

Drawing On the Body

NIAMH MOLONEY

"Here is a lesson: what happens to people and what happens to the land is the same thing"¹

This is the first time I have written about what has happened. I am a woman who has survived the indignities of the workplace. I was once one of those "...technicians of rhythm and regular activities"²: a project manager working in software development. Ten years later I was left with a feeling of "Is this it?" Not only did I feel cheated, I had skyrocketing cortisol levels, palpitations, panic attacks and a continuous sense of impending doom. I can write about this now because I returned to my body, my Self, my interior landscape of sensation.

I had existed in a disembodied state. I barely registered my emotions. Restless nights and panicked mornings. I was unsure why or what was causing it; a myriad of things it turned out. I quit my life as it then was. I grieved for months my losses. Soon I found I was grieving losses I had no words for. They bubbled up from my belly, my hips, my shoulders. My spasming lower back releasing choked and repressed emotion I did not know was there. So began a journey inside, to an internal landscape that was mine alone. An intimate place I ignored, avoided and disavowed, fearing its unknowns.

The beginnings of releasing my grief physically led me to a path of realisation. The spasms and convulsions seemed initially to come from my hips and lower back. I learned about the psoas; the muscle of the soul. It meets at the points of major arteries and nerves in the lower abdomen. The only muscles that join the legs to the torso. They exist as a pair, the hip flexors. They hold you up most of the time. The psoas is a long

muscle that looks like a river of water gushing over rock. It flows from the spine, threads through the core of us, and winds its way around the ball and socket joint of the hip.³ It supports our breath as a wave like motion. When I imagine its texture I think of *Against the Wind (Sea Song)* by Wilhelmina Barns-Graham. A similar shape to the waves created by the sea and the wind. The psoas equally requires fluidity in movement and attitude to be healthy. Dried up and tense it triggers a continual sense of anxiety.⁴ A seemingly never ending, self-perpetuating, cycle of fear.

I did not listen to music for a year. I listened to podcasts and almost obsessively to the news, seeking anchorage in 'real' world happenings: I needed the material and the concrete. I did not want to die of my sorrows as Deirdre did.⁵ Now I make work to music, I am listening to music now as a write. The soft flowing sounds so reminiscent of dissolving frozen, icy, fragile rigidity, back to rhythmic, pulsing, tidal form.

Drawing from this affective history, I investigate disembodiment and anxiety as repressive strategies of the patriarchal and technocratic power structures prevalent in Western society. These structures place and freeze our bodies daily into seated postures, perpetuating anxiety through the landscape of our physiology.⁶ They promote the supremacy of rational thought over the wisdom of our physical and emotional bodies. They deny the unity of body, mind and emotion, dismissing the rich internal landscape of sensation that can root us in our Selves, to our World and to each Other. These repressive strategies are, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, forms of social domination. They exist threefold: domination of our inner nature as emotional repression; domination of

¹ Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 89.

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 130. A term that Foucault applied to religious orders in an educational context but could very easily be applied to myself.

³ Liz Koch, *The Psoas Book* (California: Guinea Pig Publications, 2012) 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44

⁵ The Irish myth of Deirdre of the Sorrows. A beautiful young woman promised to the King of Ulster, Conchobair Mac Nessa. She fell in love with the warrior Naoise. Fleeing Conchobair they travelled to Scotland, but to no avail. Conchobair tracked them down, killing Naoise and taking Deirdre back to Ireland as his wife. Different versions of the story end with Deirdre dashing her head out on a rock but in the version I know, she died of heartbreak.

⁶ Valerie Strauss, "The right — and surprisingly wrong — ways to get kids to sit still in class.", *The Washington Post*, 07.08.2014



ABOVE
Niamh Moloney,
Drawing Experiment IV
(2017). Ink powder,
gouache, watercolour,
marker and tap water
on paper, 204 cm x
180 cm

our environment as ecocide, and domination over each other manifesting in extreme terms as genocide.⁷ This is the price we pay for modernity and the myth of continuous and infinite progress. Can we find a way to resist the oppression of our inner nature, in order to open up ways to resist the oppression of those external to us?

"Our struggle then must begin with the re-appropriation of our body, the reevaluation and rediscovery of its capacity for resistance, and expansion and celebration of its powers, individual and collective."⁸

Embodiment is a form of knowledge; this knowing of our being through sensation. The respectful listening to our bodies is a form of autonomy. Addressing self-repression, allows us to open up our inner nature, firstly to ourselves, and then to one another. This can be a method of resistance to the external forces of globalisation and neoliberalism. I have personally experienced the way in which coming into communion with myself has allowed me to come into community with others. Embodiment is a modality for us to heal the traumas of the conditions we have inherited from modernist ideals. Moving from a head centred way of living to a body centred way of being.⁹

Our bodies are established by the elements of nature. Being mostly made of water we still carry a part of the sea in each of us. Through our veins flow elements such as sodium, potassium, and calcium combined in almost the same proportions with which they exist in our oceans. As all life began in the sea, we began in the waters of our mother's womb, breathing through gills before our bodies develop for a life on land.¹⁰ The cochlea of our inner ear is a spiralling, sea shell shaped, sensory organ that too holds liquid. The hairs of the cochlea that protrude into this liquid sense our state of equilibrium, our balance. The cochlea and its liquid, allow us to stand erect. It is responsible for how we experience ourselves in space.¹¹ How misguided the modernists were to place us outside and apart from nature.

"In a misogynistic society, when people imagine the Earth as a "she", they think she is less important than a he. So, the mostly all-male polluting corporate heads think they can treat the Earth badly."¹²

In an episode from the series *Blue Planet II*, footage shows a mother whale carrying her dead calf, reluctant in her grief to release it to the sea below. David Attenborough speculates that the calf was poisoned by its mother's milk. The contamination of the food chain by plastics is pointed to as the cause.¹³ The imbalance and waste of our society, the chasing of infinite economic growth and productivity is

poisoning our oceans, our lands and ourselves. Being a part of nature, this material pollution inevitably affects us too. Susan Sontag called for "an erotics of art"¹⁴, ecosexuals call for an "erotics of nature"¹⁵. I feel we also need in tandem a return to the sensuality of the body as a strategy to right the imbalances of how we and others live and experience our world today.

My body's response to my mechanised environment was to be dry and rigid. I was not supple, nor fluid. Slowly, slowly the sap seemed to rise again. The release bathed my body in a new fluidity. My hips were opening, my psoas supportive, allowing me to breathe again. I feel as if I have decolonised my body of certain beliefs.¹⁶ I began to make marks on paper using my feet and fingers. No longer concerned with representing what I saw but what I felt. The soles of my feet pushing pigment and water around paper taped to the floor. Spirals and curves were emerging, echoing the rings of Saturn, the setting sun, storm patterns on a weather map. Meandering motions and semi-circular swirls of colour marked the joyful movement my body engaged in. My body, grounded to the earth, searches for resolution through repetitive movement.

I explore forces of push, pull and tension through the body and drawing; a way to find a balance, an equilibrium between opposing forces. A trace. Another centre. Purposefully working to stop all thought and criticality of my rational mind. I am rediscovering a wonder in the body I have inhabited for my lifetime, yet ignored for so long except to deride. I recognise now that movement is what I am.¹⁷

This body work, or body of work, that started with my response to the external world shifts continuously between the material, immaterial, metaphorical and abstract. All of these are at once separate, yet woven into the same curves of space and time. I am conscious of situating my body, an Irish body, in an appropriate context. It is a process of working out the afflictions of the postcolonial personality: inferiority, helplessness and restricted identity, while embracing positivity, imagination, resilience and duality.¹⁸ Situating myself physically within the confines of the page on the floor, the page becomes the Fifth Province.¹⁹ A site of healing. A place in which to create a landscape of the soul²⁰ to reflect the diverse landscapes of nature.

"From dance we learn that matter is not stupid, it is not blind, it is not mechanical, but has its rhythms, has its language, and it is self-activated and self-organising. Our bodies have reasons that we need to learn, rediscover, reinvent. We need to listen to their language as the path to our health and healing, as we need to listen to the language and rhythms

⁷ Gene Ray, *Writing the Ecocide-Genocide Knot: Indigenous Knowledge and Critical Theory in the Endgame*, South, no. 8 (2015) n.p. Accessed: 08.12.2017, Available: http://www.documents.14.de/en/south/895_writing_the_ecocide_genocide_knot_indigenous_knowledge_and_critical_theory_in_the_endgame

⁸ Silvia Federici, "In Praise of the Dancing Body", *Tumble Trouble*, ed. Yessa Giblin (Dublin, Milan: Project Press and Mousse Publishing, 2017) 45-46

⁹ Rae Johnson, "Embodied Activism", *Rae Johnson: Somatic Approaches to Personal and Social Transformation*, Accessed: 23.09.2017, Available: <https://raejohnsonsonline.com/2017/09/23/embodied-activism/>

¹⁰ Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13 - 14.

¹¹ Theodor Schwenk, *Sensitive Chiasm: The Creation of Floating Forms in Water and Air* (East Sussex: Sophia Books, 2014), 84 - 85

¹² Stephanie Theobald, "Nature is your lover, not your mother: meet ecosexual pioneer Annie Sprinkle.", *The Guardian* Accessed: 15.05.2017, Available:

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/may/15/nature-ecosexual-annie-sprinkle-porn-star-queer>

¹³ "Big Blue", *Blue Planet II*, Episode 4, BBC, (19.11.2017)

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation", *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, selected by Eric Fernie, (Oxford: Phaidon, 1994), 222

¹⁵ Stephanie Theobald, op. cit.



LEFT
Niamh Moloney,
Drawing Experiment II
(detail) (2017). Pencil,
watercolour and tap
water on paper,
238 cm x 180cm

of the natural world as the path to the health and the healing of the earth. Since the power to be affected and to affect, to be moved and move, a capacity which is indestructible, exhausted only with death, is constitutive of the body, there is an immanent politics in it: the capacity to transform itself, others and change the world.²¹

Embodiment is the gift of freedom we can all give to ourselves. It is a way to release the grief and trauma of our own lives, that of our immediate family, and wider communities. It is a personal and collective form of resistance to the oppressive factors and expectations of Western society. My body is all of me, not just a material body but an interior landscape of spirit, emotion and sensation. Here is the place where I open up to myself and through the page to others. Once we finish doing violence to ourselves, we will no longer do violence to others and the places we live in. To right this wrong we must return to our first home, our body, and inhabit it fully.

Niamh Moloney is an artist and writer based in Glasgow

¹⁶ Moshe Feldenkrais, *Body & Mature Behaviour: A Study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation & Learning* (California: Frog Ltd, 2005), 173
"In short, a recurrent emotional state always appears together with the attitude of the body and the vegetative state with which it was conditioned earlier. Therefore, when an emotional complex has been resolved, a specifically individual body habit is resolved simultaneously. I contend that all successful analysis, whatever technique is employed, is invariably accompanied, and probably preceded, by an alteration of posture and a change of muscular habit both in body and face."

¹⁷ Emilie Conrad, *Movement*, Accessed: 08.12.2017, Available: <http://continuummovement.com/docs/articles/movement-emilie-conrad.htm>

¹⁸ Geraldine Moane, "Postcolonial Legacies and the Irish psyche", *Are the Irish Different?*, ed. Tom Inglis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 127-129

¹⁹ Mary Robinson, *Presidential Inauguration Speech*, Dublin Castle, Dublin, 03.12.1990
"The recent revival of an old concept of the Fifth Province expresses this emerging Ireland of tolerance and empathy. The old Irish term for province is coiscéal, meaning a "fifth"; and yet, as everyone knows, there are only four geographical provinces on this island. So where is the fifth? The Fifth Province is not anywhere here or there, north or south, east or west. It is a place within each one of us — that place that is open to the other, that swinging door which allows us to venture out and others to venture in. Ancient legends divided Ireland into four quarters and a "middle," although they differed about the location of this middle or Fifth Province. While Tara was the political centre of Ireland, tradition has it that this Fifth Province acted as a second centre, a necessary balance. If I am a symbol of anything I would like to be a symbol of this reconciling and healing Fifth Province"

²⁰ Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *A Celtic miscellany: translations from the Celtic literatures*, trans. Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), 135
"I am the land of Ireland, said the bird, and I am the soul of a woman;" *From The Voyage of Ul*
Clarra

²¹ Silvia Federici, op. cit.