

The Arts of Noticing: A Multispecies Art Provocation

Come Together. Right Now

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CONTEXT

The emergent and interdisciplinary field of **multispecies studies** is predicated on the recognition that all forms of life (and perhaps even non-life) are entangled in flows of energy, culture, and materiality. Given that rampant environmental destruction unfurls from neo-colonial and capitalist programmes, a collective hopelessness around environmental futures can create states of social and spiritual paralysis. To combat this, many multispecies artists and scholars turn to the more-than-human world, situating their inquiry in place-based, local ecologies to build unlikely kinships while making sense of the ties that bind them to other forms of life flourishing or perishing in the so-called Anthropocene.

This multispecies provocation poses critical questions to the contemporary artist-researcher: how can we, as individuals, affect meaningful change given our dependencies on systemic and globally-oriented, extractive systems? Within such knotty ecologies, who is allowed to live and who is assigned to die? How do we, as artists and sapien-citizens, situate ourselves and our identities within these entanglements? And finally, where do we find hope in sites of ecological ruin?

Inspired by the teachings of Indigenous, Science and Technology Studies, posthumanist, eco-feminist, queer-ecological, and more-than-human mentors, this exercise will engage students in a collaborative process of multispecies research as a creative methodology.

DESIGN & METHODS

Structure and Key Questions

Working both independently and in groups, students will explore the immediate ecologies of their home-lands. Ecologies vary widely and are not restricted to the Romantic representations of wilderness proffered by Euro-colonial discourses. Everything from parking lots, city streets, ravines, or accidental wildernesses also contain vital and complex ecologies.

Through intimate observations of your surroundings, use a multisensory approach to get to know your more-than-human neighbours. Through this process, a study of particular species may emerge. Which organisms are you familiar with that you'd like to study more closely? Which have you never noticed before at all? Which animals, plants, fungi, or composite organisms (like lichens) capture your attention, and why? Consider the following provocations in defining a personal and collaborative form of multispecies research:

- Early on in your process, compile ecological observations through multiple forms of data collection, which may include photographs, sound recordings, videos, field sketches, notes, and reflections. Using archival and online resources, attempt to identify the species that have caught your interest.
- Periodically check in with your collaborators to share and discuss your findings. Were there any organisms that were simultaneously local to more than one group member? Which species are found in all group member's geographies? What is the ecological status of these organisms (native, introduced, or invasive?); for non-native species, where did they originate from? How did they find passage from one region to your home-territory? Discuss any possible connections you, as humans in migration, might have to such species' movements, and consider how you (and your group members) might be situated within those flows.

- If there are no species shared between members' geographies (which is unlikely), consider finding connections that might exist between different species of interest to each student.
- Use interdisciplinary research tools to open up your understanding. Browse **scientific publications, naturalist guides, humanities research papers, mainstream media articles, storybooks, folklore, art projects, or conservation portals** to develop a more nuanced conception of the public discourse on your chosen organisms.
- What feels problematic or what might be missing from the dominant conversations about your subjects of study? Are there any tensions, hidden narratives, or alternative histories that strengthen a sense of kinship with your subjects? Why or how do you identify with these creatures? How does your identity connect you to the lifeworld of a more-than-human neighbour?
- Finally, consider what the organisms in your study can teach you. Remember that knowledge exists within and beyond the cognitive realm. Are there embodied, emotional, or spiritual forms of learning that take place when you are in communion with more-than-human beings? How does the act of noticing create kinships, new relations, and expand worlds? What might be at stake in learning from your ecological partners?

Begin assembling concepts for artworks that could embody the themes and ideas that arise from group discussions and in personal observations. Given the timeline and scope of this project, prioritize process-work over product. *Consider that this project could become the foundation for a more fully-realized artwork in future.*

Notes on Collaboration

- Students should be assembled in groups with as few as two or as large as six members who live in different geographic regions. Working in groups will provide opportunities for comparative forms of investigation and analysis, which may reveal previously unknown connections between species and spaces.
- Group members can share their process work, data, and observations using online tools like Miro boards, meetups (via Teams, Zoom, etc.), or shared media drives. Coordinated field sessions together could be an optimal way to find resonances in seemingly disparate ecologies.
- Students are welcome to create independent or collaborative art-experiments to be determined through process. The outputs for this project are incredibly open and there is no requirement to produce finished artwork.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This project is about building community, first between students from different institutions, cultures, and geographies, but also with the more-than-human communities that make up a multispecies society. Consider your subjects as non-human, rights-bearing persons. To help inform an ethical protocol, consider the following:

1. Limit your collection/foraging practices to distance (observing and sketching from a reasonable space) and the digital or immaterial form (photos, sound and video recordings, etc.). Material foraging practices require situated knowledges of the biosystems under study and should only be engaged in partnership with learned stewards of the land.
2. Within reason, limit any actions in the field that might disrupt the lifeways of other organisms beyond those of your study, even if you believe them to be invasive or ecologically undesirable. For this project, we are observers, not disruptors.
3. Carefully consider the ramifications of sharing your research in the public realm. As artists, we must assume responsibility for the secondary behavior of humans who extract meaning from our work, especially when other lives are at stake.

RESOURCES

- (Journal) “Antennae: Journal of Nature in Visual Culture”. (2023). <https://www.antennae.org.uk/>
- (Video) “Arts of Noticing: Panel Discussion with Deborah Gordon, Anne Pringle, Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing.” (2014). <https://vimeo.com/98663761>
- (Journal) “Black Ecologies.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (2023). <https://academic.oup.com/isle/pages/black-ecologies>
- (Journal) “Environmental Humanities.” (2023). <https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities>
- (Website) “Feral Atlas: The More-than-Human Anthropocene.” Curated and edited by Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena, and Feifei Zhou (2021). <https://feralatlus.org/>
- (Book) Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015.
- (Book) Kirksey, Eben. *The Multispecies Salon*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- (E-Catalogue) Smith, Saad Sandy, and Cole Swanson. *The Hissing Folly*. Bowmanville, Ontario: Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, 2020. <https://indd.adobe.com/view/26c46842-09b7-4531-b527-11bfb96fd4f7>
- (Repository) iNaturalist (2023): Canada (<https://inaturalist.ca/>); UK (<https://uk.inaturalist.org/>)