

The Feminist Poetics of Creatureliness

Jess Weitz and Angie Willey, 2024

A feminist poetics of creatureliness draws on many traditions – a feral collection (Mel Chen) of narrative resources – loosely informing a practice-oriented worldview that centers on something like “healing.” These narrative resources include embodied, spiritual, and political ways of knowing that can’t easily be teased apart. As a starting point, we might say a feminist poetics of creatureliness reflects knowledge of the multidimensionality of being, the interconnectedness of different lives and forms of life, and a valuation of “work” towards more gentle/ethical relating and more just forms of relation.

The “poetic” is juxtaposed here to the “scientific.” Conversations about the visceral nature of embodiment often tend towards reductionist storytelling about “the human” or “life.” These stories more often than not naturalize the status quo and reinforce dichotomies between nature and culture, body and mind, matter and magic.

We open with a conversation that moves into collaborative querying and finally an offering of precepts informing a dynamic, evolving curriculum in progress.

I, Angie, am a dyke of a certain age. Herbalist friends are usually my first calls for medical advice. “Energy” is part of the everyday lexicon I use to think about what’s going on and to attune to those around me. I’ve been in therapy with brilliant feminist trauma specialists and skilled somatic practitioners over the last two decades and engage in multi-sensory practices to regulate my nervous system everyday. This has kept me alive and awake and capable of arriving to do my work, in both the capitalist and Lordean senses.

Still, talking about bodies is risky business. We’re trapped in the language of knowledge-systems developed to make domination seem inevitable. For example, the separation of being into “psyche” and “soma” perpetuates harm *and* attempts to narrate their “relationship” are frequently weaponized against poor, Black, femme, queer/trans, and disabled folx. Pharmaceutical companies kill for profit and play an outsized role in defining “health” *and* accessing pharmaceuticals is a privilege for many (and for others sometimes the only help accessible). The privatization of wealth and care keeps expanding disparities *and* we can’t trust the state to do what families are expected to, either. The planet is on fire (it’s 95 degrees Fahrenheit here in Carolina, PR in late October 2024 for instance) *and* activists were saying over-consumption in some places was killing people in other places long before the cottage industry of climate science emerged in the places causing the problem (Wu). Critiquing the knowledge systems that contain

our imaginations is insufficient for transformation and at the same time stories about being and embodiment with the potential to upend dominant narratives often reinforce universalizing and individualizing understandings of human nature.

A poetics of creatureliness speaks to a world of storytelling schemas that help us to make sense of what we are and need without elevating one to the status of a Truth that would foreclose others. It allows us to lightly hold ways of knowing that contribute to “livingness.” (McKittrick) Comprehensiveness is not the goal. The goal is rather to make space for a redistribution of epistemic authority that allows us to access and play with narrative resources and practices that may contribute to material transformation towards more just relations.

There is a queer feminist diasporic knowledge, a dyke science¹ if you will, that informs how I live and how I orient to understanding bodies in/and our worlds (FN: Huffer, McKittrick, me). In other words, I think about being, belonging, embodiment, and suffering in the ways I do because of the people I’ve made home, community, safety, trouble, and love with. The humans I’ve protested and attended meetings with, fucked or made out with, danced and flirted with, cared for children with, plotted and planned and organized with, written letters, articles, poems, lists, rituals, recipes, and banners with, laughed and read and cooked and grieved with have contributed to my deep felt sense that our creatureliness - and how we understand our creatureliness - matters to movement work.

I’ve been learning to trust in secret and it’s impacting my work. It’s changing my work. I’ve been working with the concept of “intuition” in a practice-oriented way. I’ve been learning that while nothing is outside of history and everything is dangerous, Foucault’s offering that dangerous isn’t exactly the same thing as bad can be read as a spiritual teaching. And when Lorde said the erotic has been reduced to the pornographic (into and out of the same early 80s queer air) she was naming the harmful containment and control of the vastness of our creatureliness into a racist heteropatriarchal narrative about what we are (types of genders/races/humans, oriented to the reproduction of our selves/species). Foucault and Lorde, cherished queer teachers, both drawing on their own experiences as political activists, writers, lovers, and “abnormals,” both invested in the potentiality of relations that don’t resemble family, called us to theorize this excess, this eros.

At some point, deep in grief, the soft animal of my body slipped off a tight leash and I surrendered to something. I couldn’t power through or think my way to where I wanted to be. I became ravenous for resources that helped me accept what I couldn’t control, for real, and survive. I started painting and telling my heartbreak to the trees and praying without knowing to what. I got into candle magic and let myself be parented by the moon.

¹ Angie is working on a book project titled “dyke science”

When I met Jess (as an expressive arts teacher), I had begun thinking through the lens of “interdisciplinary biologies” and exploring ways of expanding archives of evidence about what we are and what we need. I invited Jess to explore with me the content of something like a feminist poetics of creatureliness. Because she is a poet and an artist and a channeler of energies who inspires and challenges me. Because I have learned new ways to think/feel with her as my teacher, guide, and comrade. Because our senses of some things we want to say/offer/practice seem aligned in ways we’re still finding words for.

And I, Jess (an artist, poet, somatic facilitator, mother, witch, meditator, contemplative, ecophile on a mountain in Vermont), began to wonder as Angie and I talked...

Is the pathologizing of sensitivities a modern act of self-destruction, linked to our climate crisis?
Is our contentment, our joy, and our survival linked to our embodiment?

Is our inherent but devalued intuition and heart centered ‘knowing’ the antithesis of a reductive world of repression in the forms of patriarchy, racism and capitalism?

Over time have we traded our super-powers for earning power, endless objects filling the landfill, and a restless mind obsessively scrolling on a disembodied screen?

What do you do with these fleeting days? What do you seek? What is it that your body truly desires? What is your dream for tomorrow? Your vow to life?

Early this morning I got into my car with our two dogs to go for a walk around a pond in our small hilltown. As I was driving down the dirt road, I noticed a fuzzy white caterpillar attached to the hood. I slowed down a bit in the hopes the creature could stay put until I stopped. The creature gripped and wiggled in the 25 mile an hour wind. When the car came to a stop, I lifted the bug off the car and into the grass, hoping it had more life to live.

At 8am on a Thursday in September, the pond is devoid of human presence, apart from the artifacts of silent kayaks and paddleboards piled along the water, a few picnic benches and wood buildings. The call of the loon moves along the still water. There is a faint orange glow to the sunlight from forest fires in Canada.

My body moves along the narrow and knobby pathway that circumnavigates the pond. Leaves from the underbrush sweep across my skin. I watch the dogs move on and off the path following scents and leaving markers of their own. Aware of the moderate moisture in the dirt, the fluttering of birds, and the feeling of the earth against my feet. I notice that I move between

being present to my senses and thinking about whether I might incorporate this walk into the writing I will do later in the day. When I am thinking I cannot recall any observations over the 500 feet I have traveled. I come back to the feeling of roots tangled across the ground on my feet, the moss layers, a couple mushrooms.

The water beacons me with the heat of the morning sun on my furless skin. My bare body is surprised how prickly the grass feels. My skin's surface responds to the breeze moving across the water in rippling waves. I reach down to pick a delightfully small sorrel blossom and taste its sourness. Slipping into the pond, cooling and caressing my muscles and mind. Entangled in lily pad stalks and accompanied by the hiccuping chorus of frogs along the grassy edges.

My body knows so much it has never been asked

"I am most aware of my creatureliness when it brings me to my knees" I respond viscerally to these words Angie spoke one day in conversation. My body conjures the spaces of writhing in pain from chronic migraines, in the dark cave of my room; bleeding so heavily I cannot leave the house; the wild eyed erotic agony of childbirth; holding my young daughter in a feral state of a meltdown; disoriented in the desert wilderness, tired with no more water; panic at the isolation as the roads wash away in all directions, with no power for days; and walking together through the grief of cancer, suicide and terminal illness with other humans

wild spaces

stop looking up at the sky
lower your eyes to the field
the planetary miracle of
amniotic emergence

wet soil smell
our mother's breath
reach up to touch your face
and know everything
retrograde to old technologies

snow is the sound
of the cloud people talking
trickling stream water
recounts their memories
plants giggle

as humans walk by
clay soils calendar is eons

yes my dear
we are hurtling through space
but never alone
the times are urgent
let us slow down

“In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.”

– Shunryo Suzuki

We humans have available to us two layers of reality at all times - the historic and the infinite. The historic is our self of human identities and the circumstances of our times. Our race, gender, jobs, nationality, family members, and politics all inform our lived experience, opinions, and trauma. This realm is where action, justice, determination, and also victimhood take place. And where we scream “How do I survive these times? How do I live with this suffering?”

Our creatureliness is not a metaphor. Homosapien is an animal species, not particularly distinct on the tree of life, except for our colossal influence on the planet. It only takes a few hours, naked in the woods, to feel our animal pleasure and vulnerability. Our breath (this is elementary school science, not woo-woo) is mostly nitrogen that originated from primordial space rubble and oxygen generated by plant life. We eat plant life and animal life to survive. Our bodies, if given the chance after death, turn back into building blocks for other carbon life forms. How do we touch this layer of our beingness that connects us to all life forms? The animal body can be viewed as an ever changing micro ecosystem, just like a planet. The carbon that we call ‘tree’ is a temporary form. These same elements can morph over time into dirt, worm, bird, human, cloud, water, etc... a constant shifting of living and dying, generating waste to create more life. Every second we humans are alive we are inhaling oxygen from the beginning of time and drinking water that originated in space.

But let’s push this further and question our confidence in distinct species or individuals. Like all other life forms, we contain multitudes. Cohabiting and hosting thousands of distinct life forms, from the over 10,000 that live in symbiosis within our frame and the thousands more we

communicate with in an intimate web of relationship with those around us. There is this concept brought forward by Dojen (early Buddhist philosopher) in his Shobogenzo Uji that time and beingness is one - essentially that we are verbs not nouns. All beings are collections of causes and conditions. This concept has far reaching implications for the 'inter-being' nature of living beings and human care in areas of poverty, human violence, illness, incarceration, and environmental issues.

Are the words 'love' and 'imagination' in fact the felt sense of our inter-being with all life? Children are more keenly aware of their imaginal love affair and dance with other life forms, and whole other realms of tangible existence. But this allurement is not an invitation to dissociation. We must learn to hold both realms of 'these times' and 'all time' simultaneously. If one of our goals is to mitigate violence in all its forms, then it is imperative to engage in the infinite and sensual in the midst of cultural pain - otherwise we run the risk of inflicting the same damage over and over through our righteousness of disembodied ideas (and the reverse is true too). Imagination that is committed to transformative change rather than mere adaptation can escape the limitations of depoliticization.

Harm occurs when we place a life outside of the matrix. The word 'matrix' shares its root with matter (mater) and mother. The word matrix originally meant uterus or pregnant mother. Creatureliness is encapsulated in a web of being that emanates from this planet. This concept is a central principle in kinship worldviews. When human society 'others', or marginalizes, a group of people based on belief, gender, ethnicity, they are essentially saying that this group is 'outside of the matrix', outside of the care a creature's needs, justifying the violence of war and poverty. One of the roles of artists, activists, and spiritual mentors, and we can hope politicians one day, is to offer insight into the arrogance of this patriarchal, domination model, reminding us all of the law of the mother/earth/nature.

In the history of 'whiteness', referring to another race or person as 'an animal' is ironically dehumanizing. Slaves referred to as beasts of burden. People of color historically referred to as apes, lice, and vermin.. Our political landscape is charged with alarm at a race's 'infestation' or the urgent need to 'hunt them down'. Our more personal insults of calling someone a snake, a pig, a dog, or a cow invoke someone less-than human. These derogatory animal terms are collectively reflective of the cultural lens that connects a hierarchy that extends from animals to human races.

"We don't need another hero, but we do need all the reparented warriors, weirdos, and witches we can gather."- Chani, astrologer and social activist

Writer Sophie Strand writes beautifully into the agony of our creatureliness, “People – disabled people like me – were dying in ICUs across the country [during the pandemic]. Disabled people the country over were realizing once again how foundational eugenics and ableism are to our country’s ideas of progress and profit. Rupture. Rupture. Rupture. The ashes kept multiplying. The fires never spat out phoenixes. No. They consumed lives and spit out splinters of inanimate bone. When would I resurrect? I kept waiting. Stirring the coals.”

What if we move from the place of one collective tissue of living matter that flows like water...what if a guiding truth lives in a non-binary space beyond our dualistic concepts? “The capacities we discover become the knowing to which we must always remain accountable”, Audre Lorde insists, adding that they don’t need to be called “god or marriage or the afterlife.” This elusive us-ness, this post-positivist embodied knowing/being/livingness – conjured in descriptions of our bodies, pleasures, capacities, senses – is what we’re calling a feminine poetics of creatureliness.

Why is this exploration important, as we live amidst a climate collapse, intense social and economic inequality, a rise in facism, mental health crisis, and rise in genocides? We invite a fundamental shift in our worldview which is necessary to come into a different relationship with other humans and all life forms.

This worldview offers on the following premises -

All life forms, from single celled organisms to complex plants and animals, have a physical form and consciousness, that is both individual and collective.

We accept a kin-centric animistic and biocentric model with the earth and acknowledge an equal relationship of co-existence.

We say to the microbes and invisible life forms, “I am because of you”

We have dozens of senses and ways of interacting and perceiving the web of life. ‘Spiritual aspects’ of living beings are not cast aside but understood as the unseen aspects of the physical form.

We center value and trust in all life forms, understanding our entanglement, and feel love and joy from being held in this web of life.

As we try on these ways of moving through life, with much longer indigenous roots than our current cultural belief system, we see how deeply we are in conflict. Large scale agriculture, factory farming, capitalism driven land management, animal testing, chemical and biological drugs and weapons, societal constructs of norms, dominance of one race or species over another to name a few. Like Alexis Pauline Gumms so eloquently states as her intention in the book Undrowned, “The intimacy, the intentional ambiguity about who is who, speaking to whom and when is about undoing a definition of human, which is so tangled in separation and domination that it is consistently making our lives incompatible with the planet.” Can we invite our intuitive and heart centered knowing, the antithesis of a reductive world of repression, into the classroom, boardroom, and congressional floor?

A willingness to feel the death in life, the chaos, the nonsense which is the truth of reality, a non-relative moral truth not a human centered truth - not the paradigms of separation, comfort/safety, control. We return to a space of direct revelation of the sensorium.