

# Embodiment of Other-Than-Human Beings in Adult Environmental Education: Transforming Relationships in Times of Climate Crisis

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**Abstract:** Through an arts-based workshop series, participants and I explored the relational impact of incorporating embodiment, understood as temporarily inhabiting other-than-human perspectives, into Adult Environmental Education spaces. This research is rooted in the belief that the climate crisis is a crisis of a specific way of relating to other-than-human life—one that was shaped and spread through colonialism and continues to manifest in how many humans understand and enact their place in the world. The experiences and reflections that emerged from the workshops suggest that embodiment can create cracks in these modern-colonial ways of relating to other beings by allowing us to see and feel the injustice in these relationships, by cultivating empathy and compassion, and by challenging dominant stories of separation, objectification, and domination. This practice represents an opportunity to begin to let go of ways of relating that are no longer serving us and create cracks from which *ways otherwise* can emerge.

**Keywords:** embodiment, Adult Environmental Education, decoloniality, Theater of the Oppressed, the Work that Reconnects, participatory arts-based research

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## Introduction

*White skies mirror snow-packed pavement, a reflection broken only by the muted gray and brown of rising buildings. Shuffling carefully over the ice, I pass through Lembitu Park on my way to return the rented recording device from the previous night's workshop. Feelings, quotes, moments from the evening flood a brain on autopilot. It is quiet, save a rhythm of light wind and passing cars. Looking up for a moment from the treacherous path, something flashes before me. Color in a sea of white. Yellow. Blue. A soft black. A small bird lands, eye level, on the bare bushes to my left. Only a few blocks from home, maybe she is one of the birds that often visits our makeshift*

*kitchen-window bird feeder, pecking at chunks of seeds while we say silent prayers over our breakfast that the twine holds. Maybe not-- a neighbor none-the-less. Suddenly, briefly, I flash into the bird's body, light bone and feather. Gripping a thin branch, considering this human in front of me, familiar, to be avoided. Considering the big sky and the quiet park. Cold creeps through soft feathers as I search the bare branches for food, fat, warmth. I relish my lightness as I hop from twig to twig. Then, abruptly, I find myself human again-- heavy, warm, shuffling.*

On a brisk February morning in Tallinn, Estonia, I briefly became bird. The night before had been the first session of the workshop series on embodiment in/as Adult Environmental Education from which radiates this research. We had spent the evening slipping between bodies, striving to imagine, if possible, what it would mean to be another being, to see life through their eyes and feel it through their senses. To understand the world and what is happening within it-- what we are all doing to it, perhaps-- through their perspectives. Still, I was surprised by how suddenly this practice continued the next morning, devoid of prompt or intention. For the rest of that walk through the city, I grappled with what it would mean to be bird in a place like this, a place of long winters and deep snow, a place of meteoric summers, a place inhabited by the ghosts of old forests, a place built by, for, and around humans.

### **Coming into Focus**

Many have dubbed the space-time we are living in, rooted in this widespread anthropocentrism, the anthropocene. There are multiple definitions for this term, but it is generally understood as a new epoch of Earth's history in which humans have become significant agents of bio-geophysical change (Zalasiewicz et al. 2). Colloquially, it is associated with destruction, emergency, fear: an apocalypse of our own creation (Lynch and Veland). While this concept is useful in challenging illusions of human exceptionalism by illuminating the severe consequences

of human action on life on this planet, it obscures the entangled “dominant political, economic and ontological narratives and structures that have generated [these] unprecedented levels of ecological and climate destruction,” such as capitalism, coloniality, modernity, and heteropatriarchy (Carvalho and Riquito 40). It thus conceals the reality that not all humans have contributed to the climate crisis, and, certainly, not all to the same extent. In other words, we are not witnessing a crisis of humanity, but, rather, a crisis of a particular way-of-doing-world (Escobar, “Designs”; Krenak; Carvalho and Riquito) and, perhaps, a particular way-of-doing-human.

In this spirit, I believe we need to move away from the story of the anthropocene and towards what Donna Haraway calls the Chthulucene: “a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in responsibility on a damaged earth” (“Staying” 2). This is not the tale of the human as glorious, conjoined hero-villain in a world as good as ended, but rather a different tale, “made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet” (Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking” 2). I understand this as an invitation to collectively explore, create, and remember alternative ways of world-ing, of human-ing. This requires careful investigation into our ways of relating to the rest of nature and, importantly, the values, beliefs, and assumptions underlying them.

Last year, as a student-practitioner studying the intersection of adult education and social change, I was interested in exploring this potential for transformation in human relationships to the rest of nature in Adult Environmental Education (AEE) spaces. My hope was to identify AEE methods that can be learned from, replicated, and adapted to support the creation of more just and sustainable relationships and world(s). Rooted in my knowledge of methods that re-center the educative power of the body, such as Theatre of the Oppressed and the Work that Reconnects, I

chose to focus on embodiment as one such AEE method. Borrowing from Lane's definition of embodiment as "fully committing to, believing in, inhabiting, and becoming another perspective" (405), this means temporarily becoming bird, ocean, tree, or whale and considering the world through this new perspective, as demonstrated by the opening story. I centered the research on a participatory, arts-based workshop series in which participants and I explored this conceptualization of embodiment and how it impacted our relationships with other beings.

### **A Brief Note on Terms**

I have chosen to use the term "other-than-human" to describe living beings who are not human. This includes entities such as mountains, rivers, and oceans, who are not commonly considered biologically alive by modern, scientific standards, but are very much alive in many subaltern and Indigenous ways of understanding the world (de la Cadena; Pandey and Kingsolver, 232-33). While myriad other terms have increasingly appeared in environmental humanities, I drift towards "other-than-human," as it circumvents the hierarchies of worth reproduced by "more-than-human" as well as the binary logic of "non-human" (Price and Chao). Throughout this paper, I occasionally replace "other-than-human beings" with "other beings" for brevity and flow.

### **Positioning the Author**

I grew up in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, on the ancestral, unceded territory of the Piscataway people, as a fifth-generation European settler. As a child, I felt an intrinsic connection with other beings, one of curiosity, empathy, and care. As I grew into adolescence, I began to feel tensions between this connection and a relationship more characterized by separation and dominance, which I witnessed both around me and growing within me.

I spent the years following my undergraduate studies living and working in Ecuador with the Pachaysana Institute, an organization that re-imagines education and North-South relationships to be more just through challenging their colonial roots. This was a time of immense learning, in which my understanding of the world became deeply colored by the Latin American-rooted postcolonial and decolonial theories forming the basis of this research, specifically this suspicion that certain, dominant ways of being and relating to the Earth, formed and spread through colonial processes, are not only causes of the socio-environmental crises we are experiencing, but rather *are* the crises, and “that an other thought, an other knowledge (and another world) are indeed possible” (Escobar, “Worlds” 179).

In Ecuador, I also witnessed ways of relating to others and the Earth that were very different from those I grew up with, rooted in Indigenous Andean and Amazonian cosmovisions. Friends referred to mountains as living beings, asked the land for permission before beginning a hike, and spoke with the plants they were cultivating. The connection to Earth I felt as a child returned and evolved. This time showed me what is possible through intentional, critical education and intercultural exchange: there are a multitude of ways of being that we can learn from, and even create together, in our journeys to heal our relationships with each other and the Earth.

After leaving Ecuador, I pursued a master’s degree which brought me to Scotland, Ireland, and, finally, Estonia, where I carried out this study. The perhaps confusing entanglement of a student-practitioner from the United States applying theories that emerged from Latin America in a Northern European context is not lost on me. I questioned the appropriateness of this multiple times throughout the research process, but ultimately, felt that it was an authentic meeting of who I was, what I believed, and where I found myself. I endeavored for this intersection of places,

spaces, and identities to be generative, critical, honest, and guided by epistemic humility. It was with this spirit that I approached the contradictions of this process.

### **Coloniality and Decoloniality in Adult Environmental Education**

Many post- and decolonial scholars believe that the crises we are experiencing call for a transformation in how humans envision and enact our place in the world (Maison; Escobar, “Worlds”). This transformation entails changes at “epistemological, ontological, and relational levels” (Maison 2). In a time where coloniality has so radically shaped human ways of knowing, being, and relating, it is useful to understand this transformation as a form of decolonization.

Decolonization, especially in settler-colonial contexts, often refers to the rematriation of Indigenous land. It can also be understood as including diverse, interwoven practices of insurgent remembrance (Shotwell 40) and the co-creation of *maneras muy otras* (ways otherwise) (Walsh, “Decolonial Dangers” 46). These *maneras muy otras* are ways of being, thinking, relating, feeling, organizing, etc. that delink from modern-colonial logic to create radically different alternatives (Walsh, “Decolonial Dangers” 46). This research strives to use decoloniality as a lens through which to explore the creation of other ways of relating by delinking from the colonial knowledge systems in which we are submerged (Mignolo 106), notably the coloniality of nature (Walsh, “¿Son posibles unas ciencias sociales/culturales otras?” 106). The puzzle I, and perhaps other educators who share this perspective, face, is how to authentically engage in this delinking in practice.

Environmental education, viewed from this perspective, is often built upon, and, thus, reproduces, colonial values. These values include the hierarchical understanding of humans as not only separate from, but also superior to, other beings (Martusewicz et al. 17-18). This echoes what Plumwood calls “the illusion of disembeddedness”: the epistemic and ontological separation of

the human from all other beings (97). This refusal or inability to recognize our existence as entangled has resulted in the objectification of other beings and their reduction to human usage (Pulkki et al. 218). In AEE spaces, these patterns in environmental education are often reinforced by common trends in adult education: humanism, individualization, and labor market success (Bowers 53).

Although many visions of AEE fail to question modern-colonial values, there have been movements to enact the paradigm shift in our thinking, being, and relating that is needed to address the climate crisis. One such example is the work of Darlene Clover, who grounds her vision for AEE in Freire's concept of conscientization: the development of a critical awareness of one's social reality. This involves drawing upon participants' pre-existing experience, knowledge, and ways of being as the basis for transformation, rather than assuming ecological knowledge deficiency (Clover 56). The cultivation of this critical awareness, rooted in lived realities, is a significant opportunity for adults to understand and deconstruct their relationships with the rest of nature. Transformative Sustainability Education (TSE) (Williams; Maison) and EcoJustice education (Dentith & Thompson 65) join Clover in this recognition that AEE requires more than information acquisition to be transformative and must affect people's more deeply-held values and worldviews.

While these visions of AEE highlight the need for cultural shifts, they are not commonly positioned within decoloniality. While many academics have recognized the climate crisis as a colonial problem, and thus, decolonization as a course of action, there is limited literature exploring decoloniality within the AEE field. Thornton et al. and Henry approach decolonization in environmental education through tying it to place-based education-- exploring the histories, stories, and relationships of a place. Kulago et al. alternatively focus on the shift from separation

to wholeness, re-integrating place, but also body and spirit, through critical reflexivity and relationship-building. They write that decolonizing curricula must “do more than merely educate; it must also ‘repair’ the Cartesian split that is, paradoxically, at the very foundation of Western ‘rationality’” (Kulago et al. 357). This approach aligns well with what I hoped to explore through embodiment.

## **Embodiment**

Embodiment, conceptualized as “fully committing to, believing in, inhabiting, and becoming another perspective” (Lane 405), presents one potential, under-studied way to approach delinking from the modern-colonial relationship with the rest of nature through “[disrupting] and [reconfiguring] our senses,” thus allowing us to “listen-with the subaltern” (Carvalho and Riquito 15-16). Rather than role playing, in which an identity is put over the pre-existing human identity, in embodiment the new perspective is *inhabited* as a *new identity* (Lane 405). While it can be challenging to navigate this difference in practice, it is important to differentiate, as research suggests embodiment is more likely to facilitate deeper emotional connection and empathy than role playing (Lane 405).

This conceptualization of embodiment is rooted in Indigenous knowledge and reflects a North American Indigenous understanding that we “learn through our bodies and spirits as much as through our minds” (Cajete 31), as well as other underlying values of Indigenous education: the sacredness of nature, interconnection among all life, and the reciprocity between humans and all other beings (Cajete 28). This vision of embodiment aims to center these values through the creation of respectful *connection to* and *being through* other-than-human beings. While these relational values and ways of being flow from North American Indigenous visions, they are shared with many Indigenous cultures around the world, who consider humans to be just one of many

agential beings “who together bring an evolving reality into existence through care, interaction, and ritual” (James and Lorenz 386).

Many of the embodiment activities in this research were informed by the Work that Reconnects (WTR). The WTR is an adult transformative learning process which helps participants move from emotional paralysis regarding the climate crisis to a realistic hope that inspires action (Hathaway 297). It sometimes employs embodiment as a tool to help participants open up to new perspectives-- or “see with new eyes,” as creator Joanna Macy terms it (Hathaway 297) -- as well as to experience our pain and “mutual belonging to the web of life” at “a visceral level” (Macy and Brown 59). As with models listed above, this stems from the belief that information about the crises we face is insufficient to empower effective action, and, rather, we need a shift in consciousness and a profound change in our perception of reality, what Macy refers to as “the Great Turning” (Macy 145).

While there is not much research on the impact of this form of embodiment in practice as a tool for environmental education, speculative connections can be made. Lane’s study suggests that it has the potential to cultivate feelings of connection with and responsibility for the environment. Bonnett explores embodied knowledge as a way of coming to know nature that is akin to “acquaintanceship,” which leads to “direct, intimate, tacit knowledge that affects us,” rather than the objective truths of science (646). He writes that an embodied relationship with nature fosters “an appreciation of the embodied by the embodied,” meaning that “both knower and known are implicitly understood as unique sites from which each is itself, as contrasted with a perception of generalized objects by a generalized viewer” (Bonnett 652). Finally, in their speculative study, Carvalho and Riquito suggest that embodied methods allow us to “*listen-with* the subaltern, [reassembling] our affective architecture...thus decolonizing our bodies and selves from dominant

[one-world world] devices of subjectification...” (Carvalho and Riquito 16). This echoes the WTR’s use of embodiment to access new, other-than-human perspectives and *feel with* them, and suggests an opportunity for reshaping relationships.

This research explores the potential of embodiment to generate what these authors suggest: to help us to come to know and relate to the rest of nature in an intimate way imbued with respect, care, and recognition of primordial interconnection, simultaneously delinking from modern-colonial logics of separation, objectification, and exploitation, and, thus, creating space for something *otherwise*.

## **Methods**

The research design brings together aspects of participatory, arts-based, embodied, and decolonial research methodologies (Seppälä, et al.; Vacchelli; Mikkonen, et al.). In their own ways, these methodologies disrupt dominant discourses on knowledge, who has it, and how it is produced. As described by Nunn, the “unique constellation of participation, art and research has a number of strengths, including privileging and amplifying marginalised voices and experiences, accessibility to non-academic audiences, and communication in alternative registers such as sensuous, embodied and affective ways of knowing” (254). Importantly, participatory arts-based research includes “the deliberate positioning of the participant as ‘expert’ and a producer of knowledge, rather than passive subject” (Meaney 101), a central piece of this methodology.

### *Workshop Description*

As previously noted, I centered the research on a participatory, arts-based workshop series. I designed and facilitated four three-hour workshops carried out weekly. In these workshops, participants and I explored the embodiment of other-than-human beings as an AEE method,

through activities in which participants embodied other beings informed by methods from popular education (Freire), Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal), and the Work that Reconnects. Prior to these activities, I guided the participants through the embodiment process, most often by facilitating a moving meditation in which they chose or were invited to be chosen by an other-than-human being, then felt themselves transforming into them. These activities were followed by individual and collective reflections on the experience, many of which included an arts-based component, such as poetry, free writing, drawing, or image theater. Below I offer a brief summary of each day:

On the first day, we explored what it means to be human-- first, from their individual human perspectives through a free write (timed, continuous, stream-of-consciousness writing). Then, we reconsidered this question from the perspective of an other-than-human being to whom they felt connected, by embodying that being, then repeating the free write with the same prompt (what does it mean to be human?) from the perspective of this other-than-human being. We ended with a collective reflective discussion on the experience.

On the second day, we explored and defined our personal and societal relationships with nature, their origins, and the tensions and connections between them. In the first half, participants explored their personal relationships with the rest of nature by creating embodied environmental autobiographies. Using Image Theater techniques from the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal), participants created three statues with their bodies, each representing their relationship with nature at a different moment in their lives (child, teenager, and adult), then explored the transitions between them with movement. What feelings, thoughts, memories come up in the transitions from child to teenager? From teenager to adult? They shared reflections in small groups, identifying connections and differences. In the second half of the session, we did a similar activity to name our societal, or cultural, relationships to nature.

In the third session, we more deeply explored embodied connection with other-than-human beings and its potential impact on the relationships discussed in the previous session. We focused on one particular embodied activity from the Work that Reconnects called the Council of All Beings (COAB) (Macy and Brown, 149-65). The COAB is a powerful example of this type of embodiment. Participants embody an other-than-human being, then speak to the problems they are facing due to the climate crisis and, specifically, human activity. They have the opportunity to speak directly to humans about their impact, as well as to offer advice or lessons on how they could change. Immediately following the COAB, participants had a chance to first reflect individually by drawing or writing about the experience. We then reflected together, each sharing individual reflections then opening for discussion. We ended the session with Image Theater once again, in which the participants created collective images representing the questions they were leaving with.

For the final session, we explored new possibilities around action through embodiment. Although I never intended to address climate action, the previous two sessions had ended with participants reflecting on the implications of other-than-human perspectives on action. We began by discussing the importance of recognizing that not all humans have contributed equally to the climate crisis, and that there are existing healthier and more just human-nature relationships that we could learn from. I presented the story of Skywoman Falling, a Haudenosaunee creation myth which tells the story of humans as the youngest of creation, receiving gifts from other beings and creating the world in reciprocity with them, to frame the session. After this framing, we embodied different beings, listened to the gifts and lessons they have to offer us to address the climate crisis, then, created a collective collage of these gifts. We ended with a lengthy reflection on the experience as a whole.

## *Participants*

The Estonian Green Movement (EGM), a non-profit organization that works to address environmental conflicts in Estonia, offered to assist my search for workshop spaces and participants. The workshop series was promoted by myself and the EGM through email listservs, university newsletters, Facebook pages, and personal connections. Nine participants signed up. Six were Estonian, and the other three were German, Japanese, and Ecuadorian. I was the only participant who spoke English as my first language. There was one man and eight women. To my knowledge, four were involved in environmental movements (such as Fridays for Future Estonia and the Estonian Degrowth Movement) and two others work in the environmental sector. During the first session, I learned that many of them had signed up for the workshop hoping to have space to discuss the climate crisis.

## *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data considered in this research, to put it simply, is everything that occurred during the workshops: verbal, embodied, and artistic reflections (the participants' and my own), as well as our observations of the activities themselves (shared in collective reflections during the workshops). I audio-recorded these collective reflections, as well as presentations of group and individual work, later transcribing them. I also collected certain written and creative reflections and took photos of embodied reflections. In addition to participants' reflections, I took notes during and after the workshops on my own observations and experiences.

I decided to use crystallization, as developed by Ellingson, to explore and make meaning from this data. Crystallization brings together multiple forms of analysis to provide a “deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic” (Ellingson 3), that “[understands]

knowledge as situated, partial, constructed, and enmeshed in power relations” (Ellingson 10). In practice, this meant undertaking and bringing together multiple stages of and approaches to analysis: an individual thematic analysis, the creation of poetic transcriptions, and a participatory analysis process.

First, for the thematic analysis, I explored dynamics occurring in and between the data, tentatively identifying central themes and patterns. I then created poetic transcriptions (Dill 131) using direct quotes from participants. I often combined the words of multiple participants into one poem to capture a collective experience; in this case, each stanza corresponds to an individual participant. This process helped both to represent and further analyze the data, as creating the poems accentuated and nuanced the connections I had begun to identify. Finally, I facilitated a three-hour participatory, arts-based analysis with interested participants, about two months after the workshops had ended. We first re-encountered the data by reviewing notes and creations from the workshops, as well as my poetic transcriptions. Participants had an opportunity to reflect on the data individually through drawing and writing. I then shared with them the findings I had identified thus far, and we discussed. I have layered their analysis together with my own. In the findings and discussion below, I will share some of the most important shifts in relationships that we identified, as well as their potential implications for AEE.

## **Findings**

When I turned into the creature that I was,  
It felt very different.

I could really  
Embody the ocean

The energy

The power

The vastness of that

Everything else just seemed so meaningless

So small kind of,

You know?

How do ants see us

Mountains see us

The trees or flowers see us

Then trying to keep

All of this in mind

Walking and living on this earth

That is a lot

(Stanza 1 Laura, S2 Marina, S3 Grace)

In essence, embodiment of another being is a shift in perspective-- from seeing the world with human eyes, to striving to seeing the world through a perspective decidedly other. From the first session, participants were quick to identify this. Through comparing experiences, we realized that who we embodied significantly impacted our reflections. Each perspective had something different to offer. For example, from Marina's perspective as the ocean, humans seemed small and meaningless, while from Laura's perspective, as an ant, humans seemed big and scary. We also discussed how overwhelming it can be to consider all of these different perspectives, as demonstrated by the final stanza of the poetic transcription.

During the workshops and subsequent analysis, participants and I identified themes that emerged through these perspective shifts. In the interest of brevity, I will focus on three: conscientization, cultivating empathy, and subjectifying nature. As you will find, they are interconnected-- interwoven dimensions of the experience rather than separate elements.

*Conscientization: "Everything is designed for humans' needs and others have to adjust"*

When I was the horse

Changing my perspective

I realized

My horse never chose

To have a relationship with me

Everything is designed for humans needs

Deep down,

it was for them

They wanted to have

me

It allowed me to realize

We think we know

But when you actually imagine yourself

In the position,

You have more empathy

You start noticing

Things you would not have thought of

otherwise

It struck me to realize

How arrogant humans are

(Stanza 1 Isa, S2 & S3 Guido)

Throughout the sessions, participants shared reflections that suggested an increased awareness of the assumptions underlying their relationships with other beings. In the first stanza of the poetic transcription, Isa shares how her perception of human relationships with domesticated animals was challenged through an activity in which she considered humans from the perspective of her childhood horse. In the beginning of the exercise, she felt-- as the horse-- that humans were benevolently doing everything for her: feeding her, caring for her, etc. However, as the activity progressed, and she considered how the humans *also* built a stable to contain her, she realized that humans were really doing this for themselves, so that they could keep and benefit from the horse. She saw her relationship with this horse from a new perspective that illuminated the power imbalance between them, as well as the underlying assumption that other beings exist for human use.

Similarly, while embodying a dog in the COAB, Gabriela said to the humans in the center, “I think we are tired that you make decisions for us. We want to have agency and we understand that in some way we help you to go through your emotions and we are emotional support, but that doesn't mean owning us and treating us like nothing, really.” This suggests a similar awareness of the power dynamic in which other beings are used for the benefit of humans, with little consideration for their own desires, feelings, and agency.

During the participatory analysis, Guido referred to these moments of new awareness as his “eureka moments.” He elaborated that there were moments throughout the workshops in which he had sudden, transformative realizations, such as realizing that we (humans) assume that we have the authority and are the decision-makers, but other beings have needs and wishes too, and, ultimately, we are “just a life form like all other life forms.” These examples signal becoming aware of oppression as a reality that extends beyond humans, with participants realizing how their ways of relating participate in the marginalization of other beings.

This new or increased awareness of how our ways of relating to nature oppress and cause harm to other beings opens possibilities for their undoing. I borrow from Freire’s concept of conscientization to define this awareness. Although conscientization is often used to describe a critical awareness of humans’ social realities and oppression, Freire indicated the intention to extend his work to the oppression of Earth, in his words, “a most oppressed entity” (Misiaszek and Torres 464). As Misiaszek and Torres write about Freire’s intention to write on ecopedagogy before he passed on, there is a need to extend the dialogue on oppressions “beyond human emancipation to include nature’s oppressions—teaching to better understand oppression including humans, but also beyond humans—the trees, the birds, the rivers, the seas: life in plenitude” (471).

Notably, this awareness was interwoven with troubling feelings. In the reflection following the COAB, multiple participants (Roosi, Aomi, Isa, Gabriela) expressed fear, guilt, and/or shame when listening to what other beings had to say to them. Some participants chose not to reconnect with their human forms during the COAB due to this fear; as Roosi said “I was too afraid to be human.” Gabriela connected her fear of “being human” in the space to feelings of guilt: “I was also scared of being a human because I was feeling responsible.”

*Cultivating Empathy: “You have to feel”*

Overall

Vulnerability

I tried to put myself into

A dog

A cow

Pig

I felt scared

I can't imagine how I would feel

To not be able to protect yourself

They teach us to be empathic towards humans

I never heard someone suggesting

even

To be empathic towards other creatures

An ant

The ocean

This embodiment

Learning to have this empathy

That's really beautiful

(Gabriela)

As demonstrated by the above poetic transcription, participants repeatedly identified the cultivation of empathy for other-than-human beings as a part of embodiment. They expressed

understanding for other beings' experiences and struggles, not only rationally, but emotionally and viscerally. As Katrin shared, "This is more than thinking, this is feeling. You have to feel and experience this feeling. Because thinking is distanced. It's not so [mimes closeness]. Thinking to be...or feeling to be...they're completely different." She thus connected the cultivation of empathy to embodiment's ability to connect us with "feeling." Throughout the participatory analysis, the participants reiterated that more than *thinking* from another perspective, embodiment involves *feeling* from another perspective.

During the participatory analysis, Guido also expressed feeling a new "togetherness" with the rest of nature as a result of this "feeling from another perspective." For example, he said he felt sorry for the tree that he was embodying during and after the COAB. After I asked him to share more about this, he shared that it was a "sweet feeling," like he wanted to "go hug the tree:" "I felt together with what I was embodying." Katrin and Isa also expressed feeling deeper connection with the beings around them. Isa shared, "I knew things were alive, but now I know how to connect." These reflections demonstrate the power of embodiment of another being to generate emotional connection to, identification with, and awareness of other beings.

In the first session, we had an important conversation in which we discussed the ethical dilemmas of trying to place yourself into another's shoes-- or paws, or hooves. We discussed the importance of recognizing the limits of our empathy for both other humans and other-than-human beings. Laura shared:

I have this feeling that one thing is to think that you are something and, at the same time, understand that I could never have the experience of an ant, so I could never actually understand it...I can't be an ant, it's their experience.

Our inability to truly comprehend what it means to be another being, and the risks for misinterpretation that come with it, are a reality and limitation of embodiment to acknowledge and keep present. We are humans, with human biology, senses, and experiences, which are simultaneously deeply intertwined with and unimaginably distinct from the biology, senses, and experiences of other beings. Even so, we felt we could learn and grow from the resonances and reflections that emerge from embodied connection.

*Subjectifying Nature: "It's a live thing here"*

New worldview

I became the tree

I became small, like tiny snail

Before, environmental crisis was

Overall overwhelming

Too big

But

What I can do

We can do

Could be influential to

One or two snails

Rocks

Water

Caterpillars

Spiders

(Aomi)

In the above poetic transcription of Aomi's reflections, she shares how her embodiment experiences illuminated the intrinsic importance of individual beings in nature, and how we, as humans, impact other beings as subjects, not only "nature" as an abstract and generalized object. She felt the wellbeing of a few small beings was worth going to pick up trash. Similarly, multiple participants spoke of how the embodiment exercises had made them more aware of the living beings around them in their day-to-day life, as well as the feelings and struggles they might be experiencing. Guido spoke of his experience at a bus stop on the morning of the final workshop:

This morning, I got off the bus and I'm waiting for another bus and there was a tree at the bus stop. And I was like "Okay" (laughter). And you know, spring is getting closer, and the buds are getting a little bit bigger and, you know, it's a live thing here. It really made me think about that, not just looking at the cars passing by.

In response to Guido's story, Isa shared a further example of this recognition:

My experience then also helps me in real life when I go to nature, to have a different connection with them, because I embodied a tree before, thought about how would it be to be the ocean, that I also interact different with these beings and say hi to the ocean or, yeah, more aware of the beings around me and how the world is for them.

This share from Isa suggests that understanding other beings as subjects may open up new pathways for connection and relationship.

When we discussed this theme in the participatory analysis process, Guido further connected it to how humans objectify other humans in order to justify harm or violence towards them. In a notable moment of conscientization, he reflected that we are doing the same to nature, and, thus, seeing the rest of nature as subjects is key to undoing these patterns of harm. During this

conversation, Isa connected the recognition and valuing of other beings' knowledge and "gifts" that took place in the workshops as an acknowledgement of their subjectivity and intrinsic value. She recognized that humans are not the only beings acting upon the Earth, but, rather, the rest of nature has agency as well. Isa spoke to this further in the final workshop, sharing:

For me, throughout this workshop, I think my perspective on the role of humans shifts, from humans are responsible to save the planet from whatever, to we are causing a lot of problems, but it's more working together with other humans and with other beings and I don't need to know everything, I need to listen to other people, to other beings and then we move somewhere together... (Isa)

### **Implications for AEE**

These findings suggest that embodiment offers an opportunity to challenge modern-colonial tendencies through AEE by centering non-human perspectives, experiences, subjecthood, and our interrelationality. In this section, I will explore two practical implications for AEE gleaned through these workshops: learning through acquaintanceship and intentionally integrating the body.

#### *Learning through Acquaintanceship*

In the participatory analysis, Katrin shared a lingering impact of these workshops on her relationship with the rest of nature. She shared that she feels more connected to the other beings around her: "Feeling from different perspectives, like plant, like bog, helped me feel better because now I can connect when I want and get new information, not information I read somewhere." In this way, embodiment is almost like a form of communication with other beings. She can ask the beings around her questions and "find answers." I found this to resonate with Bonnet's

“acquaintanceship:” a way of coming to know nature that leads to “direct, intimate, tacit knowledge that affects us” rather than the so-called objective knowledge of science (646).

Acquaintanceship is, thus, not only an alternative route through which to learn about other beings, but rather an invitation to learn from and with them. It involves co-generating knowledge in direct connection with other beings, which creates an opportunity to delink from the assumptions and power hierarchies often expressed in science and other modern-colonial systems of knowledge production. It grants the possibility of re-building place-based, local relationships to the rest of nature, understandings of life that begin with the territory, rather than relationships rooted in delocalized modern-western rationality (Walsh, “¿Son posibles unas ciencias sociales/culturales otras?” 106). It is learning that is, at its core, local and relational, both important tenets of decolonial visions of education (Cajete; Kulago et al.; Thornton et al.).

As described in the findings, this type of learning also has the potential to produce an appreciation for the individuality of other beings, “a type of knowing which apprehends the other as truly other and not essentially as a vehicle to meet our desires,” which Bonnett understands as a “kind of love” (652). This acknowledgement of the intrinsic value and individuality of other beings is key to fomenting respectful care for their wellbeing. Thus, I believe that this type of learning should be further explored and integrated into AEE programming as a way to unsettle traditional learning patterns and create alternate pathways for connection.

This learning can happen in myriad ways, with embodiment being one powerful example. Participants shared other ways that they build this intimate, emotional, first-hand connection, such as foraging, creating art out of natural materials, and practicing deep attention through photography. This is an invitation to explore what we can learn from being with a tree, rather than reading about a tree. As Isa said during our participatory analysis: “When we read about beings, it

is from a very human perspective, embodiment is a more direct connection, there are more dimensions than if read from a book.”

### *Integration of the Body*

During these workshops, it became clear that the intentional integration of the body into education as a site of learning signified the centering of feeling and emotions as well. In the dominant, modern-colonial epistemology, mind and body are portrayed as separate, similarly to humans and nature (Grange 387); mind is to human as body is to nature. This has resulted in educational systems that privilege the mind and devalue the learning potential of the rest of the body. In my experience, by bringing the body back into education as an intentional place of meaning-making, we bring ourselves in wholeness. In these workshops, I saw this most clearly in two dimensions: “feeling with” other beings and feeling and sharing unsettling emotions.

As previously discussed, Katrin described embodiment as “feeling with” other beings more than “thinking with” them. Rather than thinking about how a snail may be affected by drought, or cows by industrial farming, we are feeling the impacts *through them* as a visceral experience. This “feeling with” cultivates empathy and compassion, as well as planting seeds for a relationship with other beings that respects their individuality, subjecthood, and agency.

The frequent emergence and discussion of felt senses of fear, shame, sadness, anger, powerlessness, hope, and relief-- often occurring alongside conscientization-- illuminate this centrality of feeling as well. This is significant, as multiple strands of environmental activism and education identify the need to recognize and process our emotions as we move through the climate crisis (Akomolafe et al.; Hathaway; Muhr). This is an idea central to the WTR: collectively feeling our grief, despair, anger, fear, and guilt is central to sparking action and transformation, as a natural and necessary part of seeing the truth of our world (Hathaway 302-4). Founder Joanna Macy

identified how the extreme emotions felt by humans facing the climate crisis often lead to denial or emotional paralysis-- neither of which are productive for the collective action we urgently need (Hathaway 297). WTR thus seeks to reframe our unsettling emotions from something to be avoided to something beautiful that connects us: “we feel pain...because we are connected with the entire community of life” (Hathaway 301). Importantly, it claims that sharing these feelings in a collective builds a sense of community and mutual support (Hathaway 302), something that we witnessed throughout the workshop series.

As this individual and collective emotional processing was not a focus of the research, I cannot speak specifically to the extent it occurred in our spaces. However, it is clear that these embodiment methods brought unsettling emotions and notions of “feeling” to the forefront of the conversation, and I felt that the sharing of these feelings in our collective was cathartic. Though further research is needed, this suggests that embodiment, framed and adapted adequately, provides a promising opportunity to invite and begin to move through these feelings in AEE spaces.

## **Conclusion**

Embodiment aligns with models of AEE which understand transforming destructive, modern-colonial ways of being, knowing, and relating to the rest of nature as central to environmental education. I believe that it also offers one vision of what decoloniality as praxis can look like: the creation of cracks, or quotidian moments of rebellion in which we assert an alternative type of doing, being, relating (Holloway 11). This process produced decolonial cracks (Walsh, “On Decolonial Dangers” 82-85) in how the participants engage with, relate with, and perceive the rest of nature, and, perhaps, expanded cracks that were already there. These cracks are uncovering our oppression of the Earth and feeling-with beings who are suffering because of

it. These cracks are speaking with birds, asking the ocean for advice, and feeling the compassionate urge to hug a tree. Participants may not have completely unlearned modern-colonial ways of being and relating, nor is this plausible; as Walsh posits, “decoloniality is not a condition to be achieved in a linear sense, since coloniality as we know it will probably never disappear” (“On Decolonial Dangers” 81). However, participants have seeded new places of doubt, exploration, and struggle that exist in their daily realities, thinkings, and doings.

This practice offers a small opportunity to slow down, a space to question our identities and assumptions, and to grieve and begin to let go of the ways of relating, human-ing, and world-ing that are no longer serving us. It represents a kind of activism-through-education that does not hope to return to the world that is ending, but rather enacts the hope that more beautiful new worlds can and are being created. It creates cracks for something new-- something strange, alien, beautiful-- to emerge from the destruction. Something strange, alien, beautiful, and unsettling, like briefly becoming bird on an icy February morning in Tallinn.

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