

Rowboat Phenomenology

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I'm sitting by the water on the Hood Canal, watching the tide come up over the oyster beds and looking out toward the Olympic Mountains. The sun is starting to set, and the orange sky is nudging me toward calm. My body relaxes, and I think of the smooth pink skin under a scab. The waves are gentle and constant and mimic the sound of my dog licking her paws. A humming arises in the soundscape, and two identical boats speed by in the middle of the canal. I do an actual double-take. Even the captains look exactly the same. Mirroring. Or like a glitch, seeing double. The captains hold the wheels with straight arms, locked in place and on course, determined, a destination in mind. I worry for the seals with all these propellers. When I was a kid, I thought almost daily about manatee strikes. All the scarred sea cows, huge gashes down their backs, exposed flesh white with waterlog. Just awful. I would think about the moment of the strike—the massive, buoyant, slow, nearly still manatee colliding with the motorized velocity of the boat. I wonder what 'good' these recurring thoughts did. And I wonder about the act of floating itself. Might floating be a form of resistance? I remember learning at some point that manatees have fingernails.

I grew up in Seattle, just about as far from the Florida manatees you can get in the United States. I spent most of my summers on the Hood Canal. It's an estuary, technically, just around the bend from the mouth of the Tahuya River. It's brackish here where my family's cabin is on Sister's Point. As freshwater tumbles down the Tahuya and hits the Canal, there's a slicing, a slow mixing wedge of fresh and salt water. There are large beds of eel grass and if it wasn't so cold it might be a nice spot for manatees. Maybe in the future it will be home to climate refugee manatees. The ecosystem is changing rapidly, the water becoming warmer and more acidic each year.

I first noticed the changes in the summer of 2015. When I went back to the cabin that summer, the very first thing I did was throw on my swimsuit and dive in the water. It felt great to be back in the Canal again. I dipped below the surface and opened my eyes. The water was not empty. I saw white tendrils of snot shining in beams of sunlight. There were streaks of milky goo everywhere.

What is this stuff?

I swam out past the buoy chasing a school of silver fish that were jumping out of the water. Their bellies flashed like small strobe lights in the afternoon sun. Plop. Plop. Plop plop plop. I swam up slowly, like a manatee or a piece of driftwood, and held deep breaths to help me float. They swam all around me. What were they jumping about? Were they excited and enjoying themselves? Or trying to get more oxygen? Pushed above the surface in a frantic search for breath by the massive dead zone that had been migrating north? As I treaded water near the buoy, I knew I needed to know more. This was not the landscape I had grown up with. Something seemed off, wrong, not quite right. The water had never been this warm. Algal blooms were thriving in the warmer conditions, and as the algae decomposed, bacteria sucked up all the oxygen in the water in the eutrophication process. I felt compelled to observe, document, witness.

What was happening to the Hood Canal?

I needed a way to go into the landscape. Swimming felt too exposed, too vulnerable. So I decided to take out the Sea Spray, an old blue plastic rowboat. It had been years since the boat had been used, but now it was just what I needed. If the timing is right with the tides, I can row around the bend and up the Tahuya River as far as possible, and then put the oars up and float downstream with the current through the estuary. Once I hit the mouth of the river the rowboat slows, and its movement becomes more unpredictable. I float into the oyster beds, become stuck in the mud, run into an old wooden pier pillar, or am swept out into the middle of the Canal. I let the ecosystem direct my path.

Rowboat Dispatch, 16 August 2015:

On a still day, there are moments when there is no sound but my oars dripping and the seals exhaling. I float downriver with a ribbon of frothy, brown gunk. Surrendering to the currents. The water is silent but forceful. I am traveling at the same rate as the gunk, boat and oars

and all. There's a white downy feather next to me.
We travel downstream together.

Hood Canal is a glacially carved fjord, and while the bathymetry of the majority of the Canal is deep and shaped like a V, the mouth of the Canal where it meets the Strait of Juan de Fuca in the north Puget Sound is very shallow. There is a land bridge of sorts that prohibits the influx of oceanic water. This has accelerated the effects of climate change in comparison to the rest of the Puget Sound, turning the Canal into a microcosm for speculative futures of the Anthropocene. All the dissolved oxygen is gone in the dead zone, and oxygenated oceanic water can't flow into the ecosystem fast enough to keep the organisms alive. The oyster beds are dying, the Dungeness crab are gone, and there have been massive fish kills. They can't breathe.

What might be learned through encounters with this altered landscape via rowboat?

Can a type of 'rowboat phenomenology' put us into new modes of thought and experience that illuminate ways of living with/in a ruined environment?

Rowboat Dispatch, 16 July 2018:

A wobbly float back to the cabin. It's getting cooler. Sun has set and the stars will be here soon. The wind just picked up a bit, spun me around to face the sunset and the new moon. Things I saw from the rowboat today that felt strange:

- rusted oyster shell
- orange eggs on the bottom of an oyster
- moon snails
- pretty big hermit crabs
- slimy starfish
- a long worm coming out of an oyster
- tons of jellyfish

There's something about floating in a rowboat that puts me in speculative mindsets. The stillness in motion, perhaps. I started putting the oars up and letting the tides and currents

take me wherever they take me as an exercise in releasing agency and resisting the desire for control. I think it's important to practice new forms of movement in the Anthropocene, in order to encounter climate change on the ecosystem's terms. These types of landscape encounters are what I like to call 'non-guided detours.' You bump into things you wouldn't normally bump into, at a pace that you wouldn't normally row at. You become attuned to processes. You enter tide time. The moon dictates your progress. The rowboat mimics a boundary, a membrane, between body and environment, but it also sets us into and along an environment. We melt a bit into the water, sink into movement and flow. There is an entering. I'm reminded of that movie where that submarine is shrunk to microscopic size and then explores the human body. In a rowboat, one's body still feels motion, and rhythm, but it is not the cadence of a gait. The wave-scale motion has vast intensities, from calm, glass-like, flat and steady tides, to tumultuous, white-capped, erratic and oscillating currents. You are caught up in flows, move at the same speed as the trash and algae and seaweed around you. And it makes me wonder, how do we normally move through the world in ways that limit or prohibit the world from entering us?¹

Rowboat Dispatch, 16 December 2017:

You learn the bathymetry. The depths and shallows. The way the flow of water and sediment carves and accumulates. When the water is still enough, glass-like and opaque, the slightest breeze can push the boat. Sometimes I wonder if exhaling is pushing me. I know it contributes. I hold my breath.

Rowboat Phenomenology is both an experiment and a praxis, rooted in a belief in personal experience as a potent vector for change. As a cultural geography PhD student interested in the place-based experience of climate change, I started this as a research project for investigating the embodied experience of a changing landscape. What developed was a practice in being-with, or being in process with, transformation.

Philosopher and historian Phillip Thurtle has described 'transformation' as a series of events that resonate. I am drawn

to this definition because it speaks to what climate change looks like from the rowboat—an accumulation of difference that resonates through the landscape. As I float through the environment, I am not merely observing change, I am interacting with matter and other beings. *Observation is collaboration* and being in the presence of the non-human does work on me. What lingers from any interaction is based in part on intensities of attention. Being in the rowboat with the oars up leaves me more available to notice, with more attention to give.²

My research draws upon Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, which speculates that everything we experience (or encounter with the body) enters us and lingers with us in qualitative waves of affect that condition how we emerge—experiences enter us as 'datum' and condition us for the future.³ The encounter lingers. And we emerge differently for it. I believe we can use this philosophy to think *with* the body about climate change dynamics. By moving the body through changing landscapes in new ways, we might be able to have new experiences with and thoughts about the non-human. If, as Whitehead posited, we are produced by intense sets of relations, my intent with this practice is to insert the body into new sets of relations in a way that allows them to linger and thereby to shape me. Like all ripples, the density of the effect is highest at the origin of the disturbance, where the pebble drops into the pond. Or, where the rowboat sets into the Sound.

Rowboat Dispatch, 2 August 2017:

Strange, eerie evening. Super hazy, smoky from the wildfires. The sky started turning orange and pink around 6pm and this lasted for hours. Water was very still. Floating down the river now, herons squawking at me and clumps of algae keeping me company. The water is still that strange, milky teal color. So green. I've never seen the water this color before. Beautiful, strange, concerning. Found out it's a coccolithophore bloom, which is a limestone coated plankton that turns the water this color.

We have choice and creativity in how we move and position ourselves in the world, just as the matter that we interact with

² See Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing* for more information on the Attention Economy.

³ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

¹ Many of us (especially queers and POC) do this intentionally of course to keep ourselves safe. But I am interested in the ways our movement—and everything really—is dictated by society or comfort or convention or fear, and how that restriction of movement limits our interaction with and understanding of the non-human (and human).

has creativity and choice in how it responds to the conditions of experience. We are not determined by our environment, but our environment does have the ability to kill us, which is why it is important to work toward more equitable chances of survival by shifting ourselves into positions of care and configurations of mutualism.

As a gender non-conforming, non-binary trans person, much of my movement is centered around seeking out spaces to escape the binary; spaces that buffer me away from the heteronormative doctrines of how one should move through space. For historically marginalized people, movement is linked to safety concerns and driven by the anxiety of self-preservation in a violent and oppressive world. How then can we safely crack open our movement through the world? How to surrender agency and let our movement be determined by external forces? How might we stage encounters with climate change?

Rowboat Dispatch, 22 July 2015:

Floated into a little dead-end cove, then waited for the tide to rise and carry me through to the next section. I am jellyfishing. Escaping capitalism? That's what my friend Pete says: 'The best way to escape capitalism is to become a jellyfish.' The water rises and rushes over the grasses, making the sound of a small waterfall. Bubbles, bubbling, a release of gas and air. Got stuck in the mud at just the right time. A blue heron is yelling. Crabs run through the aquatic plants like deer in a forest.

I borrow this concept of *staging* from Isabelle Stengers. As a vessel for thought, the rowboat is an experimental apparatus that allows me to enter the landscape in a different way and be in the presence of different entities. Stengers alludes to the power of co-presence, in that it allows for new combinations of thought to emerge. Thought in itself is a form of resistance simply because it has lingering effects. Not that these influences can or should be traced out, but what Stengers motions toward in her essay 'The Cosmopolitical Proposal' is an acknowledgement of the new *could* that evolves out of an intentional gathering.

For Stengers, in gathering there is opportunity to interact, to influence, to act intentionally, to be co-present. And it is this opportunity for connection and co-presence that she identifies as the real intention and power of a gathering: to allow 'the whole to generate what each one would have been unable to produce separately.'⁴ Similarly, a boat without guidance offers a new way to move with/in the landscape that isn't conditioned by anthropocentric and hierarchical ideas of guided paths, but instead seeks to include non-human voices on their own terms. This attempt at convocation is not staged for my pleasure, but for the possibility of what might arise in a gathering of entities bearing the consequences of climate change.

Rowboat Dispatch, 9 July 2016:

Watching seaweed move under the water and thinking about process philosophy. It's a repetitive movement with the waves. But each round is a little different. Each round looks a little different. I see each round differently. Not in comparison to other rounds, really, but in recognition of what's next, what has become. I love how the water wobble-wobbles, the shapes that emerge, the series of similar but different water markings, water surfaces, water faces, water poses. It's good-looking and calming, but it also teaches something of process, of causality, of influence and emergence. And when the surface glistens with rainbows of oil swaths and suds, it shows us something about ourselves and how we linger in and influence the world.

The longer I spent on the river, the more I noticed what I noticed, the more I paid attention to what I paid attention to. I started considering, seriously, Whitehead's notion that there is no bifurcation of nature, no division between the physical materiality of the world and my perceived experience of it. That my thoughts and feelings and my own mind are part of the same substrate, what Whitehead calls the 'totality.'⁵

Extreme ecological distress is palpable from the rowboat. As I float up the river I note the large clumps of dirt and grass that have slumped off the riverbank. My awareness flickers to the totality, for a moment. I see global sea level rise, increased

4 Stengers, 'The Cosmopolitical Proposal,' 1002.

5 'We are, each of us, one among others; and all of us are embraced in the unity of the whole.' Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 110.

erosion rates, a new landscape in kind and not in degree. I encounter what Bergson calls the duration of the river, the shifted intensity of the landscape's own experience of time.⁶ I see climate change, I see my own thoughts mingling with the CO₂ molecules, or think I do, for a moment, until I hear a breathy exhale to my left and my attention shifts. Could it be a manatee?

Rowboat Dispatch, 18 May 2018:

Frog noises, bird noises, wind noises, water noises. The bugs swimming/skimming on the surface make no noise that I can hear. I can't track my movement, have no gps points, have no desire to quantify and visualize my journey. I remember the general path. I am stuck in a cove, a grove of young birch trees. Takes a while to sink into the outside world. Do I ever, really? No, of course not. Trapped in your own consciousness. Whitehead might disagree, tell us there is no difference between the thing and the sensation of the thing. I love the story about how the Swedes ask, 'do you want to have it, or do you want to be it?' Berit and her sister would decide which two yellow flowers they wanted to be of all the yellow flowers that cover the Swedish fields in Spring. They would look out over the fields and say, 'Look, our kingdom!' Not in an imperialistic way, but in a rhizomatic, extended consciousness kind of way. An extension of the corporeal form. A post-human co-becoming.

The Dadaist Hugo Ball said that 'being in harmony with nature is the same as being in harmony with madness.'⁷ As a child I used to sit cross-legged in the water with my eyes stationed right above the surface. I felt just like a seal. *This is what it looks like when they come up for air*. I would run my hands along the stones below me and pick them up, dropping them one by one underwater. They fell so slowly, they tumbled, and I'd dip my ears below the surface to listen to them clunk.

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