

Astrida Neimanis

rivus 23rd biennale of sydney



Image: Bushfire sky and sun in Kelowna, Canada

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Deixis, or: What is our common frame of reference?

Instructions for a 10 minute walk from here to there.

Minute 1: Begin here; start slowly. The first minute is for attunement. Look around. Open your ears, your nose, the pores on the backs of your hands. Make your body more permeable to this place. More holey.

Minute 2: Actually, you probably need two minutes. Bodies take their time.

Minute 3: This is an ecotone – where the water meets the land. I've often wondered about the extent of ecotonal places. Where do they start, where do they stop. In a sense, we are always in the middle, navigating. But if you pay attention, you may be pulled. Can you feel it, tugging you this way? Over here?

Minute 4: The water moves differently. Its rhythm is not a walking rhythm. Still, you might adjust your gait, soften your spine. Remember, your body is mostly water.

Minute 5: Do you hear that? I know, the traffic sounds in the air are trying to cancel it out. Listen harder. I don't think I've heard that one before.

Minute 6: Keep listening. Now that you have finally tuned in to this, let it stay in your ears a while longer.

Minute 7: Watch out. Close call.

Minute 8: Only now my skin adjusts to the quality of the air. It is different here, isn't it? The almost imperceptible shift in the vapour content. Breathing in deeply, the finery alveoli of the lungs sense the change.

Minute 9: There are some things you know in your body. (I can still smell the ash in the air.) Other things seem impossible to conjure, five minutes or five months later. You dig around for evidence that you haven't made it all up. This place can play tricks. I know.

Minute 10: Are you still with me?



Image: Lake Okanagan, Canada

Afterword/Afterwalk

Me, I am walking along the shoreline of a very deep, very cold glacial lake that cuts through the unceded territories of the Syilx people in the Okanagan watershed. I am 400 kilometers from the ocean. You, you are hanging upside down from the underside of this doomed and glorious ball of Earth, flanked by other waters on another day. And yet: this suture.

Deixis is a grammar that indexes the time, place, or situation from which a speaker is speaking. Derived from the Greek word for "pointing", deictics (such as "here" or "there," "now" or "then," "me" or "this" or "them") establish relationships that are personal, temporal, and spatial. Deixis anchors us in specific relations whose truth is no less meaningful for its instability, ephemerality, contingency. Rhetoricians tell me that for deictics to function, a common frame of reference is required; otherwise "this goes there and that comes here" can make no sense. Without a common frame of reference, deictics on their own would be too vague to understand.

We are all bodies of water – leaking, sponging, sloshing, dripping, sipping. Imagining ourselves as bodies of water, we are invited into a different kind of relation with other bodies of water. We are related through fishy beginnings that flow through all life that comes from the oceans; we are related through planetary currents of matter and meaning. We are related through carrying: each of our bodies holding things, and holding things, and each other, in relation.

You, you are unfathomably distant, so far away. Me, I am closer than my own skin, my body inescapably here. And still, we can walk alongside.

Astrida Neimanis
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