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**ATTENTIVE AND APPRECIATIVE: DESIGNERS  
CONNECTING WITH MORE-THAN-HUMAN BEINGS**

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## **ATTENTIVE AND APPRECIATIVE: DESIGNERS CONNECTING WITH MORE-THAN-HUMAN BEINGS**

### INTRODUCTION

This essay considers a design student project that practised methods and languages for connecting designers with the more-than-human. The term refers to ecologist David Abram's phrase "the more-than-human world" as a way of considering our entanglement with earthly nature.<sup>1</sup> Alongside ecological thinking, we drew upon New Zealand Māori and Canadian First Nation scholars and worked with local cultural advisors. This project was offered across two design classes, beginning with one in Vancouver, Canada, and the other in Dunedin, New Zealand, with a six-week synchronous window.<sup>2</sup> These schools connected through DESIS, a network of labs that research social innovation and sustainability. Teachers and students were able to share their approaches and progress online, culminating in an online exhibition and conversation. Key ideas explored included Karl Wixon's "whakapapa-centred design"<sup>3</sup> and Robin Wall-Kimmerer's "grammar of animacy,"<sup>4</sup> indigenous values that centre the natural world as sentient and present with the world of humans. Students were tasked with becoming advocates for a more-than-human being. They drew upon multiple frames to learn about this being and conceive of possible different relationships. After conducting a series of immersive research activities including meditative, phenomenological and academic approaches, students drew upon their design skills to translate and share their learning. The outcomes are a variety of prototypes, designed to share this advocacy as experiences for others. Through a combination of online and embodied learning, many explorations brought to light understandings about the fundamental interconnectedness of humans with the earth, with all species and with each other.

## BEGINNINGS

This project began, as many do, with a conversation.

Conversations can collect thoughts. They require two or more participants and require attentive listening and appreciative reflection. Communication with open intention is inclusive of multiple perspectives and understandings. Time and space open up through skillful listening and attention. Thich Nhat Hanh identifies that “[t]o listen is first of all to be fully present and not distracted.”<sup>5</sup> In this course, students developed abilities to be attentive and fully present to the life force in another being, shifting their attention and communication, “maybe just 20° away from what we have been taught to seek, to bring attention to the living earth; to forests, ravens and ground squirrels.”<sup>6</sup> This shift affirms that more-than-human beings have much to offer to design conversations.

This project brought together design students across the Pacific Ocean, from Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, Canada, to Otago Polytechnic School of Design in Dunedin, New Zealand. Both schools were united through their common relationship in the DESIS Network, where research labs are dedicated to exploring social innovation for sustainability. The project drew together texts and experiences, local indigenous advice and our worlds around us; we endeavored to listen together appreciatively, reflect and use our design tools and languages to share and communicate our relationships with others.

Two texts framed the shared project. Robin Wall-Kimmerer’s essay “Learning the Grammar of Animacy”<sup>7</sup> describes the author’s experience learning her indigenous language, and with it new relationships to the natural world, in constant vibrant flux, in states of being and becoming. Wall-Kimmerer combined perspectives from science with her grounding in the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She shared multiple understandings of her sense of place and belonging in these worlds. She made connections between the traditional Potawatomi language and the biological world, as she integrated new learning made available to her through the vocabulary and grammar of her native tongue. At first, in frustration, she describes the limitations imposed by the predominant use of nouns in the English language. Nouns remove life, reducing nature to “things.” Most of the words in her Potawatomi language are verbs ... “to be a hill” or “to be a bay.”<sup>8</sup> These places are defined by their animate qualities, and only become perceived as fixtures in a landscape when considered in English, as nouns. Wall-Kimmerer describes her epiphany when she identified the difference that verbs allowed her in terms of perception:

In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift onto the sand. A bay is a noun only if the water is dead. When “bay” is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores, and contained by the word. But *wiikegama*, to be a bay, the verb releases the water from bondage and lets it live.<sup>9</sup>

Through breathing life back into her language Wall-Kimmerer is breathing life back into her world. This changes our conversation, too, as she asks us to use language and active thoughts as we consider our natural worlds. For instance, she suggests that we replace the use of “it” with “she, he, or they” when referring to natural beings.<sup>10</sup> We encouraged this practice by example. For instance, we would say in reference to lichen, “She lives on the rocks.” Or, about a tree, “His roots are fed by the mitochondria.” By adopting this phrasing, students found themselves in more intimate relationship with their beings.

Founder of Māori Design Society Ngā Aho, Karl Wixon's article "Whakapapa-centred design"<sup>11</sup> was read alongside Wall-Kimmerer's text, and also contributed to students' conversations through their reading and reflection. Wixon identified indigenous Māori values and protocols (tikanga) and how these connect people and place and can also be read as a necessary approach to design: "Whakapapa' is generally translated in English as genealogy, but it is much wider and deeper and is at the very heart of Māori ontology and identity. It connects people and place in an inseparable way."<sup>12</sup>

As we began a project that required students to engage directly with their environment in order to forge social connections, these indigenous wisdom stories were a reminder to respect the important relationships that have been forged before us, during the times of our earliest ancestors arriving and becoming.

But Wixon's knowledge, like Wall-Kimmerer's, also proposed methods. "When we anchor design in whakapapa and tikanga, we open up all of our senses, we view people, place and environment as inseparable and interdependent, we engage deeply in ways that form enduring bonds, commitments and sense of consequence."<sup>13</sup>

This sense of deep social connection and understanding of consequence that Wixon describes leads naturally to greater care in design. We regularly reminded the students to avoid extractive and exploitative approaches, such as harvesting materials to make artefacts, and to take care that insights from nature would not be operationalised in utilitarian contexts. Wixon cautioned as well that we not "extract natural resources with no sense of consequence or intergenerational effect."<sup>14</sup> These approaches need to be held at the centre of design practice, building non-extractive relationships that are inclusive and respectful of all beings.

We reached out to our local indigenous advisors to help us learn appropriate and respectful ways. In New Zealand this approach is considered within a bicultural conversation, encompassing the two cultures – indigenous Māori (First Nations) and non-Māori or Pākehā – who formed a co-governance treaty in 1840. Ron Bull<sup>15</sup> describes how we have come to know each other's ways, and through this ongoing conversation have opened up a third cultural space. He spoke online to our students about his identity and connections to his own whakapapa, as Māori, from the southern islands of New Zealand. These narratives, he adds, may be part fact and part story, but he is certain of their implications, of his connections and responsibilities toward the landscapes – mountain and river, the islands and the birds – that he is connected to through his whakapapa. He also talked about his experiences of meeting First Nation people in British Columbia, and the connections he made – forging connections across the ocean.

In British Columbia, things are more complex. This Canadian province is home to almost 200 First Nation communities, with over 36 dialects spoken. Among these Nations there are many overlapping forms of ritual, grounding, respect and greeting, but there are also different cultural ways. We cannot refer to a singular indigenous culture. In Canada, indigenous reconciliation has only just begun, and the infusion of indigenous wisdom into academia is not as far along as it is in New Zealand. Indigenous Advisor Connie Watts<sup>16</sup> impressed upon us an understanding that seemed to be central among many First Nations: that everything is comprised of energy. The energy might be slow, as in a rock or mountain, but it is always moving, movable, and can be heard; this energy, whatever manifestation it might appear as, is all the same. Everything is alive. In these

teachings, Connie made it clear that modernity's notion that sentience is restricted to humans and animals is inaccurate. All beings, including trees, rivers and mountains are sentient. "Everything is one," she said.

As part of her pedagogy, Connie led the Canadian group through several circle conversations in which she brought each person 'into the room' by inviting responses to a series of personal questions in turn, such as "Where are you from? Who are your ancestors? What do you love about this project?" This intimate conversational format left a legacy for the class. Circle conversations featured largely in later meetings and class discussions, and even replaced design critique. The classroom, whether virtual or in person, became a place to unravel questions and offer support for one another. This form of engaged pedagogy eases pathways for new and sometimes unsettling learning.

## OUR PROJECT

In our 2021 project, Canadian students were in lockdown, most working – and attending our online classes – from home. In 2022 the opposite was true, and this time New Zealand students were working at home through pandemic conditions, while Canadians were at last free to meet at design school and work in their studios. The online nature of the project was able to bridge our varying conditions and although many were home-bound, the core of this international exchange was a deep focus on the local. Even those with restricted travel conditions could walk outside their home and find evidence of nature with their first step. This brought new agents to our online conversation, and both familiar and unfamiliar species to our collective work. Although our classes coincided for six weeks, the Emily Carr semester had started six weeks before their Otago counterparts. These students began on their path in advance and were able to mentor and demonstrate their approaches and understandings as their peers in Otago approached the project.

As mentioned above, the project began with a conversational approach, as students were tasked with developing a social relationship with a more-than-human being. The term refers to ecologist David Abram's phrase "the more-than-human world"<sup>17</sup> as a way of considering our entanglement with earthly nature. Designers explore many different methods and processes in relation with people, nature, materials, forms and artefacts. In this project, we focus on how this can be considered a conversation in Donald Schön's terms. Schön described this approach as "a reflective conversation with the situation."<sup>18</sup> Each situation is unique, complex and uncertain, and must be continually reframed, requiring reflective action, which is the basis of a conversation. In this conversation, the situation "talks back."<sup>19</sup>

In this way, speaking and listening takes place between designer and material, designer and sketch model, and between models and sketches themselves, with increasing complexity. Bringing the animate world into this conversation opens an additional dimension that requires a new skill set for designers, one that rests largely, as we noted earlier, on building new listening skills. How long must we sit with a tree to hear her words? What does she have to say about this day? A process that was already very dynamic became increasingly emergent, and at times out of the control of the designers. This, we speculate, is a good thing. The natural world has been degraded for centuries due to the modern impulse for control.<sup>20</sup> To not be in control means to engage in wholehearted spiritedness with an otherness that has integral rights and agency. It also has mystery.

The design brief asked students to learn first through their bodies – in Wixon’s terms “to open up all their senses.”<sup>21</sup> This required apprehension, appealing to their being, becoming available physically in their world, in a phenomenological sense. The project began with roaming outside. Students can’t start this project in front of a screen. They need to physically relocate outside of the classroom to identify a possible project partner, all the while remaining open to different ways of feeling, listening and ‘being with.’ As Kimmerer said, “Listening in wild places, we witness conversation in a language that is not our own.”<sup>22</sup> This took a leap of faith initially, but in order to participate in what Lynch and Mannion identify as “ongoing reciprocal response-making,”<sup>23</sup> learners and educators must first become attentive. Through this process, most students became aware of their entanglement with other beings.

These early conversations were attentive to the centrality of the natural world as sentient and present with the world of humans. Students were tasked with becoming advocates for another (more-than-human) being, and drew upon many different modalities – experiential, sensorial, embodied, collaborative, collective and academic – in order to learn about their being and conceive of possible different relationships.

Students created a shortlist of possible beings – ranging from lichen, birds, bears, rivers and mountains – to work with, eventually narrowing the selection to one entity for each student. Importantly, the students also created a species card to describe themselves, within similar categorisations as for their chosen being. Students described their own class, species, habitat, food supply, food sensitivities, ecological sensitivities and other factors. Displaying their own species card alongside a card for their chosen being positioned them *among* other beings, rather than *above* them. This was a subtle challenge to human exceptionalism, the pervasive view since the seventeenth century, that humans are apart from and more important than other species.<sup>24</sup> Referring to their parallel species cards throughout the semester, students were regularly reminded that they are included in the wondrous diversity of the animate earth.

After a species was selected, students conducted deep-dive research, including academic approaches and design approaches such as multi-sensory exploration, meditation, system mapping and sketching. At this stage, it was easy for some students to become overwhelmed by information, as it became increasingly apparent how many interconnections there were between their species, other life forms and surrounding ecosystems. In the midst of scientific knowledge, the question came up repeatedly: What is a designer? What does a designer contribute to this relationship? The system maps proved to be important ways of organising the complexity of new learning. Some students took it upon themselves to research ways of mapping, and developed highly visual charts that were integral to their project outcomes.

Once surrounded by different forms of knowledge, students drew upon their design tools and languages – along with other knowledge systems available to them – to translate and share their learning through the design of an experience that advocated for their chosen being. During this design and development stage, the students met online in small groups for feedback and critique, developing friendships and an appreciation for similar and dissimilar approaches, places and beings.

The outcomes are a variety of prototypes, designed to convey students’ learning and advocacy as experiences for other audiences. One student spent weeks trying to engage crows in a game that

he had designed for them, only to see the crows regularly take his offering of food and skip away. He determined then to meet the crows on their own terms. He designed a shelf that would clip on easily to any window as a landing deck where crows (or other winged beings) could be offered water and food. Like him, many other students encountered the agency of other beings and shifted their designs to respond to them.

Themes of communication and storytelling resonated through the projects. One student was so enchanted by the stories her classmates told of their experiences with trees, bogs, mushrooms and nudibranchs that she designed and hosted a series of podcasts featuring each of her classmates' beings. Another designer reached out to a mushroom foraging group and asked them to complete a survey aimed at learning about the different ways people got to know mushrooms, in order to gain insight into developing fungi friendships. One student spent weeks studying and listening carefully to decode the language of a stream. She created a series of interpretive tiles for an adjacent school, so that children could also listen more deeply and notice all the small beings who inhabit the stream.

Some of the projects were intimate and personally transformative. The student who swam in the cold winter ocean every week to honour the salmon; the student who went for a barefoot run and over the weeks developed an appreciation for the benefits of slow attentiveness to the task at hand, inspired by the worms beneath his feet. Qualities of attention and listening permeated all projects, some directly and others indirectly, and all led to a change of relationship between the designers and the natural world.

## LEARNING ACROSS MULTIPLE DOMAINS

We referred above to Donald Schön's conversation with a given situation where reflection-in-action is the reflective form of knowing-in-action, indicating that the languages of making are at play in a given student's designing. While Schön was focused on identifying a spatial action language inherent in design, our conversation deepens the appreciation for phenomenological and design-making languages. The addition of animist practices helps to further "spread mind and creativity out much more widely."<sup>25</sup> We also share the belief that many "design practices can support other ways of knowing. Sketch models, drawings, reflective documentation, role play and storytelling can unlock designers from their thinking self and help them see things differently."<sup>26</sup>

Numerous other elements were introduced to our – much noisier – conversation, which drew together multiple beings, multiple locales, multiple cultures and multiple approaches as designers shared their projects with peers, faculty and classmates. For many students there was a new and embodied realisation that everything is interconnected ... that more-than-human beings have always had something to say.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

The intentions of the DESIS network are to research design that incorporates social innovation for sustainability, with a focus on relationships and community. After this project, we now know with certainty that all beings have insights to offer our social innovations, and that limiting community to human-to-human has serious flaws for any sustainable future. Upon reflection, we realise that intriguing spaces and possible new communities opened up as a consequence of our trust in sentience. The design students took up all the necessary tools and languages to engage in ways that held these spaces open for periods of interconnected learning, for new conversations. Through these conversations we identified three design system relationships that can be understood differently.

*Reconceiving systems:* We recognise that our emerging methods reflect those of design ethnographies, drawing for example on observation techniques and empathic interpretation, engagement and sense-making.<sup>27</sup> However, our practice reconsiders a design system without humans at the centre.

*Trust and letting go:* We found that this kind of learning is highly engaging and is available to everybody who is willing to pause and pay attention – and is willing to let go of preconceptions about knowledge, design process and an outcome focus. Personal trust in a different starting point is required, and an acceptance that designers can turn to design tools when they need them, rather than start with them on hand and let familiar tools dictate the result.

*Tools and their place:* This project helped us to reconceive what a design tool can be, and what an exploratory tool can be. In an online workshop held during lockdown, the Roving Designers<sup>28</sup> asked students to raid their homes for spoons, yarn or other tools that could support exploration. The research tool was then something domestic and incidental. Further, the engagement between human and more-than-human allowed for tools to be realised during the research activity. For example, one designer chose to hang from a branch of a tree in order to see the world from another perspective. The branch became a tool for examining differing perspectives. It is only the relationship between the tree and the body that allows a tool-like quality to be identified in that moment. This example may help us see the limitations of both tools and ethnographies. The branch shifted from an element of observation to a device that helped to change the observation process. Within the system of observer–observed, the previously observed became a different element with a new role.

Another unsettling example can be seen in the student who asked, “What does the tree see when the tree sees me?”<sup>29</sup> In conventional ethnography the designer does not ask, “How does the research subject see me”? This posture signifies an extraordinary amount of humility and a resetting of presumed hierarchies. It brings humans into the place, into an authentic relationship, one which is non-extractive and compassionate.

We recognise that we are not alone in these efforts,<sup>30</sup> but are developing particular methods with which to form connections and relationships that may grow and connect us and our learners with an animate world. These methods acknowledge and make room for more than one worldview, including the views of our local indigenous cultures. In this project we have learned that through iterative design conversations and attentive listening, other voices can be heard.



## Acknowledgements

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**Caro McCaw** is an associate professor and head of programme Communication Design at Otago Polytechnic. She employs creative social practice and approaches in art and design contexts. Embracing sustainable, decolonial and indigenous agendas, her workplaces emphasis on social relationships, interdependency and care, to suggest empathic and alternative ways of knowing and being, across diverse projects and contexts. She is the coordinator of the Otago DESIS (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability) lab, a node in an international network, and an umbrella and a hub for a community of like-minded researchers.

**Louise St Pierre** descends from a long line of settler farmers and artisans. Her passion for the Earth has propelled her to research ecological design throughout her career. She is co-author of the internationally recognised Industrial Design curriculum, *Okala Ecological Design*. She established Canada's first DESIS Lab at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver. She brings animist views to DESIS, decentering the human and contending that all beings are social. In her PhD, she integrated her concern for environmental sustainability with her Buddhist practice to understand how modern culture's tendency to diminish our relationships with nature has implicated designers. Her recent publications including *Design and Nature* (with Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham) and *Design for Biodiversity* (with Zach Camozzi) offer a range of examples of how designers can reprioritise the importance of the natural world and challenge human exceptionalism.

1. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).
2. We refer to our respective nation states using their non-indigenous names for the sake of clarity for our international readers. New Zealand is also known as Aotearoa and Canada is part of the larger nation known as Turtle Island.
3. Karl Wixon, "Whakapapa Centred Design Explained ...," *LinkedIn*, 16 August 2020, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/whakapapa-centred-design-explained-karl-wixon>.
4. Robin Wall-Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar of Animacy," *The Leopold Outlook* (Winter 2012), 4-9.
5. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2021), 191.
6. Louise St Pierre, "A Shift of Attention," in *Design and Nature: A Partnership*, eds K Fletcher, L St Pierre and M Tham (Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2019), 20-25, at 25.
7. Wall-Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar."
8. *Ibid.*, 7.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 8.
11. Wixon, "Whakapapa Centred Design".
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. Ron Bull, tumuaki whakaako at Otago Polytechnic, identifies with Kai Tahu, Kati Mamoe and Waitaha whakapapa or tribal heritage.
16. Connie Watts identifies with Nu-u-chah-nulth, Gitksan and Kwakwaka'wakw ancestry.
17. Abram, *The Spell*.
18. Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 1991), 76-104.
19. *Ibid.*, 132.
20. Joanna Boehnert, *Design, Ecology, Politics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).
21. Wixon, "Whakapapa Centred Design."
22. Wall-Kimmerer, "Learning the Grammar," 15.
23. Jonathon Lynch and Greg Mannion, "Place-responsive Pedagogies in the Anthropocene: Attuning with the More-than-human," *Environmental Education Research*, 27:6 (2021), 864-78, at 873.
24. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1980).
25. Val Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (Slough, UK: Acumen Publishing Ltd, 2009), 441-53.
26. St Pierre, "A Shift," 24.
27. Reflecting keywords identified in Keith M Murphy, "Ethnographic Design," *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, 29 March 2018, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/ethnographic-design>.
28. Roving Designers, online workshop, Spring 2021, INDD 310.
29. Student conversation with author, 2022.
30. The pioneering design and nature work of Dr. Kate Fletcher is described in her books *Wild Dress* (Uniform Books, 2019); *Design and Nature, A Partnership*, with Louise St. Pierre and Mathilda Tham (Routledge 2019); *Outfitting*, with Helen Mort (Hazel Press 2022).