CATALYST
feminism, theory, technoscience

COMMENTARY

Ungrid-able Ecologies: Decolonizing the Ecological Sensorium in a 10,000 year-old NaturalCultural Happening

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Abstract

In the photo essay that follows, I share some field notes two years into a long-term research-creation collaboration with award-winning dancer and filmmaker Ayelen Liberona. Becoming Sensor mixes art, ecology, and anthropology in an attempt to do ecology otherwise. Part of a long-term ethnographic research project on an urban park in Toronto, Becoming Sensor speculates on protocols for an ungrid-able ecology of a 10,000 year-old naturalcultural happening. In this project, Ayelen and I engage the expansive mediations of art and the artful attentions of ethnography to remake the naturalist's notebook. This more-than-natural history of an oak savannah in Toronto's High Park offers one approach to cultivating a robust mode of knowing grounded in queer, feminist, decolonial politics.

Myers, N. (2017). Ungrid-able Ecologies: Decolonizing the Ecological Sensorium in a 10,000 year-old NaturalCultural Happening. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, *3*(2) 1-24
http://www.catalystjournal.org | ISSN: 2380-3312

Introduction: Decolonizing Feminist Knowledge Projects

In this post-truth world order, where alternative facts threaten to unravel even the most stably constructed scientific claims, it may seem utterly blasphemous to question whether more science or even better science are what we need in order to respond to the dire circumstances unfurling all around us. It is clear that scientific institutions, research programs, and data are under serious threat.[1] And at the same time, what should be concerning to scholars of feminist technoscience is that it is precisely in this climate that many appear to be clamping down more fiercely on the myth of science as the exercise of disinterested objectivity in service of securing universal truths. Note the protests against the "politicization of science" around the April 2017 March for Science, and against efforts to make that march more inclusive. Feminist technoscience scholars have long known that science is more and other than what it has claimed to be. But many scientists and their publics still hold on to mythical ideas that assume a clean divide between science and politics. And so perhaps we could take a moment to trouble the desire for a feminist knowledge project that aspires to the status of a science. Yes, we need sciences grounded in intersectional feminisms. But we also need to invest our efforts in generating robust forms of knowing (and not knowing)[2] that can stand both alongside and athwart science.

In what follows, I speculate on the possibilities of a decolonial feminist mode of inquiry that can build on the best parts of science – its situated, embodied, and responsively attuned forms of knowing[3] – while simultaneously refusing its foundational logics: the colonial, capitalist, military, mechanistic, and neo-Darwinian forms through which science has gained its traction as the sole arbiter of truth. This is a call for a robust mode of knowing that can break from the very forces that science was designed to serve: those capitalist and colonial desires for knowledge forms that facilitate the management of lands and bodies.[4] For too long these forces have shaped what we can and cannot know about

the world.

I am looking for ways of knowing that can expose the colonial and extractive logics of the sciences, while holding scientists, their publics, governments, and industry accountable to asking better questions and cultivating more robust modes of inquiry.[5] I am holding out hope for a mode of inquiry that can be responsive to the needs of communities, such as those living downstream from the toxic flows of late industrialism, and in the wake of climate change.[6] I want to support the creation of knowledge forms that can help us to contest constrained regimes of evidence, unsettle ideas about what modes of attention, objects, methods and data forms are proper to the sciences, and disrupt assumptions about whose knowledge counts.[7] Perhaps this is what feminist technoscience already does. Do we want to call that science?

Science has commitments not aligned with feminist projects. The regimes of evidence currently marshaled by states and industries operate within a constrained discursive field in which all claims to truth must appeal to a mechanistic world view, one in which forms of life and death are made alienable, extractable, commodifiable and reducible to their parts. Other forms of knowing, most especially local and Indigenous knowledges, are forced to make themselves legible to this scientific rationalism. Other knowledges are either "tolerated" as a matter of liberalism's bureaucratic principles of "inclusion" and "consultation", just glossed over, or outright ignored.[8] I wonder then whether calls for knowledge under the banner of science will keep us entrenched in forms of knowing that institute hierarchies among life forms, reaffirm Western conceptions of the separateness of humans from nature, continue to mechanize and commodify living processes, propagate militarized narratives and technologies, and ensure the continued silencing of Indigenous and local knowledges. If this is so, I want to try my hand at inventing *forms of knowing otherwise*.

In order to imagine a robust form of knowing that could stand alongside science – and push back on widespread desires for totalizing, universal truths – it might be generative to begin by building on elements

of scientific practice that are consistent with intersectional feminist ethics. My long-term ethnographic research among protein modelers who render visible the stuff of life taught me that science is more and other than what we long though it was.[9] Practitioners of the arts of protein modeling showed that it was possible to eschew idealizations of mechanical objectivity and cultivate a practice of situated knowledge in the laboratory.[10] They showed me how scientific rigor has less to do with conventional ideas about detachment, disembodied objectivity, or routinization, and more to do with improvised regimes of care and affective labor. These practitioners showed me their willingness to get lured by phenomena they study, and to get entangled and attuned to the liveliness of matter.[11] They also taught me that their best attempts at asserting a mechanical worldview consistently failed to disenchant the living world. In spite of their best efforts at deanimation, in their hands matter remained lively and excitable.[12] I saw glimmers of a feminist science in their loves and labors.

But scientists working in this field and those working across many other disciplines, and especially in ecology, also insistently show me the mundane ways that colonial and economizing logics still have a tenacious a grip on our imaginations about lands and bodies.[13] So while scientific practitioners share so much with artists and anthropologists (especially when you look closely at the affective entanglements that take shape in the course of inquiry), too often scientists are constrained to modes of attention and regimes of evidence dictated by colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy. Just as I want to affirm the potential scientists have to render the world otherwise, it clear that decolonial feminist projects must find a way to break from the sciences' founding logics. If the aim is to break with the colonial ecological imaginary, why not start with the disruptive potential of art? Arts-based inquiry, in the form of research-creation projects that tie thinking together with making and doing, can break the frame.[14] Art can alter how we sense, feel, and know; arts-based inquiry can expose and subvert the colonial ecological sensorium, and in the process, open up perceptions of more-than-human worlds.

In the photo essay that follows, I share some field notes two years into a long-term research-creation collaboration with award-winning dancer and filmmaker Ayelen Liberona.[15] *Becoming Sensor* mixes art, ecology, and anthropology in an attempt to *do ecology otherwise*. Part of a long-term ethnographic research project on an urban park in Toronto, *Becoming Sensor* speculates on protocols for an *ungrid-able ecology* of a 10,000 year-old naturalcultural happening. In this project, Ayelen and I engage the expansive mediations of art and the artful attentions of ethnography to remake the naturalist's notebook. This more-than-natural history of an oak savannah in Toronto's High Park offers one approach to cultivating a robust mode of knowing grounded in queer, feminist, decolonial politics.

A More-than-natural History of an Oak Savannah

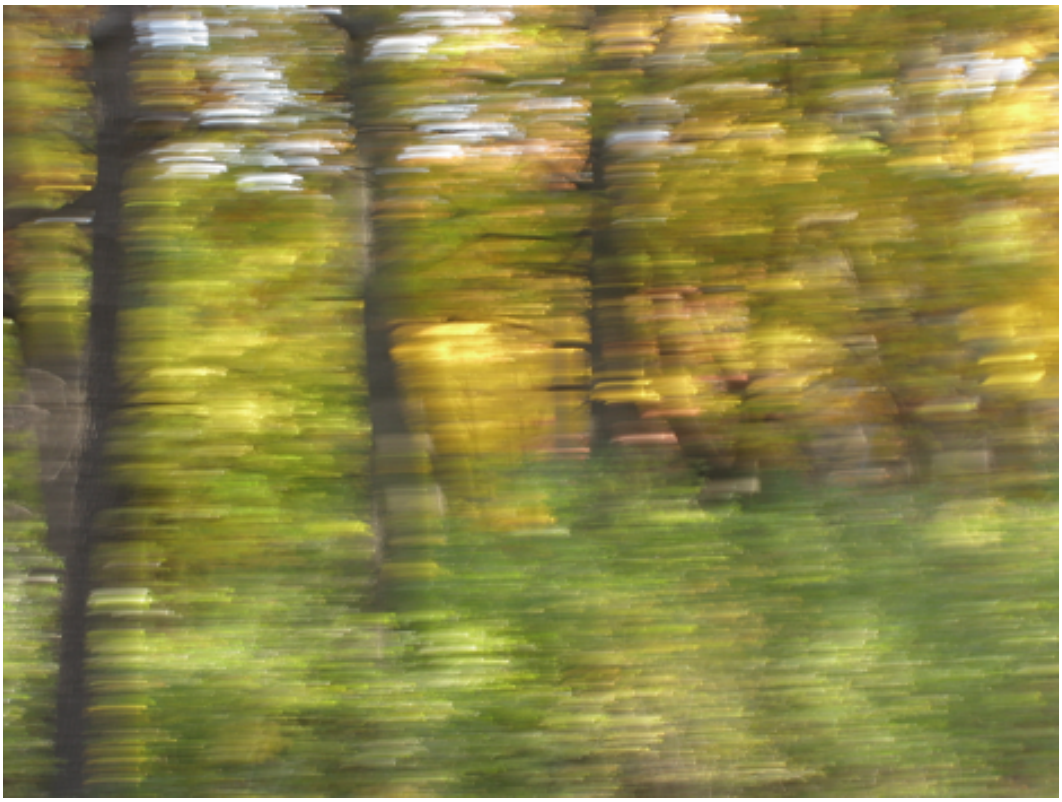

Figure 1: High Park's Oak Savannah. Photograph by the author

Becoming Sensor experiments with ways to *decolonize ecology* in a 400-acre urban parkland in Toronto, which is currently under intensive ecological restoration. The lands in question are remnants of the ancient oak savannahs that used to stretch out across this region. Oak savannahs are remarkable *happenings* that ingather many kinds of beings, becomings, and comings undone. They are composed of widely spaced oak trees, tall prairie grasses, and wildflowers that love to take root in sandy soils. And yet the composition of these lands is not only dependent on "natural" forces. Oak savannahs depend on the disruptive force of fire to keep the grasslands thriving and to promote the regeneration of oaks. And for that reason, they depend on people with knowledge of fire and the skills to use this disruptive force to care for the lands. Oak savannahs are in this sense *naturalcultural* formations par excellence.[16] Their very existence is a record of Indigenous peoples' use of fire to care for these lands over millennia.[17]

These lands have suffered significantly under settler colonialism. Only one percent of the oak savannahs that once stretched out across this region have survived settlers' grazing sheep, lawn mowers, and development projects. The removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands and attempts to decimate their cultures through residential school systems and forced assimilation has had and continues to have devastating effects on individuals and their communities across Canada. High Park's oak savannahs provoke another line of inquiry into this history: can we simultaneously ask how this violence impacts the wellbeing of the land? What does a land lose when it is dispossessed of its people?

Oak savannahs do not survive without people. After years of settlers grazing sheep and mowing the grasses to sculpt the lands into a pleasure park, these lands are now recognized as rare ecosystems, sites of natural and scientific interest. Toronto's Urban Forestry team has brought in controlled burns in an effort to save the oak savannahs. However, saving the oak savannah's "nature" seems to be prioritized over addressing the lasting legacies of colonial violence that contributed

to the degradation of these lands. The lands struggle to survive today precisely because the Indigenous peoples who gave this land its contours and significance were removed and their fires suppressed. Working without the inclusion of Indigenous people, the intensive ecological restoration efforts under way in the park today participate in an ongoing colonial project that continues to enforce the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Can we do ecology otherwise?

Decolonizing the Ecological Sensorium

One of the most totalizing erasures of colonial ecology has been the disavowal of Indigenous articulations of the sentience of lands and bodies, and their inextricable relations.[18] Affirmations of more-than-human sentience are blasphemous to a colonial ecology whose data forms and modes of inquiry tacitly and explicitly assume that bodies and lands must be managed as property, resource and commodity.[19]

Decolonizing ecology demands disrupting our well-rehearsed retorts to the suggestion of more-than-human sentience. We are all familiar with that quick dismissal that reduces claims about nonhuman sentience to primitive expressions of animism or anthropomorphism. Consider for a moment however, that the very taboos against animism and anthropomorphism are grounded in colonial imaginations of nature and culture, and that this disavowal of nonhuman sentience is intimately bound up in colonial projects that have taken shape under the guise of the ecological sciences.[20] *Becoming Sensor* invites us to consider that ongoing protests against the very conception of nonhuman sentiences risk re-colonizing the past, reviving a colonial present, and ensuring that colonial rule over settled lands and bodies endures well into the future.

To become better allies to Indigenous resurgence projects,[21] settlers could start by forgetting everything we thought we knew about nonhuman lives and worlds. This takes serious work. *Becoming Sensor* invites us to forget what we thought “nature” was; to forget how we thought life “worked”; and to forget, too, the naturalizing tropes that

made us believe that living beings "work" like machines, or that forests perform "ecosystems services," or that "reproduction" and "fitness" were the only valuable and recordable measures of a life.[22] It demands cultivating new modes of embodiment, attention, imagination, and new ways of telling stories about lands and bodies.

Figure 2: Sensing, Sensitive and Sentient. Photograph by the author.

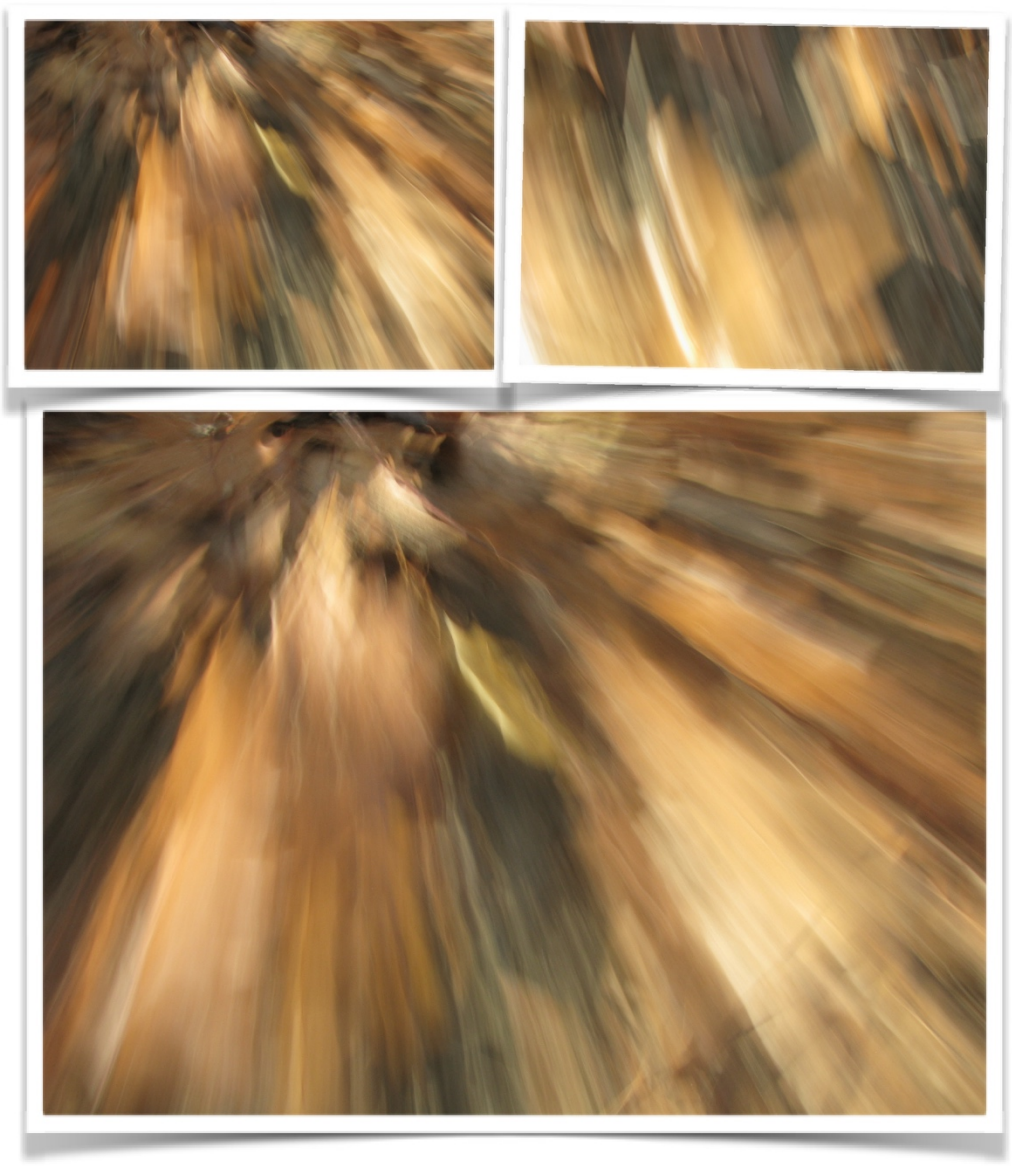

Figure 3: Decompositions. Photographs by the author**.**

Returning again and again to this work of de-tuning and re-tuning our sensoria through our work in the oak savannah has inspired the invention an *ungrid-able ecology* for a *more-than-natural history* up to the task of documenting this naturalcultural happening 10,000 years in-the-making. It is in High Park's oak savannahs that Ayelen and I are learning that it is possible to invent new modes of attention and inquiry for a decolonial,

queer, feminist ecology. Perhaps this will become a place where ecological restoration might get disarticulated from incentivized management schemes that aim to maximize a land's ecosystems services. Perhaps it will become a place where neocolonial moralizing discourses about invasive and native species might start to lose their traction. I imagine that this is also land on which the reproductive imperatives and heteronormative, militarized, and productivist tropes of neo-Darwinian survival stories might someday become less salient. Two years in, our first attunements are just beginning to sensitize us to what this land is *mattering*, and what *matters* to this land.[23]

Doing Ecology Otherwise: Protocols for an Ungrid-able Ecology

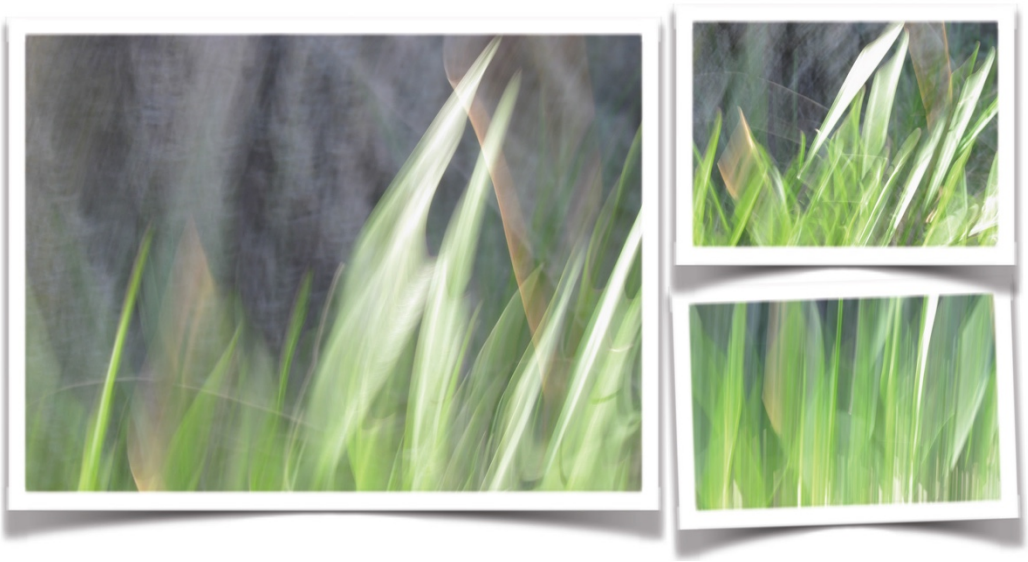

Figure 4: Green Flames. Photographs by the author.

Toronto's Urban Forestry team has put up signs throughout the park to mark "Monitoring Plots" where they have done ecological restoration work. These are sites to which parks workers return once every few years to take photographs and record changes, storing the images in an archive at city hall. We take seriously the idea that these monitoring plots are sites where we need to pay very close attention. What is involved in

monitoring an environment? What would it take to really pay attention to what is happening here? And what modes of attention might be required for a decolonized account of this land?

And what, Ayelen and I ask, would we have to do to really tune in? *Becoming sensor* in this already sentient world, we are experimenting with modes of attention to learn how to pay attention to this land that has been paying very close attention to all the transformations taking shape around it for so many years.[24] Plants and trees are themselves remarkably sensitive sensors.[25] How can our sensing practices do justice to documenting the beings and doings of an oak tree, let alone the vast numbers of trees and other creatures taking root together across this wide swath of ancient land? We are learning that becoming sensor in the savannah demands subtle attunements of our always already *synesthetic* sensoria. As long-time dancers our attunements to these lands are always already kinaesthetically inflected and profoundly attentive to rhythm, temporality, momentum, and more-than-human movements of all kinds. Our protocols for this ungrid-able ecology are especially attuned to the bodies and movements of the creatures around us, including the plants, trees, fungi, insects, birds, squirrels, dogs, machines, and people, and all forms of living and dying, becoming and coming undone.

It is important to note that our protocols are not intended to re-colonize these lands with yet more settler colonial stories. Rather, these techniques offer an example of some ways to break the consensus of a colonial ecology that is indebted to economizing, militarized, mechanistic, and neo-Darwinian logics. These protocols demonstrate how one might begin to refuse the colonial norms and logics of conventional ecology in order to open up to sensing other sentiences. In so doing, they aim to expand the discursive field in which stories about bodies and lands can be told. The aim is to make more space, to push up against the conventional ecological sensorium, so that the sciences do not have the only or final say. Perhaps these protocols will help us learn how to ask better questions about what matters to the land, so that in the future we can work alongside ecologists to transform the ways they apprehend the

world, the questions they ask, and their methods of inquiry. It is by making more room for other ways of telling stories about lands and bodies that, as settlers, we are allying ourselves with the remarkable work of Indigenous activists and scholars in the name of decolonization.[26]

Kinesthetic Imaging: Rendering Sentient Bodies in an Affective Ecology

We begin from the premise that we are not the only observers on these lands. What changes when we start from the assumption that we are being watched by the trees? What do the trees know? If we learned how to listen, what stories might they tell?

If traditional nature photography captures living bodies and turns them into objects of scientific interest, the kinesthetic images Ayelen and I compose in the field *render the world otherwise*. We hack in to our cameras to disrupt the conventional ecologist's desire to capture clean, clear, legible data. We hold open the aperture long enough to keep our moving bodies in the frame, allowing us to register the moods and energies of the land relationally as we pull at light and color, and participate in the vibration of each happening. As situated knowledges these relational images document the energetics of an encounter, the push and pull between bodies, human, more-than-human, and machine. Generated in the act of moving with and being moved by the beings and doings of these lands, these images register ephemeral happenings and offer records of the momentum of our active *involution* in this affectively-charged ecology.[27] (See Figures 1-7)

In the act of making kinesthetic images with digital cameras, the photographer does not capture the phenomenon so much as get caught up with it, hitching a ride on what is becoming and coming undone.[28] The rotting logs, frilled mushrooms, crumbling leaves, ancient sands, and greening grasses of these lands are not discrete things, they are happenings taking shape through deep time and in the ephemera of now, and now, and now. It is by hitching a ride on the growth movements of

trees and plants, letting their slow movements lure our bodies, that our kinesthetic images blur the distinction between animator and animated.[29] Letting the wild arc lines of tree limbs set our bodies and cameras in motion, we experiment with ways to *intra-animate* with the trees.[30] Laying these still images out in sequence allows us to animate these dances (see Figure 5). These images appear to conjure the otherwise imperceptibly slow movements of tree growth as a dance, with the trees as gestural and expressive dancers. In this sense, our kinesthetic images are what Deleuze might call "time images" [31]: they animate temporalities otherwise imperceptible or unimaginable, conjuring uncanny planty agencies in a blur of light, color, and movement.

Our imaging experiments with ways of tuning into what matters to these lands. To reach toward the unknown and unknowable of more-than-human worlds, our images open up speculative modes of attention suggestive of the speeds and slownesses of the light, color, and vibration that a plant or tree might perceive of the urban world racing around it (see Figure 6).[32] These renderings insist that the glass, metal, plastic, concrete, salt and petrochemicals of the roadways are also inextricable participants in the vibratory milieu of this ecological happening. Kinesthetic images of growing grasses can also reveal the energetics of growth, combustion, and decomposition: blades of grass alight in flames in ways that also invoke the fires that these lands so long for (see Figure 4). Image making in this way allows us to participate in processes of decomposition by refusing to hold still for a focused image. By pulling at time and light we experiment with ways to conjure the unseen, ineffable, and numinous energies unfurling in processes of decomposition (see Figure 3). They also help us document the infolding of urban life and park life, teaching us in new ways the impossibility of disentangling nature from culture. Taking walks through the oak savannah at night, holding the camera's aperture open for up to 25 seconds, we are able to render the ways that our moving and mediated sensorium plays with the city lights, generating tracers and tailings from the flickering lights that cut incessantly through the night (see Figure 7). It is by playing with excess and fabulation, that

our ungrid-able data forms toy with desires for scientific legibility while generating ways to channel, transduce, and story the remarkable forms of involutionary momentum taking shape in this affectively-charged ecology.

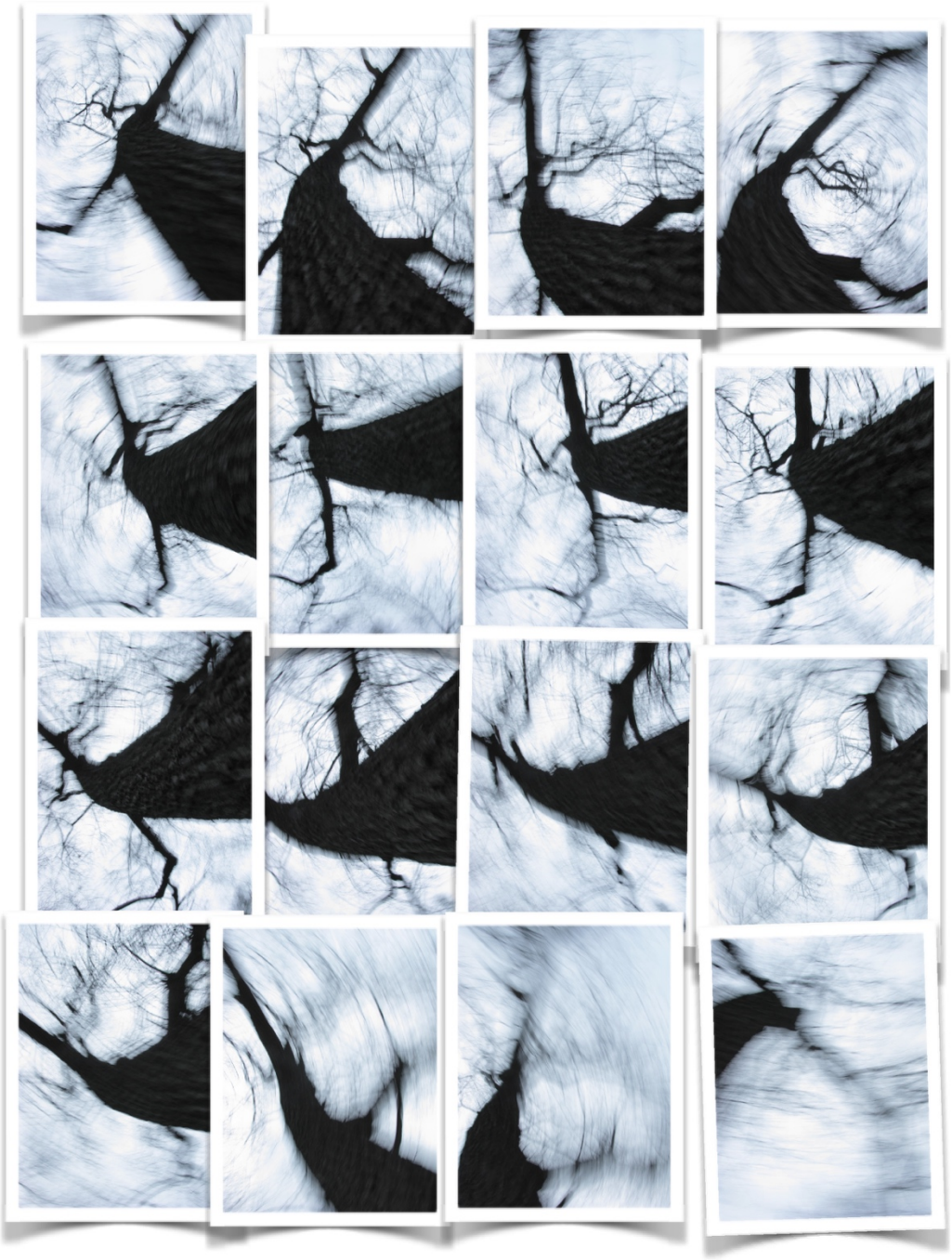

Figure 5: Dances with oak. Photographs by the author.

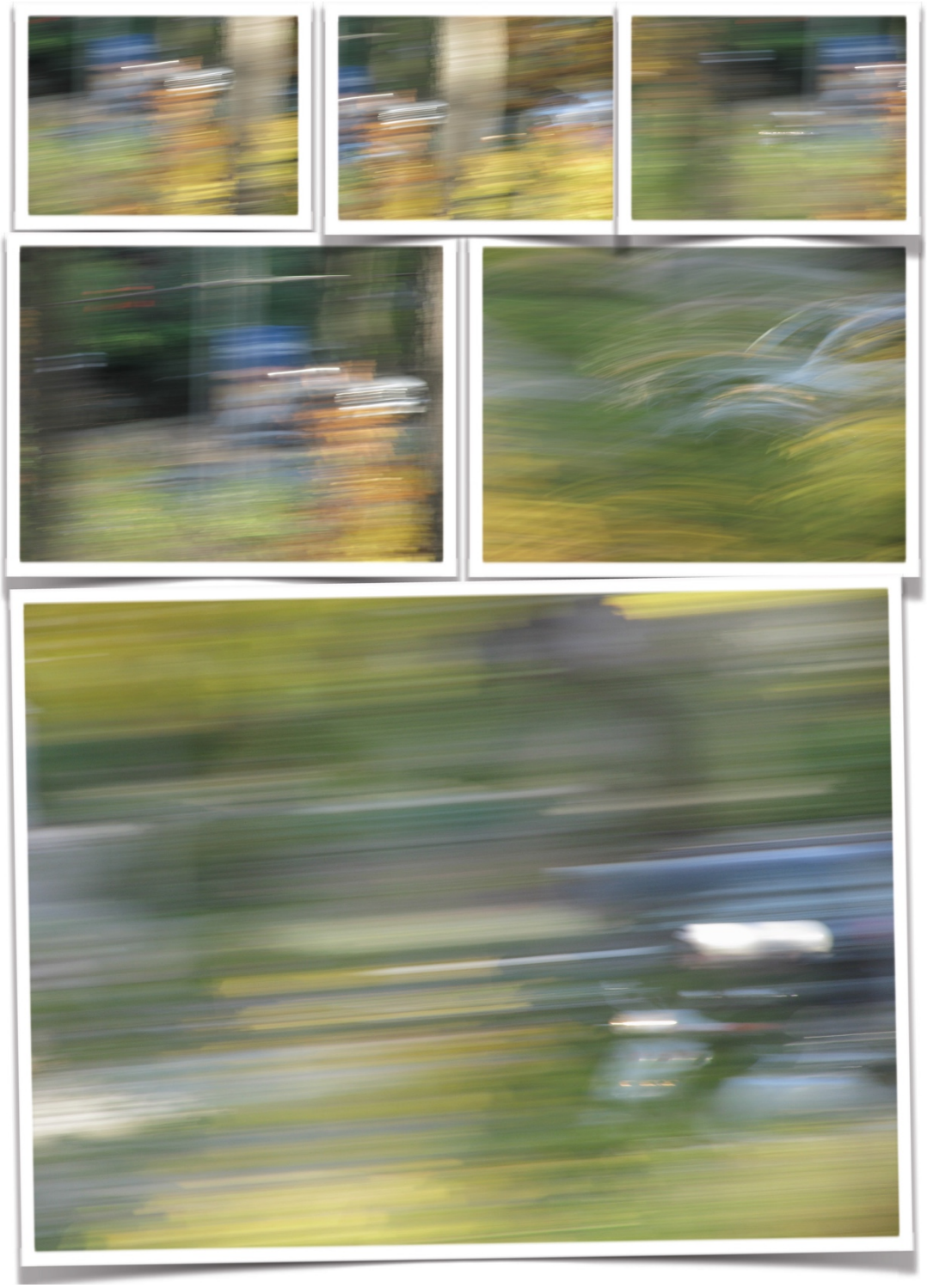

Figure 6: Glass, metal, plastic, concrete, and petrochemicals. Photographs by the author.

Figure 7: Night walks in the savannah. Photographs by the author.

Notes

[1] See the remarkable work of Michelle Murphy, Matt Price, Nick Shapiro and many others at the Environmental Data Governance Initiative launched to save environmental data from the Trump administration's

efforts to shut down the EPA. https://envirodatagov.org

[2] See de la Cadena (2015)

[3] See Haraway (1997), Barad (2007), and Myers (2015a)

[4] See for example Murphy (2017).

[5] See for example the Write2Know Project (http://write2know.ca), a social and environmental justice research collaboration with Max Liboiron and the Politics of Evidence Working Group (http://politicsofevidence.wordpress.com), which contested the defunding of science and the muzzling of federal scientists under the Harper government in Canada, while simultaneously taking a stand for forms of public inquiry responsive to the needs of marginalized communities and for regimes of evidence that expand whose knowledge gets to count in policy making.

[6] See for example, Fortun (2012), Shapiro (2015), Liboiron (2016), and Murphy (2013).

[7] See for example the efforts of the Politics of Evidence Working Group (http://politicsofevidence.wordpress.com).

[8] See Povinelli (2002, 2011) on liberalism and the politics of recognition, and Stengers (2010) on the curse of tolerance.

[9] See Myers (2015a).

[10] Haraway (1988)

[11] This approach resonates with the works of Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) Stengers (2010), and Despret (2013).

[12] See also Myers (2015b).

[13] Hustak and Myers (2012)

[14] See for example Campbell (in press), Loveless (in press), and Myers (in press b).

[15] For more on Ayelen Liberona's work see http://ayelenliberona.com

[16] On naturecultures see Tsing (2015)

[17] See Johnson (2015) and Riley (2013).

[18] See for example Simpson (2014), Geniusz (2009), and Kimmerer (2015).

[19] On the colonial history of ecology see for example Kingsland (2008). See Hustak and Myers (2012) for more on the functionalist, mechanistic, militarized, and economizing tropes that shape ecological perception.

[20] See Myers (in press a)

[21] Thinking with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), and exploring ways to work as a white settler ally to Indigenous resurgence projects, I am not employing decolonization as a metaphor: decolonizing ecology requires repatriation of lands to Indigenous people. See for example, Simpson (2008), Simpson and Ladner (2010), Simpson (2011, 2014), and Coultard (2014). See also Geniusz (2009) for an Indigenous scholar's approach to decolonizing botanical knowledge. See Mastnak et al. (2014) for ways of decolonizing understandings of "native" and "invasive" species.

[22] See Hustak and Myers (2012).

[23] See Myers (in press) and the Becoming Sensor website (http://becomingsensor.com) for descriptions of this and other protocols including those for sniffing out chemical ecologies and sounding out the savannah. To tune in on our experiments with kinesthetic listening and imaging see https://becomingsensor.com/portfolio/kinesthetic-imaging/

[24] Note that I am deliberately blurring the distinctions here between human and nonhuman modes of attention. There are crucial differences and incommensurabilities among human and nonhuman sensoria, to be sure. But perhaps there are also possible resonances that we have not yet fully grasped.

[25] See Hustak and Myers (2012) and Myers (2015b) for reviews of literature on the sciences of plant sensing.

[26] See for example Todd (2016a &b), L. Simpson (2008, 2011, 2014), A. Simpson (2007), and Tallbear (2013).

[27] On "involutionary momentum" and "affective ecologies" see Hustak and Myers (2012).

[28] Donna Haraway's (1987) figure of the cyborg reminds us to reckon with the non-innocence of our technologically-mediated sensorium. Our cameras are indeed inheritances of militarism and more, and so the work of an ungrid-able ecologist is not without its trouble. "Staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016) in the oak savannah requires reckoning with, rather than disavowing, the tricky nature of our always already cyborg sensoria. Good cyborgs learn how to hack into and jam hegemonic systems. What would it take to interrupt and reimagine the conventional ecological sensorium? How can we think and work beyond grid-logics, especially when the surface of this very document/page, itself digitally mediated, is bound to a grid? Some figures in this photoessay make self-conscious use of automated digital rendering algorithms that make it

seem like these images were printed, arrayed on a white surface and imaged as tentative, temporary groupings. I treat this as a simulation of a way of one might interact with these kinesthetic images as data forms and expose the limits of grid-thinking; that is by shuffling them together, arranging and rearranging them to make aesthetic and conceptual arguments, always tentatively, to see what stories take shape in between.

[29] See Stacey and Suchman (2012) and Myers (2012).

[30] See Myers (2015a) on "intra-animacy."

[31] See Deleuze (1986).

[32] For insight into a range of ways plants perceive the world see Myers (2014 and 2015b).

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Bio

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