of Whitehead's score who, when giving the instructions, described forms of engagement involving water. So, if I go over there, on dry land, and do something – don't know exactly what yet – will I still be working on the score or will I have diverted from it? The moment the thought lands, I understand that whether a possible interaction would count as part of the score has little, if any, significance. Like the banks of the real river, the score is there to channel and contain the flow of the exploration. It is not there to twist me into questions about right and wrong. Yet, the fact that the question has been raised makes me aware of a more pressing one. Caught between the attraction that a specific part of the landscape exercises on me and the constraints of the score, I realise I do not know what river is. Is river only this flow of water that wets my skin? Is this bit of dry land over there still river? And was my previous interaction with the sunlight on my skin part of the river or have I departed from the score already?

Time passes, river flows, and it happens again. This time, the worry of whether I am still following the score emerges once I am well within an exploration. Absorbed in the intricacies of the branches of a hazel, I admit to myself that this is definitely tree and not river. A slight anxiety of 'am I doing things right' creeps up and again I let this go in favour of the possibilities for play and exploration that the hazel branches present. I engage in an action of gently pulling from the middle of the branch

outwards, like holding a partner in a counterbalance, until my hand comes to the tip of the branch and lets go. In that moment, I note the short distance between the edge of the tree and the beginning of water, less than a meter, and then something else also becomes apparent: the tree is extending towards the water. Joy emerges from this sense of alignment between processes and intentionalities of which up till that moment I was unaware. Perhaps I am not off the score after all. Perhaps my engagement in this landscape, in this very moment, fits with the score *and* with the orientations and life cycles of other inhabitants. Perhaps, like a good actor, I have a purpose for being here. Perhaps my 'role' is to fill the gap, to add my limbs to the tree's branches as a projection of her extension, as an enactment of the possibility of growth that is available to her. With one arm on her branch and one foot in the water, I can serve as a hyphen and find my place in river. And this time I feel that my position, the rationale for what I am doing, my enactment of the score, is both immune to and aligned with an all-intentional, all-knowing I; it is both independent from and co-opted, contaminated, conflated with the will and flow of an other.

Conclusion: back on land

Reflecting on these moments afterwards in discussion with Bell, I become aware of how insidious a specific understanding of river has been. I realise that up till that point I never considered or needed to consider what river is. This was already given to me through conventional understanding. I become aware of how this understanding, operative until the moment it became destabilised by the force of attraction, has been regimented by innumerable daily occurrences within which the river has been presented as a contained object which can be pointed at (and owned), a line I can conveniently trace on a map, or a set of instructions I can obediently follow in a score. When I enter a state of participation with the river none of these understandings holds true (or is particularly useful). The river emerges as a multiplicity and offers a breathtaking (endless?) number of potential interactions, each one revealing a new aspect of what river is as well as a new side of my sensorium. When river bursts its conceptual or real banks, I cannot be contained either. When river ceases to be an object, I cease to objectify, and, perhaps also, I cease to be an object for others. 'Human epistemologies' writes Lopez 'are like the six thousand ways a river can run down from high country to low' (2023, 4). Accordingly, when a river or place is known in its specificity and multiplicity, 'somewhere in this process a person begins to sense that they *themselves* are becoming known' (Lopez 2023, 70 emphasis original).

As I am reading this piece of writing, I am aware that the material offered here provides a sense of closure, an almost Aristotelian sense of completion where the enactment of the score starts with exposition, proceeds into conflict, and becomes resolved with a realisation and a fulfilling sense of self as being part of the environment. Yet embodied experiences with environment are often a lot messier, vague, or even resistant to articulation. I am also reminded that, compounding the sense

of completeness emerging from this particular exploration, shortly after I say my goodbyes to the hazel, I feel Bell's soft presence behind me alerting me to the fulness of the camera's memory card. There is no memory left. Perhaps there is an important message in such logistical detail. Both for me and the camera there is a limit on memory, a restriction on processing power, a ceiling on how much we can take in. This can lead to a search for closure, which may be premature and appear all too neat. Nonetheless, if such closure is not available, what may occur is a forceful shut down. Whereas there is a danger of reducing complex interactions with non human others to the limits of our technological and sensorial interfaces, it is also important that these experiences are storied, so that they become contained within the banks of concepts and the contours of realities we are ready to hold at a particular moment. In this way, we can trace them as pathways towards the creation of new paradigms of relating, of new horizons of what relationships to land can feel, look, and sound like, of new and perhaps more daring accounts of what happens and who we become when we are wading upstream and practising places.

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Ruth Bell trained at the Scottish School of Contemporary Dance with a focus on choreography and dance for camera. Previous to this, she studied costume making at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and then worked within theatre & tv. Film and costume have always been an integral aspect to Ruth's practice and creative process.

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