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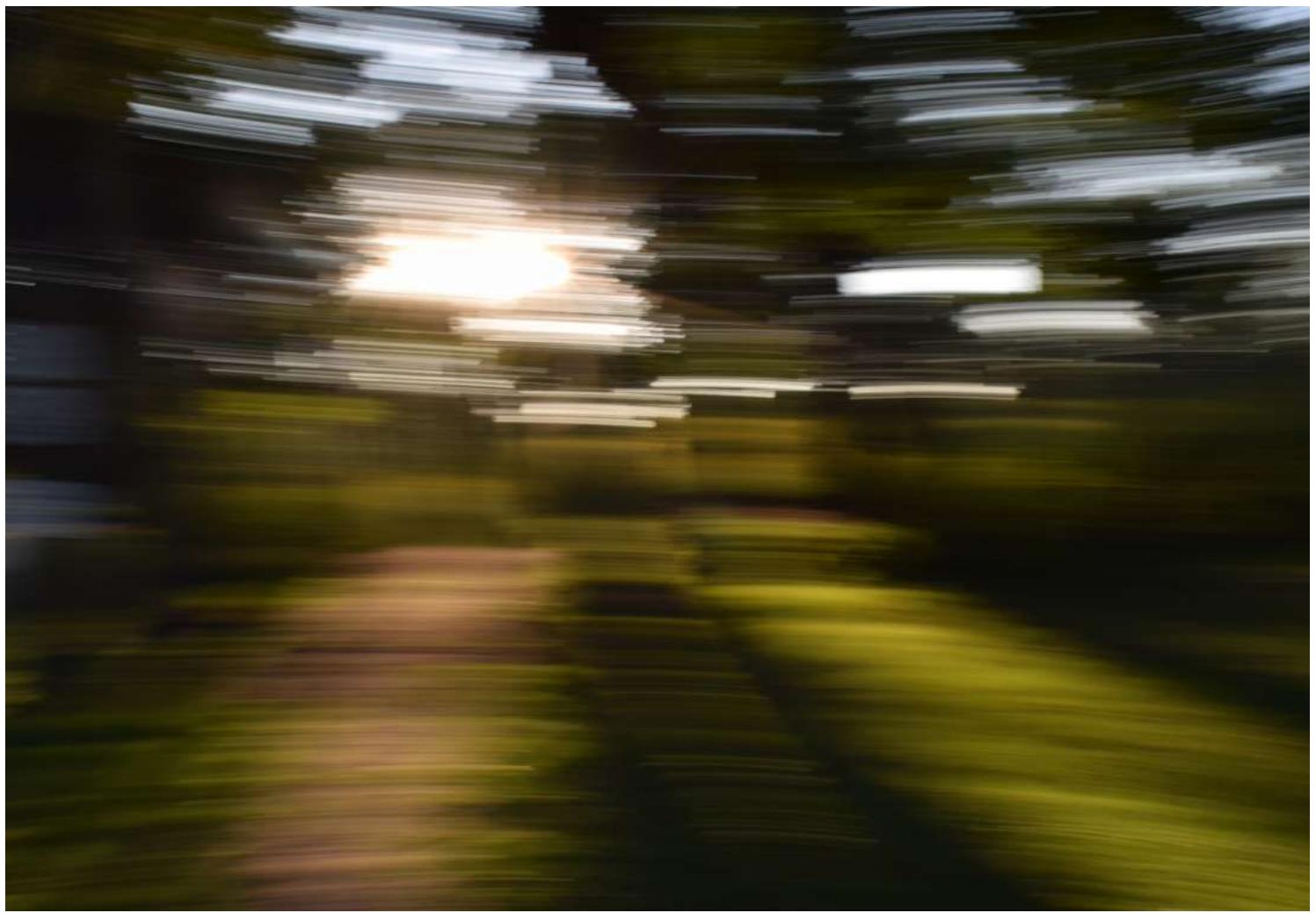
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Becoming Sensor in the Planthroposcene: An Interview with Natasha Myers



Stepping into the oak savannah. Kinesthetic image by Natasha Myers, 2018.

By [Meredith Evans](#)

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Situated at the intersection of anthropology, art, ecology, and activism, *Becoming Sensor* is a research-creation collaboration between filmmaker and dancer [Ayelen Liberona](#) and anthropologist [Natasha Myers](#). Through experiments with protocols for what they call an “ungrid-able ecology,” Liberona and Myers craft kinesthetic images by moving with and being moved by the living world, attuning to the happenings and becomings in the oak savannahs of Toronto’s High Park. Refusing to capture, document, and represent the worldlings of High Park through colonial imaginaries, Liberona and Myers render aesthetic entanglements that evoke the affective qualities of movements, energies, and relationalities, inviting us to join them in [“detuning colonial common sense.”](#)

What follows is an interview that contributing editor Meredith Evans conducted with Natasha Myers about *Becoming Sensor*. Myers describes the process of creating *Becoming Sensor* and how she mobilizes artistic practice as a methodological intervention for anthropological scholarship in an aspirational episteme she calls the *Planthroposcene*.

Meredith Evans: How was *Becoming Sensor* first cultivated as a collaborative entanglement in art and science, research and practice?

Natasha Myers: It began in 2014 from a desire to be more grounded in my work. At the time, I had just completed an exhausting twelve-month sabbatical where I traveled around the world to follow plant stories, visit botanical gardens, and interview plant artists and scientists in Canada, Europe, Australia, Japan, Singapore, and the United States. After returning to Toronto, I began writing a grant proposal that would have seen me continue to fling my body across the world. Plants were pulling me in so many directions; I had this profound realization that I had become unmoored.

In this moment I took a pause and stepped into High Park, this 400-acre park in Toronto five minutes from my home where I had spent lots of time throughout my life, including a stint as an environmental educator at the park’s nature center twenty years ago. I realized that High

Park holds all of the deeper questions that I wanted to work through, all of the political, economic, ecological, and aesthetic tensions that complicate the stories we tend to tell about plants and people. I saw how I could involve myself in issues that were pivotal to the land on which I live. It really brought home how important it is for anthropologists to have a sense of accountability to the communities that we're living in and a sense of accountability to the worlds we write about. Turning my attention to High Park meant I could root like the plants that I wanted to get to know. Rooting, I'm learning through this work, is about learning a deep sense of accountability to the local. What is in these soils into which I'm rooting? What is in this air that I'm breathing? It is grounding to be doing research on land that I care deeply about, and I knew that the stories coming out of here could be as transformative for others as they have been for me.

High Park is a site of intensive ecological restoration, where the metrics and experimental techniques of ecology render these lands as sites of pure nature, as an ecosystem that must be saved from humans and preserved for science. But these are also stolen lands, and sites of ongoing dispossession for Indigenous people in Toronto seeking access to ancestral lands for healing and teaching in ceremony. As I stepped into my field site, I began to see the nuance of the worlds within High Park that needed not just an anthropologist's attention but also the attention of artists and activists.



Pulling at light and grasses. Kinesthetic images by Natasha Myers, 2018.

ME: How has *Becoming Sensor* transformed over the years?

NM: There are so many different sets of skills, disciplinary forms, practices, and things that don't look like what we typically call anthropological research happening in the spaces around this project.

Initially the project asked how can we reinvent ecology to make it an ally rather than an obstacle to Indigenous resurgence on these lands, which are the traditional territories of the Wendat, Seneca, Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe Nations of Turtle Island. These lands now known as High Park lay within the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, a treaty that binds the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinaabe Nations in shared responsibility

to care for these lands. The covenant includes sharing in the abundant harvests of acorns that came from these edible forests. The question I wanted to work through was whether or not ecology could be transformed from a colonial tool for enduring dispossession into something that could support Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty. To me this meant engaging the land counter to the ways a restoration ecologist, conservation biologist, or naturalist would. Could we tell stories in ways that could disrupt colonial land management regimes? What if this land is more and other than an aesthetic collection of plants, an ecosystem service, or an extractable commodity? How would we engage it as a being worthy of address? I can't think of a question more blasphemous to the mechanizing sciences, so ready as they are to chastise any claim that resembles anthropomorphism. This felt like the necessary pivot for refusing ecology's militarism, colonialism, and its "economization of life" (see Murphy 2017b). If we begin there, then how could we develop a practice that could do justice to the lives of the more-than-human creatures who are rooting and weaving across the land?

Becoming Sensor is a collaboration with my dear friend Ayelen Liberona. We have been friends since we were 11 and 12 years old when we were training at the same dance school here in Toronto, and we share a resonant aesthetic and sensibility. We were already thinking together about movement and image-making—I was thinking about movement, plants, and the settler sciences; she was rethinking the relationship between cameras, movement, and land. We began this collaboration walking the land together, listening and experimenting, using a whole range of movement-based modalities that became protocols for what we call an "ungrid-able" ecology, an ecology that cannot be mapped and enclosed by a grid logic (see Myers 2017). We introduced movement into the image-making by holding open the aperture of our cameras to allow our moving bodies to register energetically in the image. These techniques disrupt the logics of a camera designed to capture clearly defined objects. In our sound art, we would integrate the sounds of our own bodies moving with the sounds of the land and the roadway, and speed up and slow down the recordings, texturing these sonic ecologies with otherwise unheard sounds. We did a lot of drawing, film and image work, and sound recording using these kinesthetic techniques. By moving with and being moved by the creatures all around us, we were experimenting with ways to tune in to the sentience of the land and participate actively in animating its relations. These ephemeral encounters generated kinesthetic images that we think of as affectively charged data points, a kind of alterdata (thinking with Michelle Murphy's [2017a] concept of alterlife) that can entangle both

the makers of the image and its viewers in moving relations with the land. This practice of attention encourages us to reckon with our situatedness, involvement, and profound interimplication in the act of knowing, rather than reproduce the enduring myth of disembodied objectivity as the foundation of robust inquiry. We are working with Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge, and building on my past projects (see Myers 2015, 2020) on the kinesthetic and affective entanglements of inquiry.

As a settler living and working on stolen Indigenous lands, I am reckoning with the ways that colonial forms of restoration ecology are enforcing another regime of dispossession by reproducing nature both as a domain of expert technological management and as a realm to be protected from humans. *Becoming Sensor* is about figuring out a way for settler allies to de-tune the colonial common sense that shapes how we understand the living world in order to tune into the land in less colonial ways, initiating the work with an anti-colonial sensibility and commitment. It was our first gesture towards forming relationships of respect and reciprocity in support of Indigenous sovereignty and resurgence projects happening here in Toronto.

In the last twenty years, the city's ecological restoration efforts in High Park have focused on saving the remaining rare oak savannah lands from humans for science. Some of the restoration of the oak savannahs is done through controlled burns that ecologists say mimic "natural" wildfires. But this is a complete erasure of the work of Indigenous pasts and presents, including those who tended these lands with fire for millennia, and who have deep understandings of the role of fire in caring for these lands. With their widely spaced trees, tall prairie grasses, and wildflowers, these oak savannahs were abundant sites for food and medicines, for foraging acorns, growing gardens, farming corn, and conducting ceremony—not sites of "pure nature." These are lands where intergenerational teachings are given and received, these lands have deep and profound significance. Learning to read a landscape like an oak savannah with a restoration ecologist is profoundly different from learning to read these same lands alongside an Indigenous knowledge keeper. For settler scientists, oak savannahs are aesthetically pleasing plant communities that are rare and for that reason worth conserving. From the perspective of the Indigenous people I work alongside, these lands have been and continue to be sites of sovereignty, healing, nourishment, and survival.

The city's park managers make extensive use of glyphosate and other herbicides to manage the oak savannahs, reinforcing colonial ideas about who should live and who should die on these lands. One of my Indigenous collaborators reminded me: if we want to know who and what should be thriving in an oak savannah, we should be talking to the Indigenous peoples whose ancestors have been working with these lands for millennia. It was only thirty years ago that restoration ecologists "discovered" that High Park's once manicured grasslands were actually oak savannahs. Now they are the ones eradicating any species that they deem "non-native" or "invasive." But what makes these species "invasive" has nothing to do with the plants themselves. These are plants that love to take root in the ruins left in the wake of capitalism and colonialism, in the wake of Indigenous dispossession. These lands are out of relation.



Fall's decompositions. Kinesthetic images by Natasha Myers, 2018.

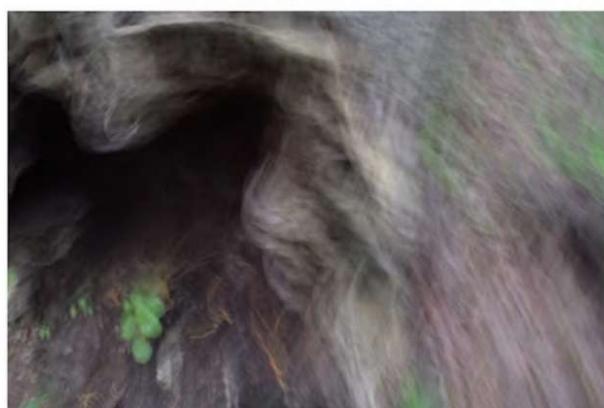
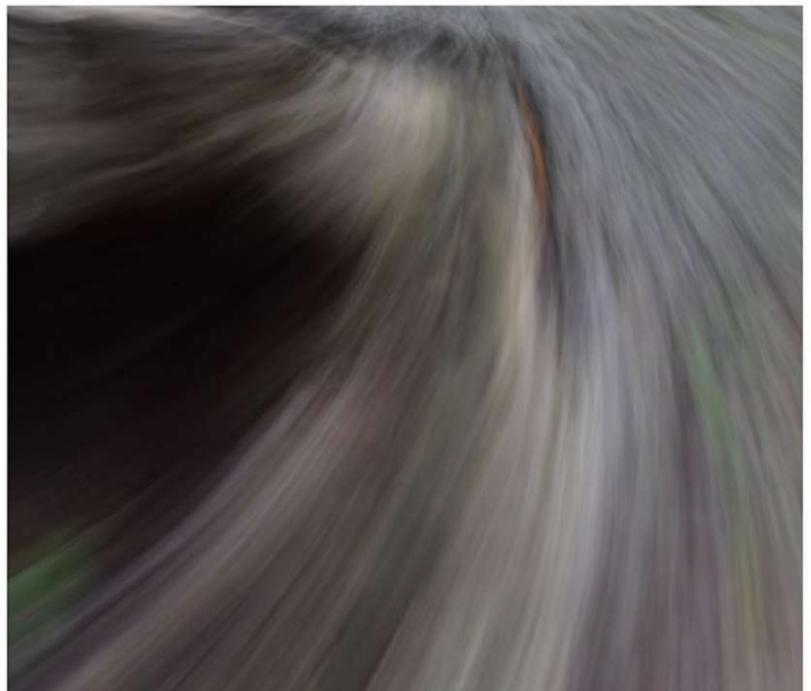
Ayelen and I have put down our cameras in the past year. Some of the most important work we do now is in the form of advocacy and activism, expanding *Becoming Sensor* into a public anthropology project supporting community-led research and earthwork. In 2017, Ayelen and I began to build relationships with an Anishinaabe Elder who was engaged in work in and around the park. In 2019 we started meeting with a circle of Elders, knowledge keepers, and community leaders around the care of the oak savannah. The [Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle](#), as this group has come to be known, includes members from Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Wyandot, Wendat, Métis, Cree, Blackfoot, Mi'kmaq, and other Nations who are involved in Indigenous land sovereignty and community work across the city. They are advocating for the restoration of Indigenous stewardship to lands across the city. In learning how to become an accomplice to the work of the Circle, I've been doing administrative, communications, and fundraising support. We have met regularly for over a year, and have worked together organizing meetings with the city, hosting actions, public events, and writing letters to multiple levels of government. Currently I'm funding a circle within the Circle, supporting Indigenous researchers and earthworkers from university grants.

Many in the Circle have been doing advocacy around earthwork, gardens, and ecological restoration for years and having a hard time getting heard. But things are changing. After the report of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) and the report of the [National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#), several Canadian cities including Toronto have made commitments to creating spaces for Indigenous peoples to have access to land for ceremony. The Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle is holding Toronto to its commitments and providing a body that this city can consult around land stewardship.

ME: Can you elaborate on the kind of strategies that you employ as a settler scholar to support decolonization? Do you have any advice to scholars who want to decolonize their research practice?

NM: One of the important teachings for me has been: Who's deciding what decolonization looks like? I have to ask: As a queer white settler what could my support of others' decolonization projects look like? I feel privileged to be surrounded by Indigenous academics, researchers, artists, Elders, and earthworkers who are enacting decolonization in the work they do, showing others what decolonization can be. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012)

affirm that decolonization is not a metaphor; it is about giving land back. What would it take for settlers to viscerally understand what this means and act on it? For me, a deep reworking of settler sensoria could support this process. *Becoming Sensor* aims to support some of the work that settler allies need to do on themselves in order to transform how they apprehend land (in both senses of the term).



Portal. Kinesthetic images by Natasha Myers, 2019.

Art can alter our ideas about what we can see, sense, feel, and know. Art making can help us recognize how colonial and limited our forms of knowing are. *Becoming Sensor* is about us developing the skills that we would need in order to render ourselves available to the work of

ally-ship; to more fully appreciate the significance of land/body relations to the people we want to be in solidarity with in a way that does not appropriate their knowledges. Ayelen and I have been detuning our settler sensoria through practices and ways of attending to the world that draw from our own genealogies and which aim to deepen our experience of the sentience of these lands. By refusing the disenchantments of a colonial and militarized science that evacuates the sentience of more-than-human beings, we aim to open up space for settlers to hear other stories about these lands. We want them to be able to appreciate the significance of the stories Indigenous peoples tell from a place of respect; this could come from having already had an experience of *land otherwise*.

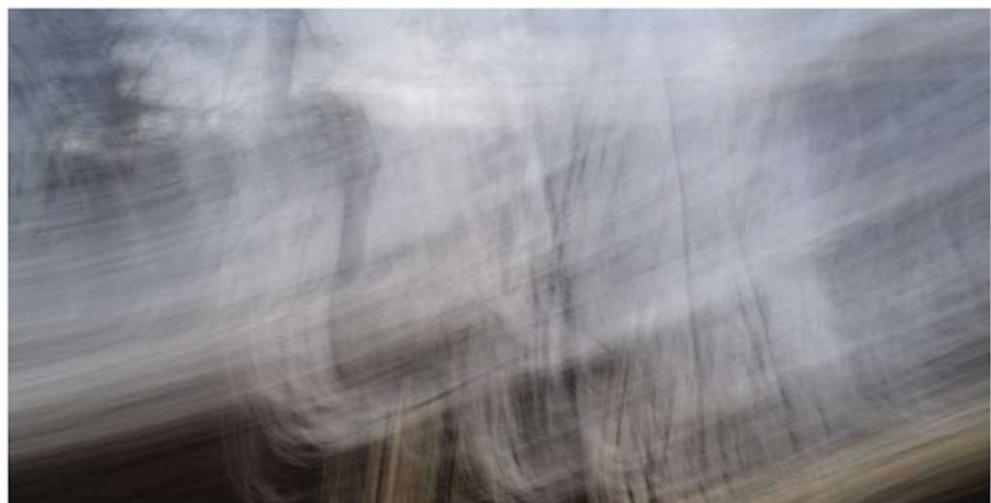
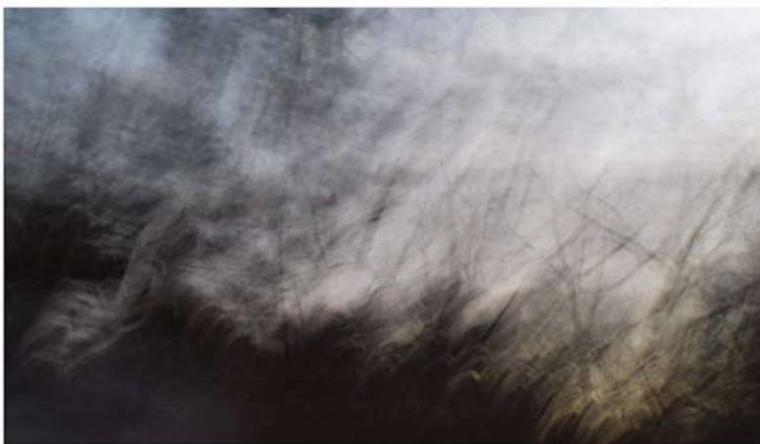
ME: Your [kinesthetic images](#) that characterize *Becoming Sensor* are enchanting: in refusing to capture a still scene, they evoke movement, gesture, and the processes of becoming. I was particularly intrigued by the textures evoked at the 2017 synesthetic installation as the kinesthetic images were projected onto hanging fabrics. Can you describe how you craft these kinesthetic images and speak to how the artistic process is generative as a research-creation practice, specifically within the discipline of anthropology?

NM: In some ways, I'm hoping that rending (pulling and bending) attentions and questions through an art project like *Becoming Sensor* can also disorient anthropology. Artistic process can upend our most taken for granted assumptions, including our disciplinary orientations. I'm really interested in the productivity of what Jacques Rancière (2009) calls dissensus—a disruption of a sense and common sense, which he sees as caught in the slumber of a normative aesthetic and post-political consensus. I like to think of art practices as forms of dissensus that can rearrange our sensoria and sense making. I think about disrupting the intention of the camera, the logic of the grid in ecology, and producing data forms that cannot be arrayed along a chart or graph, that resist quantitative analysis. *Becoming Sensor* is about disrupting modes of attention and forms of knowing about the more-than-human that are so entrenched in settler common sense. It's a kind of de-schooling, an unlearning, which can help us forget everything that we thought we knew about "nature."

Plants also provoke rethinking the senses, sensing, and sense making. People tend to think plants can't communicate because they have no eyes, ears, or mouths. We wanted to render

our bodies available to sensing plant sentience, sensing what plants are up to, how they move and grow, and tune into their sensibilities and gestures.

That attention hinges on embodying temporalities and forms of seeing and sensing that a camera is not designed to register. Unlike an ecologist, who uses an instrument to measure the amount of light that can penetrate through the canopy of the oak savannah, we're not interested in the quantity of light. We're interested in the qualities of light and the dance that's happening between the light, the moving trees and the leaves, and our moving bodies. We consider that encounter itself as a moment worth rendering, registering, and storying. Our [Protocols for Doing Ecology Otherwise](#) are about disorienting and disrupting our assumptions and expectations about the media forms well as the kinds of stories ecology can tell.





Dusk magic. Kinesthetic images by Natasha Myers, 2018 and 2019.

Crafting and reflecting on a kinesthetic image or sequence is a theoretically rich and generative process. We're mostly working with still images that we array in series in short video clips that allow us to animate our encounters. I'll sit with these artworks to propel my writing. There are so many stories that the work elicits. New vocabularies open up for me. I can get at deeper nuances and channel the words with greater clarity. I've written about this recently in a new essay called "Alchemical Cinema," which will be part of a volume that I'm co-editing with Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and Dimitris Papadopoulos (*Reactivating Elements: Substance, Actuality and Practice from Chemistry and Cosmology*, Duke University Press, forthcoming).

ME: What is the role of artistic practice in your scholarship, both past and present? How does artistic practice inspire new ways of thinking and doing anthropology otherwise?

NM: Movement has been a constant throughout all my work. A lifetime of dance has enabled me to see the world in particular, or one could say peculiar, ways. By the time I started my PhD in the anthropology of science, I had trained in dance, molecular biology, and the environmental humanities, and had thought a lot about how these fields intertwine, when I discovered all of these scientists in the field of structural biology and protein modeling relying on their moving bodies to make sense of the molecular realm. I was entranced by their bodywork as a form of knowing and mode of thought and pursued ethnographic research with them (see Myers 2015, 2020). As an anthropologist, it became clear that I couldn't just rely on my intuitions about movement—I needed an intentional technique in order to register and record the qualities, gestures, and affects that I was encountering in the field.

In 2008, I started [adanceaday](#), a 365-day research-creation project designed to invent protocols and techniques that would allow me to attend energetically and kinesthetically to all of the dances unfolding around me, the amazing choreographies that take shape between moving bodies of all kinds. In order to develop a notational technique I could use in the field, I

realized I would need to cultivate skills in a daily practice. After each dance, most of which would be unrecognizable as “dancing,” I would let a pencil fly across the page in a gesture drawing technique that aimed to transduce energetically the quality of that encounter, its movements, and affects. This produced a mnemonic image or memory device that I could return to in order to call myself back to that moment in order to write about it. This drawing modality or notational technique was an attentional practice that enabled me to register and channel movements, energies, and affects into my writing. Over the course of 365 days, my writing was transformed by this project. The words came in new ways.

I approach research-creation in anthropology as what George Marcus (2000) might call a parasite, or a site alongside one’s fieldwork. Drawing and movement, photography and video deepen my scholarly practice in interesting ways. Like *Becoming Sensor*, the aim in all this work is to cultivate a robust mode of attention that makes ethical, aesthetic, and political interventions that can disrupt conventional ways of knowing.

Artwork is an important modality for thinking about ways of altering our relationships with the plant world. I’m interested in artists around the world who engage plants to stage new relationships with them. The work that I do around gardens poses the question: How do we stage our relationships with plants (Myers 2019)? The larger question for me that ties together my research in gardens, oak savannahs, plant science laboratories, and artists’ studios is the question of how we might stage our relations with plants otherwise, to grow livable worlds rather than entrench ourselves in the ruins of the Anthropocene. A *Planthroposcene* is an aspirational episteme or scene in which we seed solidarities with the plants. In a sense, *Becoming Sensor* is just one of many modalities that could help propagate scenes of plant/people conspiracy (on conspiracy, as an act of breathing together, see Choy forthcoming).

I’m working in my own garden right now, alongside many other people around the world who have started Covid-19 gardens. Anyone who has been tending to little seedlings and watching them grow while under pandemic lockdown is learning to conspire with, breathe with, and get on side with the plants. There are *Planthroposcenes* taking root everywhere giving me some hope that we can collectively grow more liveable worlds.

ME: Why do you think people are turning to gardens during the Covid-19 pandemic? What are the opportunities of gardening in these uncertain times?

NM: This is the moment where we need the aspiration, the inspiration, the pleasure, and the incredible sense of grounding that comes with putting seeds into soil. We need this now more than ever, as we watch our food distribution systems become thwarted by this virus, as we watch massive quantities of food being wasted, milk being dumped into pits, cabbages being tilled back into the soil, and racialized and vulnerabilized migrant farm workers and meat packing workers die in Covid-19 outbreaks at poorly managed industrial facilities. Our agricultural systems are designed precisely for food insecurity and we have become deskilled in our reliance on these commodity chains. In this moment, so many of us are stuck at home, no longer able to fling our bodies and things across the planet. Those of us who are working from the comforts of our homes, not having lost our jobs or being forced to work on the front lines of this pandemic, must confront our privilege and do something meaningful with it.

Gardens grow communities. Covid-19, as ravaging and destructive as it has been, has opened up space and time for new kinds of communities to form around plants. People who never had an interest in plants before now are mesmerized watching seeds germinate and following their slow unfurling. Seed and plant exchanges are flourishing. Some cities are sending seeds, soil and containers out to communities in need, creating the conditions for people to make good on this opportunity to form solidarities with the plants. Mutual aid projects, like Grow Food Toronto, are encouraging people to liberate their lawns and “grow a row” for food banks and communities in need. As the powerful Black Lives Matter movement galvanizes the world’s attention, the spotlight is shining on outstanding [Black-led food justice projects](#) and Black farmers like [Cheyenne Sun](#) in Toronto whose farm runs training programs for BIPOC youth at risk. Forming solidarities with the plants is one way to nourish and transform human relationships. There are many ways to stage relations to plants, but it is only a *Planthroposcene* if it supports racial justice and decolonial futures. Revolutions can take root in gardens.

I’m also interested in connecting Covid gardens up with the homeschooling that’s happening under various forms of lockdown. What better time to invent a new home school curriculum to seed a *Planthroposcene* in your midst? Kitchens are a place for *Planthroposcenes* to thrive.

People are proudly posting pictures of themselves re-growing cabbages, celery, onions, beet and carrot tops from kitchen waste. We can engage all these living beings that are involved in our nourishment by replacing old-school “home economics” with a kind of *home ecologics*. *Planthroposcenes* can take root in our upturned and liberated lawns, in gardens, on a windowsill, or in a bucket on a stoop with some seeds shared among friends.

ME: I’m reminded of your work that calls for us to “[garden against Eden](#).” When turning to gardens in the time of Covid-19, how can we garden against Eden and root into the *Planthroposcene*?

NM: Gardening against Eden is the inspiration of Lois Weinberger, a plant artist in Vienna who created remarkable counter-gardens that disrupt our assumptions about gardening, gardeners, enclosures, and the aesthetic and political functions of gardens. His artwork throws into relief the deep contradictions, horrors, and spectacles of Edenic gardens like Singapore’s Gardens By the Bay (see Myers 2019). So how do we learn to garden against Edenic values? How do we learn to garden as if we are conspiring with and getting on side with the plants? How do we learn how to support their thriving and their relationships with all of their allies?

A *Planthroposcenic* garden would be a garden for seeding community among the insects, microbes, birds, animals, plants, and people. It would be a garden that serves the wider human and more-than-human ecology. A garden designed around human convenience, functionality, and control, on the other hand, is a garden for the Anthropocene, where the singular agent that matters is the human bent on extraction. Plantations and industrial farms are gardens for the Anthropocene. Anthropocenic gardens are Edenic enclosures, reproducing estranged and alienated relations between and among humans and plants. To garden against Eden would be to disrupt these enclosures and rearrange the relations between plants and people.

ME: What’s next for *Becoming Sensor* as you root in the *Planthroposcene*?

NM: I’m working on a book tentatively titled *Rooting into the Planthroposcene: Seeding Plant/People Conspiracies to Grow Liveable Worlds* that expands on “[How to Grow Liveable](#)

[Worlds: Ten Not-So-Easy Steps](#)” (see also Myers 2018). There will be chapters on gardening against Eden, ungrid-able ecologies, detuning scientific and settler common sense, and making art to seed plant/people conspiracies. It’s been a real pleasure to be weaving together all my work on plants over the past ten years!

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