Nested Bodies (or A Small and Careful Spoonful)

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This short paper refers to a project involving the development of a material fermentation practice into a process-led research praxis, wherein themes of embodiment and the relational bodily self are explored through direct contact with nonhuman agents. Theory and concepts borrowed from an Okanagan perspective of the body, as related through its language by scholar and land speaker Jeannette Armstrong, as well as from interaction design and a rich lineage of embodied researchers and practitioners, contribute to a re-framing of the human as a body dependent on others in the life-making activities of preparing, feeding, and eating the ferments. This paper reflects on the service, uncertainty, and accountability taken on by drawing on these lineages and implicating the body in the work, and makes the case for allowing the final outcome to remain a process of ongoing relations and accountabilities.

embodied design research, fermentation, relationality

A Small and Careful Spoonful

Pull the brown paper bag of flour out of the cupboard. Unfurl the crumpled neck of the bag, and flick it so the dust just inside its edge is loosed and settles, so that when you reach your hand inside to scoop a rough cup of flour, less of it ends up on your wrist, hand, and counter. You’ve already tipped some of the pasty, unfed sourdough starter from its jar; its heavy appearance and sticky texture tell you it’s ready to be fed, replenished with flour and water to consume and bring its population of yeasts (and other fermenters, such a various lactobacilli) back into balance, and its smell back to bread.

In its current state, even though you fed it yesterday, it smells faintly of wet old towels, or maybe socks. You missed a few days before that (end-of-term paper was due), and she clearly hasn’t recovered. You wonder if you’re a fit...fermenter? Parent? Co-life-maker? Human? All those little flour-hungry yeasts are
doing their job in there and here you are, forgetting to do your part because you’re so caught up in your arbitrary human doings (papers, Zoom calls, Netflix series).

Dump the flour into the jar on top of the small bit of starter left in the bottom. If things are really dire, maybe you’ve had to give her a fresh start in a new jar: re-seeding a small and careful spoonful that seems the least grey, or green, or pink, onto a fresh mound of fragrant flour. At least you got her the good stuff this time, ordered fresh from a local mill, instead of one of the sad, ripped bags left behind in the COVID-ransacked flour shelves at the grocery store.

Turn on the kitchen faucet and let the lukewarm water run over your wrist, testing its temperature like you would freshly heated milk for a baby. You measure about the same amount of water as you measured flour, pour it in, and stir. Work out all of those little dry clumps that she seems to struggle with. Put her lid loosely back on, and up she goes to her spot on top of the old refrigerator, whose fan is chugging warm air up and over the curved belly of her jar.

Check again in a couple hours: is she eating? Does she accept your offering, your methods? Has she grown to a confident, doughy-smelling froth, or remained a sad, pale jar-bottom of wet concrete—a sure sign the human side of things has once again come up short in its duties. Sigh of relief—she is effervescent, winking at you from a level four times what she was, blowing bubbles like a toddler in a bathtub, smelling like a tiny pizza party. You’ve learned how to smell, see and taste her contentedness and her distress, and today she seems to be ok. Making bread or pancakes for yourself now seems superfluous. Besides, you’ve already promised today’s discard—the portion of starter you removed before feeding—to a friend. Better feed that one now too, so it’s in fine form by the time your friend drops by for a masked, outdoors exchange in the muddy front yard of your building. That way they’ll think you’re maybe a better sourdough mom than you are, that you maybe know what you’re doing.

Tomorrow will be the same (for goodness’ sake don’t forget to feed her tomorrow). Scoop dump measure pour stir smell sit hover check wonder and check again, and see if she decides to keep sticking (and sticky-ing) it out with you, alone together in your lockdown apartment.

Figures 1 (left) & 2 (right): Sourdough starters which lived alongside me during 2019-2021.
Nested Bodies

The previous section offers a small window to my experience of a material practice in an at-home fermentation lab (my kitchen), the core activity of a master of design project during 2019-2021 (Van Oyen, 2021). I borrowed and adapted embodied research methodologies, and conducted other exploratory work, such as drawings, sensory sketches, and practitioner narratives (Van Oyen, 2021). In addition to the sourdough starters, I also worked with lacto-fermented vegetables and yogurt, with similarly varying results and feelings throughout the process.

In the story above, I personify ‘her’, bestowing human gender, emotions and reactions upon one of my starters; in actuality, the ferments have been quite opaque to me. Their subtle fluctuations seem entirely on their own schedules. They are in reaction to, but not necessarily proportional to, my own actions, and subject to wide swings despite my best efforts. Increasingly clear through the work, however, is its effects upon myself and my larger design practice. Enacting ongoing, repetitive service to an enigmatic mix of bacteria, molds, yeasts, food substrate and water, “[brings] to mind thoughts of nested relations between my sensing and working body, its microbes, and those of the land I am on, the ambient air, the watershed, and the other human bodies who worked with the ferments before me” (Van Oyen, 2021, p. 18). From the words of Okanagan scholar and land speaker Jeannette Armstrong (1995), relating an awareness in which of all of these relationships are held at once, and in perpetuity:

> We also refer to the land and our bodies with the same root syllable. This means that the flesh which is our body is pieces of the land come to us through the things which the land is. The soil, the water, the air, and all other life-forms contributed part to be our flesh.

A material fermentation practice holds implications for one’s experience of being a subjective, perceiving body embedded in the world, with others: working every day in the way described above, I was fundamentally altered. The microbiome of my skin and gut adapted to the closeness and exchange with the ferments (Dunn, 2018). My sensory system became attuned to their nuanced fluctuations, developing a bodily familiarity through smell, taste, and touch, indicating the state of the relationships between their microbial constituents (Hey, 2017). In this way, my sense of mind-body separation was completely changed, as the work builds and engages knowledge which is not centralized in the analytical mind. Ideas of human exceptionalism within interactions and making have also been destabilized: “the human is not the only maker, nor the only eater, of this process” (Van Oyen, 2021, p. 25).

Bodies of Work

The approach to bodies as living land-forms, as related by Armstrong (1995, 2002), is important to this project on a conceptual level (as described above), as well as a personal one. In borrowing from Armstrong’s words and Okanagan worldview, I become accountable to them. This is especially true due to having been born on, formed and fed by the exact lands Armstrong refers to (the unceded and traditional territories of the Okanagan Peoples), and living as an uninvited guest on unceded Coast Salish lands during the course of the project. Furthermore, calling in embodied research and its methodologies, and just the body in general, makes me accountable to a deep and rich lineage of researchers and practitioners who have shaped the field, many of whom take queer, nonwhite, nonwestern, non-ableist and non-healthist perspectives (see Berrigan, 2014; brown, 2019; Lorde, 1984/2020; Pinto, 2020; Simpson, 2017). Reading and referring to them makes me accountable to practice in less productionist, hierarchical, and oppressive ways. Calling this lineage into the work creates (at the very least) a responsibility to not treat the body or other beings as products, and to never assume that all bodies may experience practice in remotely the same ways. Thus, there is greater
imperative to not produce a unifying product, service, system, manifesto, or set of principles, but to allow the work to remain a process of building relationships (Brown, 2017). This is not to say that my efforts necessarily accomplish this, but that they—and I—remain accountable anyway.

My positionality as a white, settler, able-bodied, cis-gendered, Academy- and Industry-approved design researcher in the Global North offers some specific ways in which I am responsible to contribute to the detaching of design from the values and beliefs of a production-focused “patriarchal capitalist Modernity” (Design Research Society). It renders me to be in a position more easily recognizable to the gatekeepers and rules of acceptance to spaces such as conferences, journals, jobs, and degrees. I think this means I have a greater responsibility to enact work/process that may not be fully recognizable, rather than adhering to and perpetuating the highly-productive and structured patterns of the typical design project.

**Becoming, Being**

I undertook this project as an interaction designer interested in stripping away any digital mediators (such as the fermentation and citizen science applications I had designed previously) between human, microbes, and others involved in the process of fermentation. In *Thoughts on Interaction Design*, John Kolko (2011) offers a definition of interaction design as the “creation of a dialogue between a person and a product, system, or service” (p. 15). According to Donella Meadows (1993), a system must consist of three kinds of things: elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose”. Taking an ecosystem as an example, these elements may be living (or nonliving) beings, and their entangled dependencies for life may be considered purposeful interconnections (Van Oyen, 2021). Furthermore, as described by interaction designer Kristina Höök (2018), interaction design takes into account wide-ranging considerations such as aesthetics, motion, sound, space, time, subjective experience, and behaviour (2018). Thus, the moving, sensing and perceiving body may be considered as much the material of interaction design as are digital tools and systems, and interaction design may concern itself with dialogues between bodies and ecosystems.

The creation of the dialogue itself, and its placement as a matter of concern in interaction design, matters. It is a process worth exploring, despite possibly not culminating in an easily definable ‘designed outcome’. It has become clear that implementing this project as a business-as-usual design project would be “oriented by a one-way anthropocentric temporality” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) which seems inappropriate for the relationships being built. If a dialogue is like a story, perhaps it can be looked at from a perspective like that of Ursula Le Guin’s (1989) *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. Rather than a linear arc, to be tracked like an arrow through the air, ending in a triumphant kill—as in the case of Le Guin’s (1989) Hero mammoth hunters—or cleanly resolved product or service, what if it were a container? What if it were simply an old canning jar with thoughts and ideas and regular people and beings and dependencies tumbling around inside? A set of doings and relatings “full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations...” (Le Guin, 1989).

This project isn’t finished; it hasn’t converged. The work keeps thickening, and keeps implicating me in relation to more beings, and ever thicker lineages of thought and practice. It is important that I remain faithful to them, and describe the project as it is—a tangled and slow building of relationships between bodies and beings in ways that have already been practiced by others. The material practice exists within a modest setup and a domestic context, and thus I cannot claim that it may have far-reaching impacts in other contexts, nor that it may solve large and systemic problems. It has, however, re-affirmed the idea that we are made from our relatings with each other (Haraway, 2016). As related in
the thesis document, awkwardly written and presented in what felt like the middle of a much bigger story, “[i]t has been less about doing and creating, than becoming, being” (Van Oyen, 2021).

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About the Author:

**Julie Van Oyen** (she/her) is a designer, researcher, educator, and recent graduate from the Master of Design program at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, which is situated on the unceded territories of the the xwma8kw-wəy̓am (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səll̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. She is the daughter of Dutch, Scottish and English settlers and immigrants, and was raised among the pines on the unceded territories of the Sqilxʷ/Syilx (Okanagan) Peoples. Growing, living, working, and learning as an uninvited guest on those sacred lands has deeply influenced Julie’s design practice, wherein she explores embodied knowledge & design, more-than-human interactions, and public sector digital service design. In particular, she hopes to honour and serve the land, its Indigenous caretakers, and the interconnected, caring, and complex relations of all who live upon it (human and nonhuman). She also gratefully acknowledges the deep and rich contributions of the BIPOC and queer communities on her design education and work, in particular on collaborative projects during her master’s degree. Her work presented at this conference is a direct result of the influence of these communities’ transformative knowledge, methodologies, and organizing.