

Name: Anushka Nair

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A LEXICON OF BECOMING

This lexicon aims at highlighting the keywords that untangle the process of reaching states of Becoming in the context of my practice in performance art. I am looking into the relation between my body (formally, human) and non-human entities that inhabit the ecology of my performance practice. “Becoming”, referring to Donna Haraway, is to ““become” or embody different identities and understand the world from multiple, heterogeneous perspectives” (Haraway, 1991). It is essential to note that Becoming takes place in relation. As Haraway states, “[i]f we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism then we know that becoming is always becoming *with*, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake” (Haraway, 2008). Through my practice with non-human entities, the fixed notions of the human body and identity are put to stake in order to dilute anthropocentric ways of engaging with the environment. My urgency to reconfigure power relations lies in the fact that the current human approach of domination and alterity towards the non-human removes the human not only from its environment but as a result even from itself. The need to bridge this gap leads me to expand the way I understand and position myself (therefore, the notion of human) in the world.

In Akupāra (2019), my durational performance with roof tiles upon my back, I moved slowly on all fours, with the aim to prevent them from falling. We encountered one another through the meeting of our physicalities and agency within the tiles and I to influence and transform one another through affective capacities. My research looks at the performative encounter between humans and non-humans as intra-active in nature. The concept of intra-action by posthumanist philosopher Karen Barad refers to “pre-established bodies that participate in

action with each other. Intra-action understands agency as not an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but as a dynamism of forces” (Barad, 2007). When our bodies—my body and non-human bodies—form a performative relation, the forces of ontology and materiality of our bodies create a dynamic that brings to surface the agency within the bodies. The agential nature of our—the tiles and I—relation opened pathways for the process of becoming to take place, which aids me to inquire and learn about the capacities of our materiality as being vital and affective towards one another. On a side note, I would like to clarify that the use of ‘our/we’ throughout this essay, will refer to my body/the human and non-human bodies. I am cognizant of the ethical dilemma of ‘our/we’ in regard to the consent of non-human bodies, therefore it becomes essential for me to have a hospitable approach which prioritises care within our relation. My site of inquiry lies in the larger framework of posthumanist philosophy and performance art, and is particularly interested in unravelling the methods and actions that take place to reach states of Becoming-with non-human entities.

Ontological-hybridism and Matrix

To begin unfurling the actions, methods and systems through which the fabric of relationality and subjectivity can be expanded and reshaped, I establish the lens through which these notions and actions are contextualized through two main terms, namely, *ontological-hybridism* and *matrix*. These terms provide a framework of my approach to the ontology of our bodies and the system they are a part of. *Ontological-hybridism* takes the notion of the ‘hybrid’ as a composition of mixed origin to see our ontology as a mixture of human and material ontologies as opposed to a boundary making practice that separates the two. To use Jacques Ranciere's phrase, “The quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations” (Vibrant Matter, 2009). In my practice, the material formations are composed in a way where my physicality and the ontology of objects build relationality by sharing a space with each other as "ontologically one, formally diverse” (Deleuze, 1994). In Akupāra, the ontology of the tiles and I are considered as equal or one, though our form and materiality differ. This does not mean that my body and tiles share the same form but it is important for my practice to dissolve the notions of separation and hostile alterity towards the tiles. I negate assigning functionality and ‘prop’ role as the only status of the tiles as a way to minimise ‘otherness’ in order to form mutually constitutive entities that are relational and not hierarchical in nature. The tiles have as much power to affect me as I have to affect them. I approach the very notion of our

ontology as bleeding into one another to acknowledge the emergence of a hybrid presence, being and reality.

“The concept of becoming, like the paradigm of embodiment, refuses the idea of separation; ...between the self and other: human and non-human” (Blackman, 2008). I tackle this notion of difference by using diffraction as a metaphor for inquiry. Diffraction involves “attending to difference, to patterns of interference and the effects of difference-making practices. Diffraction creates something ontologically new” (Hill, 2018). I see difference not as hostile but as a way to bring formally different entities as ontologically equal, which then creates a state of hybridity as they come in (performative) relation to one another. To quote Bozalek and Zembylas, “...difference is seen as an affirmative light, as a tool of creativity rather than as separation and lack. Difference here is not positioned as the opposition to sameness—but is also incorporated into the self as difference within and seen as a means of becoming” (2017). For me, these practices open up multifarious positions of subjectivity by inquiring into “what else takes place” during the intra-action between our bodies. Diffraction allows me to look at the patterns of interference that emerge in my practice with non-human bodies, as underlying synergies, tensions, unwritten contracts, embodied communication and shifts in subjectivity are revealed in a system of our *ontologically-hybrid* bodies. In Akupāra, these elements emerged as vital to the relation between the tiles and I, as we formed a contract of fixity and balance through which our materialities were in constant physical contact and communication to negotiate the emerging synergies and entanglements. The distinction of human and non-human is removed in my practice in order to situate our bodies in a space where “reality is continuously re/constituted through material entanglements” (Hill, 2018). The notion of ‘entanglement’ is essential to see *ontological-hybridism* on a macro level as well, and thus to see the *matrix* within which this kind of hybridism breathes.

‘Matrix’ is defined as the set of conditions that provides a system in which something grows or develops. I consider the conditions set for my performance as a *matrix* and a system which holds and creates an environment for something to take place, to develop and affect. The *matrix* becomes the web within which our *ontologically-hybrid* bodies are composed in connection with one another within a specific time. Temporality plays a key role in manifesting these relations as the matrix is in a continual process of evolution as different elements engage with each other. This web is spatially horizontal and functions as a ‘flat ontology’ (DeLanda, 2002). The hierarchical ontological categories are flattened to practice “...an approach in terms of interacting parts and emergent wholes which leads to a flat

ontology, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status”. (DeLanda, 2002). Our bodies may occupy different forms, space and time but that does not retract us from being ontologically interconnected, to be a “mutual constitution of entangled entities” (Barad, 2007). I view the *matrix* as an entanglement where our bodies are agential and thus have the capacity to affect and change the bodies they are in relation with.

The *matrix* in my practice creates conditions that encourage this ‘flat ontology’ and explore our entangled nature by assembling the varying “material practices in particular ways to produce specific phenomena” (Hill, 2018). The dynamism of our forces produce phenomena that bring about affects in our form, physicality, materiality and consciousness. The *matrix*, as an ecology, fosters ways to find dynamic relations by consciously creating conditions of co-dependency through composing performative actions that require our bodies to work together. The tiles and I are situated within the *matrix* through the conditions of maintaining balance through continuous physical contact over a duration of 2 hours. Through these conditions of co-dependency, the bond of relationality was formed between us that then gave way for transformation to take place. Our bodies function as equally agential and entangled entities that are “open systems that connect ... so that they are always unfinished and in a process of becoming” (Blackman, 2008). Initiating connection, exchange, and becoming-with to take place, requires the *matrix* to be the foundation of my performative actions. This system helps me inquire into my position within the *matrix* “not through abstract knowledge, but through the affective capacities of our own bodies and the bodies of the more-than-human” (Wright, 2014). I view the *matrix* not as a passive system, merely holding space for our entanglements, but rather as a system that is active and has an affective capacity. The bodies of the non-human, in my practice, have led to alter my physicality, consciousness, emotions and perspective as I, simultaneously, alter its form, materiality and culturally assigned identity. Through situating ourselves in this *matrix*, the potential for notions of ontology and human subjectivity to shift, evolve and become emerge.

My desire to pursue this inquiry into becoming was birthed from questions of what it is to be human; how can I rethink the superior subject positions and fixed identities assumed by the human body; and who are the other bodies through which the fixity of human subjectivities can be questioned and multiplied. Being a part of a *matrix of ontological hybridism* that

consists of animate and inanimate bodies, gives the potential for the existence of multiple lenses or bodies to look through, think through and become-with. This potential aids in rethinking divisions, boundaries and homogeneity within how humans see themselves and the world and how they treat and live with other bodies. The human tends to enforce a domination that does not support the vitality present in all matter. The Cartesian dualism of nature/culture removes the human body/mind from the organic flows of exchange and growth. Encounters between our bodies “reconfigure how we conceptualize the human, and concomitant notions of personhood and knowledge” (Barua, 2015). I have been driven to re-work the concepts of nature and culture and how when our materialities come together, we become powerful agents of generating “phenomena-in-their-becoming” (Barad, 2007) which gives rise to a radical openness to the ever evolving world. The inquiry into the capacity of materialities to overwhelm the rationality of human consciousness and to shape human bodies and minds to expand the knowledge on our personhood is the objective behind my research. Therefore, I am looking at ways to manifest an exchange between our bodies that result in alterations in the concept of the self as who and what ‘I am’ into who and what ‘I can become’.

Dialogic relations and Graftification

For the emergence of states of becoming, the method of *dialogic relations* and action of *graftification* are key actions located within the *matrix*. Inspired by Bakhtin’s (1895-1975) main philosophical theme, ‘dialogic relations’, that influences his views on language, culture and personhood refers to “between persons, between cultures, and between a person and culture...dialogue for Bakhtin is not simply a verbal act of interaction (Bakhtin, 1929). Rather, he understood it as universal communication that denounces ‘monologism’ (single-thought discourse) and promotes ‘dialogism’ (a continual dialogue with others). He looked at the relational discourse based on inter-subjectivity that brings together I/other relations. In my research, I replace the field of ‘linguistics’ with ‘performance’ and the element of ‘culture’ or ‘persons’ more specifically with humans and non-humans. I look at the performative act of the *dialogic relation* between humans and non-humans which is the communication that occurs between the materiality and affective capacities of our bodies. Through this communication, a relation is built where we intra-act with one another and the process of ‘becoming’ is continually emerging. Bakhtin proposes that the “entire cosmos and-bodies residing in it are in a continuous process of 'becoming' because of the cosmos's inherent nature to communicate. Our existence itself is a process of communication that he

names as dialogue”. This inherent nature allows us to “recognise connectivity, feedback loops, interdependence and vulnerability” (Wright, 2014) in our dynamic relations.

In Akupara, I come into a tactile dialogue with the tiles that then bring about influences on my physicality and emotional state because of their weight and precarious state. In response, I influence the physical state of the tiles, as they shift and fall and break twice during the performance. As Schweitzer and Zerdy state, “the materiality of the object exerts a significant influence on the kinesthetic and spatial aspects of both preparation and performance” (2014). These influences bring an intimacy in our *dialogic relations* through a hospitable approach to create space for responsiveness and negotiations in our encounters. *Dialogic relations* provide the thread for our bodies to encounter one another through specific performative actions that depend on a tactile dialogue. The tiles and my body were in constant communication with each other as I perceived the small movements of the tiles and it responded to the movements of my back. The embodied dialogue and negotiation between our materialities was essential. “Encounters are becomings, nuptials. They are movements... An encounter poses problems; it reconfigures identities, space, political economies” (Barua, 2015). The point of encounter through *dialogic relation*, becomes an important factor for the action of coming together of two bodies as they loosen the boundaries to find synergies and paths of becoming-with.

Boundary-making practices, in my research, are re-configured through the action of *graftification*. I am applying the definition of ‘grafting’ from biology, as a horticultural technique whereby tissues of plants are joined so as to continue their growth together. Through this, I attempt to describe the process and action that our bodies engage with to reach states of becoming. “In becoming, one piece of the assemblage is drawn into the territory of another piece, changing its value as an element and bringing about a new unity” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Taking this into consideration, the concept of *graftification* suggests that entities penetrate and change each other’s boundaries to mutually grow. The tiles and I, were ‘grafted’ to one another through the conditions of the actions that led to a fluid boundary as the tiles became a part of my physicality over the duration, and the endurance of its weight upon me, gave time and space for synergies and differences to emerge and evolve as the limits of our bodies were tested. The ebb and flow of recognising boundaries, traversing them as it collapses to create new relations and synergies through time and endurance form an important part of my practice. As Mol and Law suggest, ‘keeping ourselves together is one of the tasks of life’, and this requires new ‘conceptualizations of

what it might mean to hold together' (Blackman, 2008). Through *graftification*, our bodies 'hold together' not by reinforcing boundaries but by reconfiguring them through continually creating and collapsing it.

This loosening of boundaries give entry points into the skin of the other. Through this nature of exchange in my practice, a shift in perspective occurs as I begin to find ways to see 'through' the other instead of 'at' the other. To quote Kim Atkins, "...because the body is enmeshed with the 'flesh' of the world, one is able to articulate a perspective on the world". (Atkins, 2005) This convergence and expansion of perspective, gives space for unique patterns of co-existence, agency and affect to emerge and thus for becoming to take place as a continual process of growth and change within and between our bodies. The senso-somatic experience of texture, colour, shape, sound, size and emotions between the tiles and I, initiate becoming-with to emerge as I am enmeshed with the tiles. To quote Deleuze and Guattari, "we know nothing about a body until we know what it can do...what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with the affects of another body, ... to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, ...to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with in composing a more powerful body." (1980). *Graftification* as an action looks into the conditions of intertwining, unique formations and the emergence of something new (becoming). Becoming as and through an amalgamation of our bodies and forces which gives birth to multiple subject positions.

Nomadism and object decolonisation

In my search for multiple subjectivities and activating different states of Becoming with objects/non-human entities in my practice, the scope of the research can be articulated through my concepts of *nomadism* and *object decolonisation*. I apply the notion of a 'nomad' as a member of a people who have no fixed residence but move from place to place. I am interested in dissecting identity and as a result the body as a 'home' that an individual fixes oneself in. With this idea I am interested in seeing our bodies as entities that move, change and shift their homes with and in one another in order to "relinquish stability and fixity" (Hill, 2018) and foster "rhizomatic traversing across boundaries" (Hill, 2018). Through *nomadism* these shifts are practiced and manifested to rethink singular, essentialised, fixed and dominating identities assumed by human bodies. Instead, I aspire to continually question and move them in order to inhabit different perspectives and states of becoming through the embodied relationship between human and non-human entities.

As Bennett quotes, “we need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature - to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (Bennett, 2009). The conditioning of human ontology and subjectivity as higher than other entities causes the destruction of the innate vitality of matter and its power to mould the human. Vitality of matter needs defending because “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies (Bennett, 2009).

I seek to decentralise the human by withdrawing culturally assumed identities of non-human bodies and my domination of them by treating them as equally active agents that have knowledge to share. By recognising them as active performers in the *matrix*, I remove the ‘tool-analysis’ (Heidegger, 1927) of the non-human and instead realise their intrinsic vitality. The tiles on my back were powerful agents in shaping the evolving states (physical pain, exhaustion, emotional responses and altered consciousness) of my body throughout the duration of the performance. Inspired by ‘decolonisation’ as the action or process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent, I am interested in looking at ways to withdraw the domination of human on objects and non-human entities. I attempt to apply a non-anthropocentric lens in order to make visible the agency and independence of objects. To quote Deleuze and Guattari, “the process is one of deterritorialization in which the properties of the constituent element disappear and are replaced by the new properties of the assemblage—”becomings-molecular of all kinds, becomings-particles” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). The state of becoming can be initiated only when my body is not holding on to any fixed boundaries and territories. The fluid traversing of consciousness, physicality and materiality is possible by renouncing the assumed human power and domination to give room for multiple bodies, multiple perspectives and thus multiple states of becoming to emerge.

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