

Regenerative Practices in Creative Collaboration with our More-Than-Human Kin

By Lauren Saunders (2024)

My MA research was centered around equitable, regenerative and ethical creative collaborations between humankind and the more-than-human. I shall do my best to give a overview of what I mean by that.

I originally wrote a literature review titled [‘The Geopoetics of Drawing’](#), which started off as a simple investigation into how drawing might support environmental activism but evolved into something much more complex.

The main thing I moved forwards with was the concept of Kinship Ethics, an environmental philosophy first offered by Aldo Leopold in 1949, in which a kinship felt with the Land drives moral responsibility to defend it. Remember, ‘Land’ doesn’t just refer to the geological makeup of the Earth but rather everything organic in nature – the soil, the trees, the water, the animals, the plants, the sky... *everything*.

By accepting that the Land is an active co-creator of knowledge (Barrett, 2014), we can easily accept that it possesses an autonomous voice which is able to shape its creative agency. Demonstrating/exploring this agency through collaborative artmaking helps us to see the Land as being someone akin to us – autonomous beings with needs and wants. It helps us to recognise shared characteristics and shared

origins and with that developed kinship comes care and compassion. And with that care and compassion comes a sense of responsibility to protect it and motivation to actually do something to support it. This is an ecoliterate transformation from which moral duty, moral action, and a sensitivity to the needs of the Earth arises (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, cited in Coleman, 2016, p.88).

I creatively and contextually investigated the notion of what I coined 'human:non-human creative collaborations' (which is a mouthful so from here we'll refer to them as HNHCCs) and how to go about them in the most ethical, equitable and kindest way possible. HNHCCs, in short, refers to the creative coming together of at least two natural entities, beings or phenomena, one of which must be human. These creative unions help to centre the voices of the more-than-human and develop a sense of kinship to the Land within humans, as described above.

It is easier to collaborate with animals than it is plant, mineral or other natural phenomena – possibly because we share so much physiology – but HNHCCs can be explored with any number or types of Being. Perhaps even metaphysical ones on a supernatural plane – but that's an essay for another day!

HNHCCs are really exciting philosophically (Magrane 2015) but could also go a long way to helping humankind to develop a revolutionary level of respect for other species (Jevbratt 2010).

After exploring HNHCCs in a practical sense it became very apparent to me that creative collaborations with other Beings could so easily tread into exploitative, harmful, spectacle, controlling, disempowering, manipulative territories – as it has

been historically (in 'art' but also in life). So I looked into what ethical art-making in the context of HNHCCs meant. I wrote a journal article on the matter, [Ethical Art-Making – Human:Non-Human Creative Collaborations](#), and exhibited some of the ethical-collaborative explorations in my MA exhibition '[seeds of change](#)'.

I've been reflecting a lot upon the practical ways in which I can ethically collaborate with more-than-human beings. I recognise that – as a human – I am always going to have some sort of position of power over most non-human beings because I am a product of the Anthropocene and live within a world manipulated in favour of my species. I cannot deny or remove my privileged position in the network of our shared realities, but I can work to a set of standards that feel more equitable and kinder to the assortment of more-than-human Beings that I genuinely do care about.

Principles of equitable collaboration

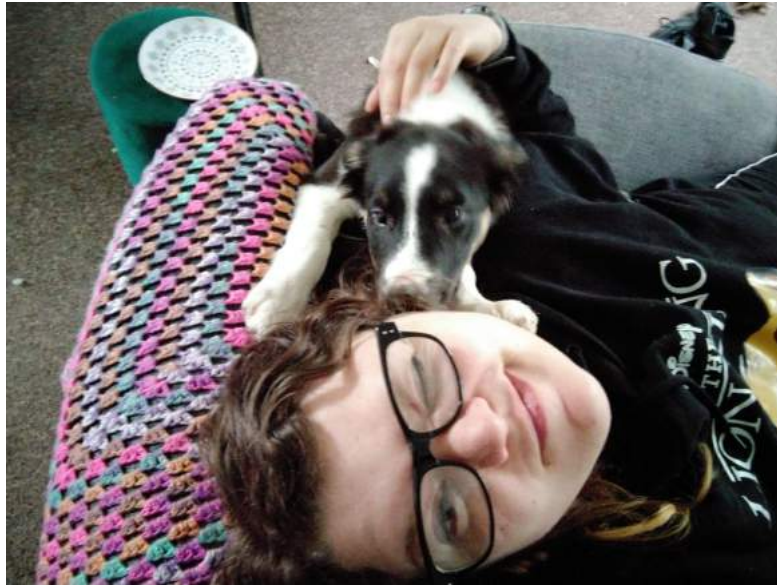
By equity, we mean that not only do we not discriminate on race, colour, ethnic or national origin, religious belief, migrant status, political opinion or affiliation, sex, marital status, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, age or disability (and for us, also species, type or biome)... but we also recognise that we don't all have the same privileges (due to intentional or unintentional bias or structural discrimination) and address these imbalances by meeting needs so collaborators (human or otherwise) can engage fully.

As a participatory artist, I find myself always taking time to see the people I work alongside as the individuals they are, celebrating their strengths and ideas, understanding their needs and trying to minimise barriers as far as possible so they can shine. I don't understand why this caring, empowering approach typically stops with our species? Imagine what could happen if this sense of support and care was extended towards our more-than-human community too.

By synthesizing literature and direct experience, I have come to some key conclusions about the approaches we must take as artists to work regeneratively alongside our more-than-human-kin.

Friendship

Interactions should be respectful, discursive and empowering. Really approach more-than-human collaborators with the same level of respect, supportiveness and curiosity you would approach a human artist friend of yours with. Be respectful of their existing needs and priorities and don't assume you take priority in that moment. Build relationships, don't ask or expect too much too soon, and respect what they choose to share with you.



Me and Merlin the pup developing our relationship in the early days.

Natural Behaviours

Never ask a more-than-human collaborator to do something that it wouldn't naturally do. Respect and value their natural abilities – you don't need to make them do anything different so avoid pushing collaborators beyond their natural behaviours and capabilities.

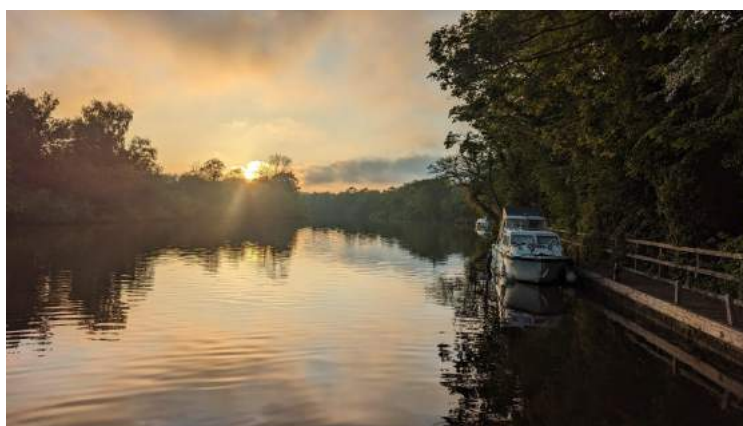


<https://youtu.be/FP71d7BAe48>

Drawing in collaboration with the wind.

Recognition

Acknowledging that more-than-human collaborators are on equal footing with you – there’s no room for archaic biblical hierarchies here. Engage with them as equal co-creators whose work is valued – even when they inevitably play the role of an anthropocentric, artist-ego-extending tool – and recognise their strengths and limitations in art-making. Also recognise your assumptions, your projections and your position in the network. Acknowledge their role in the wider ecosystem and be respectful of their needs, cycles, behaviours, priorities and attributes (remember that most Beings hunker down and rest in winter, be mindful of nesting season, and avoid poison plants!)



How does one select an image that depicts ‘recognition’? But this is from a moment of being hyper aware of the wider ecosystem and recognising my place within it.

Agency

Collaborators should be free to exercise their agency, including to refuse. Minimise the levels of control or manipulation as far as you can and support them to make their mark as freely as possible. And they may not want to collaborate with you, or at least not on the terms you are proposing, so actually respect their decision. In some instances this might be immediately obvious (a cat settling down for a nap instead of playing with you) but other times it may require patient, intuitive listening. For example, you might feel a strong sense of 'no' in your belly when asking a river to collaborate, or a push away from a certain area of land – both real life examples. Once I asked a tree to make work with me and eventually felt a firm 'no' coming from it... yet a wild sense of 'Me! Me! ME!' from another nearby tree. So I went over. Or maybe you have an expectation and it just doesn't happen. An absolutist rule here is to follow what your gut is telling you, and to be patient with Beings like trees, rocks and landscapes; they exist a lot longer than we do so it's reasonable to expect their sense of time to be slower than ours.



<https://youtu.be/JKzV-AXn9ol>

I wanted Osiris to play and chase after this dangly toy I offered him. But he wanted to rest. So instead of forcing him to perform for me, I respected his choice to just lay and watch... which became the artwork.

Recompense

There must be a generous 'giving back' within the means available to you. End extractivist conditioning and only giving when it equals increased 'yield' for you. Offer food, water, acknowledgement, thanks and love to nurture Beings for it's own sake, as well as in exchange for collaboration. Try to hear what it needs and help them out. Or in the case of spoilt pets or indoor plants who already need for nothing in this world (like mine), give them a cuddle and offer something to the more-than-human community in the wild instead.



An offering to the local deer family.

I fully acknowledge that what I say will resonate with a number of people, yet sound a bit too 'woo' for others to take me seriously. I actually don't like the word 'woo' because it's used as a derogatory term that *incorrectly* dismisses a lot of spiritual, intuitive or indigenous cosmologies into the realm of nonsense and pseudoscience, and labels people with related belief systems as stupid, gullible or 'mad'. But is there even a neutral word for 'woo' in the English language that isn't full of judgement? That itself, I think, is telling. I say nothing from a place of theology but from a place of love... whilst also not being arrogant enough to think that human science has all the answers. Our collective arrogance is already truly proving to be our downfall as a species.

One way for all you cynics out there to see it is: if I'm wrong, there's no harm done and ecoliterate responsibility is still nurtured. Whereas if I'm right (and there's more and more hard evidence coming out that supports this position) and we continue to

act in the unsustainable, colonial, exploitative manner that we in Western cultures are so accustomed to, we continue to remain unsustainably extractive and disconnected from the Land we undeniably need in order to for our species to survive.

It pays to be open-minded, open-hearted, and take an 'and/both' approach to these sorts of things. Just ask Starhawk (1999, cited by Morgain, 2013, p.296).

Eco-sensitive collaborative methodologies and examples

What might these regenerative principles look like in artistic practice, especially in collaboration with more-than-human Beings? Below I offer a list of ethical methodologies, with accompanying examples from my own work:

Decay and destruction - Bury. Submerge. Mould. Rot. Erosion. Nibbling (them, not you).



Lauren Saunders (2022) Collaboration with Earth [Ink and soil on paper].

Naturally occurring chemical and physical processes - Evaporation. Sun-bleaching.

Rust. Crystallisation. Weather.



Lauren Saunders (2023) Evaporation Drawing #2 [Charcoal and Rust on paper].

Supporting Growth - Nurturing life by ethically creating (or contributing to) conditions

for life to thrive. Making nourishing offerings.



Lauren Saunders (2022-23) Orb #5 (Erin) #2 [Earth, coir, clay and seeds].

Sustainable processing - Using sustainably gathered natural material to craft or make with (e.g. pigments, heritage crafts)



Making ink from elderberries

Space-time interactions (Jokela 2008) - Walking. Hunting. Fishing. Foraging. (literally not condoning the killing of animals here by the way, I'm vegetarian, but more that hunting/fishing is a very traditional space-time interaction within indigenous communities).



<https://youtu.be/xkmgH2rFiHY>

Lauren Saunders. #foraging365 (2022-23) [Digital Film and accompanying map]

Essence Recognition - Drawing attention to a core quality or 'essence' of a collaborator – for example, tree rubbings or other phenomenological showcasing. Also Actor Network Theory (Bruno Latour 1996), which is the understanding that materials (a.k.a. 'actors') impact knowledge production.



Lauren Saunders. Medicine bath (2022) [Digital photograph of dried flowers and herbs]

Dialogue - Direct play, call and response, discussion, and relationship-building



<https://youtu.be/lckxsxP0ipE>

Lauren Saunders and Merlin. Choreodography (2023) [Digital Film]

Interference patterning (Jevbratt 2009) - Shared moments and/or a conscious immersion with place and/or another Being.



Lauren Saunders. A conscious moment shared in a beautiful place (2023) [Digital Photography]

Response - Protocols (Jevbratt 2009), observation and documenting movement / sound / behaviours.



<https://youtu.be/1liZc5Yf8nk>

Lauren Saunders. Breydon Waters (2023) [Digital Film]

Psychical - Limbic resonance / Empathy (Jevbratt 2009), interspecies communication (Barrett et al 2021), intuition, meditation, symbolism, and ritual.



Lauren Saunders. Ritual Mat (2023) [Mixed Media installation]

Conclusion

The difficulty with creating the kind of absolutist maxims that I am apparently encouraging here is maxims never work in a practical sense - life is never that simple and like most ethical debates, there is no straightforward answer.

At the centre of a lot of complications is the fact that we are limited by human bias and the appropriate tools available; we are essentially working with a lot of assumptions based on the information we have available to us.

When we apply this to defining ethical collaborative methodologies, we're only able to assume what is fair and equitable (or harmful and disempowering) using human parameters based on existing human sensibilities, tools, and ethics... and who we find it easier to sympathise with (I.e. animals).

There is much more to discuss on this topic but I feel that having a set of regenerative guidelines, like those above, are a step in the right direction in regards to future regenerative sustainability.

References

Barrett, M., Hinz, V., Wijngaarden, V. and Lovrod, M. (2021) Speaking with other animals through intuitive interspecies communication: towards cognitive and interspecies justice. In: A. Hovorka, S. McCubbin and L. Van Patter, ed., *A Research Agenda for Animal Geographies*. [online] Elgar Online, pp.149-165. Available at: <<https://www.elgaronline.com/view/edcoll/9781788979986/9781788979986.00018.xml>>

Coleman, V. (2016) 'Emergent Rhizomes: Posthumanist Environmental Ethics in the Participatory Art of Ala Plastica', *Confluencia*,31(2), pp. 85 – 98

Jevbratt, L. (2009) *Interspecies Field Guide*. [ebook] Available at: <http://jevbratt.com/writing/interspecies_field_guide.pdf>

Jokela, T. (2008) 'A Wanderer in the Landscape: Reflection on the Relationship between Art and the Northern Environment'. In: G. Coutts and T. Jokela (ed.), *Art, Community and Environment: Educational Perspectives*, 1st ed. Chicago: Intellect Press, pp.3 – 27.

Latour, B. (1996). On actor-network theory: A few clarifications. *Soziale Welt*, 47(4), 369–381 [online] Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163>

Leopold, A. (1949) *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Magrane, E. (2015) 'Situating Geopoetics', *GeoHumanities*,1(1), pp. 86 – 102. doi:

10.1080/2373566X.2015.1071674

Morgain, R. (2013) 'The alchemy of life: Magic, anthropology and human nature in a Pagan theology', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 24(3), pp. 290 – 309. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/TAJA.12052>

Saunders (2022) Collaboration with Earth [Ink and soil on paper].

Saunders (2022-23) Orb #5 (Erin) #2 [Earth, coir, clay and seeds]

Saunders (2023) Evaporation Drawing #2 [Charcoal and Rust on paper]

Saunders and Merlin. Choreodography (2023) [Digital Film]

Saunders, L. (2022b) The Geopoetics of Drawing. *The Critical Fish*, [online] Available at: <https://thecriticalfish.co.uk/the-geopoetics-of-drawing/>

Saunders. #foraging365 (2022-23) [Digital Film and accompanying map]

Saunders. A conscious moment shared in a beautiful place (2023) [Digital Photography]

Saunders. Breydon Waters (2023) [Digital Film]

Saunders. Medicine bath (2022) [Digital photograph of dried flowers and herbs]

Saunders. Ritual Mat (2023) [Mixed Media installation]