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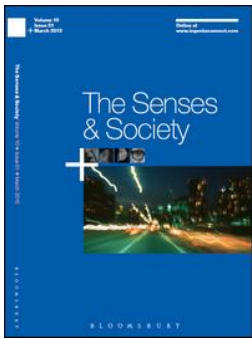
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Embracing water, healing pine: touch-walking and transcorporeal worldings

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ABSTRACT

This article considers touch as an embodied worlding practice in the context of humans intentionally seeking tactile trans-species contact. In particular, it examines three co-researchers' tactile relations with tree(s) and water which were explored by "touch-walking," an immersive method developed for this study. The method opened possibilities for examining transcorporeal sensory matterings and affective flows between the researcher's body, co-researchers' bodies and more-than-human bodies. This experimental micro-research brings knowledge about how people form deeply meaningful relationships with natural bodies, making worlds by cherishing tactile contact with them. Theoretically, we "posthumanize" touch by bringing insights from cultural touch and skin studies, feminist new materialisms and affect theory. We propose that our co-researchers' specific companionships entail multilayered, more-than-human intimacies. The co-becomings fostered by tactile and sensual more-than-human intimacies are affective, material, and psychic. The study inspired us to propose that rethinking ways of engaging with matter through touch may advance alternative environmental ethics and necessitates the development of further multisensory research methodologies.

KEYWORDS

Touch; worlding; touch-walking method; transcorporeality; more-than-human; natural bodies; affect; intimacy

Touching nature

What sensory engagements – in particular, tactile relations – with natural “elements” or bodies do people intentionally seek out, and how are these encounters affectively charged? How do these sensory engagements come to matter, and how can we make sense of these matterings – becomings of matter and meaning (Barad 2012) – as researchers? To engage with these questions, we immersed ourselves in tactile relations with natural bodies introduced to us by three research participants as their precious companions. Our exploration is based on the method of “touch-walking” which Nätyinki developed for this experimental micro-research. The participants who attended touch-walks are called “co-researchers” in this study, since we wish to emphasize the process of co-creating our field of study as places, events, sensory practices, and reflections in dialogue with the participants (Given 2008). We introduce touch-walking as a method where tactile experiences, haptic knowledges, memories, and affects *emerge*

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between and across bodies when walking together and touching nonhuman bodies. Thus, this article draws upon the rich methodological and epistemological discussions associated with other “walk along” methods in sensory studies, to which we also make a new contribution.

Touch is constantly “on”: we cannot help but always be touching something (Paterson 2009; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). In its varying positions and movements, the body is always literally bound to the environmental settings and material objects that carry and cover it, and which the body weighs, grasps, and strokes. Touch has been acknowledged as a spatial and environmental practice that provides profound experiences of place (Paterson et al. 2012; Rickard and White 2021; Rodaway 1994). However, active search for tactile stimulation by nature or, as in our case, intentional touching of natural bodies in itself, is often marginalized or othered. In his study of “touching the beach,” Obrador (2012, 49) states that in the search for tactile stimulation by natural elements – such as through “sun, sea and sand” tourism – touch is vulgarized and categorized as a lower “animalistic” activity by contrast with cool “post-tourism.” We take it that meanings and experiences of those activities can be more fully understood when considered as parts of complex cultural “skinscapes” – (dis)entanglements of human and nonhuman agents (Howes 2018). Touch is culturally, socially, and materially shaped, including environmental touch (Rickard and White 2021).

In traditional forms of primary production, such as farming, forestry, and agriculture, haptic knowledge about nature has been crucial and inherent to everyday practices. In an urban skinscape, however, which consists mainly of plain surfaces, “cold” screens, and static temperatures (Classen 2005), tactile stimuli from natural bodies are often something “extra” or even extraordinary and need to be specially arranged. This is the case with many outdoor activities that are based (albeit often implicitly) on haptic practices, such as wild swimming, recreational walking, sports fishing, hunting, and berry- or mushroom-picking. In sports such as golf, hiking, mountain biking and climbing, nature provides a neutral setting for activities or is an object to be battled or conquered. Yet the sensory matterings that foster (re)connection to natural environments undoubtedly explain much of the enjoyability of these activities and can lead to new kinds of agential engagements with natural bodies (Brymer and Gray 2010). By posthumanizing touch and prevailing notions of intimacy (Lykke 2018), we want to further an idea of meaningful sensory trans-species relations.

Our study is a reminder of the nature of touch as a primal way of communicating togetherness, comfort, and affection, including interspecies relations, of humans and other mammals (e.g. Binfet, Green, and Draper 2022; Keltner 2009; Montagu 1971). In what follows, we address how touching natural bodies provides opportunities for interspecies communication (Lykke 2022), and how these encounters are also experienced as a site of transcorporeal energies – as a possibility of vibrating together – and, even beyond that, as a means of giving and receiving nurturing care and comfort, providing an experience of togetherness and being held. These experiences have tremendous value for individuals and may also provide a gateway to tactile environmentalism (Lorimer 2012) and posthumanist ethics (Neimanis 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) at a more general level, as we will propose.

Theoretically, we combine insights from cultural touch and skin studies (Classen 2005; Howes 2018; Lafrance 2018; Obrador 2012; Obrador-Pons 2007; Paterson 2007a, 2007b, 2009), posthumanistically oriented affect studies (Seyfert 2012; Stewart 2012) and feminist new materialisms (Alaimo 2008, 2018; Lykke 2018; Neimanis 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa

2017). Despite their varied philosophical backgrounds and empirical focuses, all these strands stress the relationality of more-than-human bodies. Touch makes our bodies more-than-one: one cannot touch without being touched (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Touch, as well as affect, inherently calls attention to the porosity and permeability of bodies, as well as their ambivalence and their simultaneous activity and passivity in transcorporeal operations (Kinnunen and Kolehmainen 2019). In a touch, an infinity of others – other beings, other spaces, other times – is aroused (Barad 2012). Touching is also a matter of response, demonstrating how each of “us” is constituted in response-ability (Barad 2012). The article thus brings together cultural sensory studies’ theorization of skin as “open, relational, sentient and processual” as well as “human and non-human, material and immaterial” (Lafrance 2018, 4) and Alaimo’s (2008, 2018) notion of transcorporeality.

Transcorporeality – rather than intercorporeality – refers to the co-constitution of bodies, both human and nonhuman, through material corporeality across species. It stresses the ways the dynamic, material world crosses through bodies, transforms them, and is transformed by them (Alaimo 2008, 2018). In this study, the concept enables recognition of the co-researchers’ processual, tactile, affectively charged matterings with water and tree(s). We consider touch to be a site of tremendous affective capacities that extend deeply into the psychosocial affective realm (Kolehmainen and Kinnunen 2020; Paterson 2007a), being a vital mode of becoming with animate and inanimate nonhuman bodies. In this way, we seek to advance an understanding of the affective transcorporeality related to touch that extends beyond human or singular bodies.

From the perspective of the lived sensory body, Merleau-Ponty’s idea of a “mesh” of elemental being in which all beings participate, entangle, and entwine – the “flesh of the world” – provides one key to understanding the more-than-human transcorporeality of touching: “My body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover [...] this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the felt [*sentī*] at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping” (1968, 248). We take touch as an embodied worlding practice, a way to engage with human and nonhuman bodies in constantly reconstituted assemblages (cf. Stewart 2012). Through touch, particular “worlds” emerge for the individual through their engagement with a number of interrelated phenomena (ibid.; Palmer and Hunter 2018). Touch, we argue, is a vital mode of worlding and, through tactile relations, particular worlds emerge for individuals – caring, violent, complex (Kinnunen and Kolehmainen 2019) – even though the significance of these worldings has not been fully understood and remains under-researched.

Touch-walking: a hybrid experiencing-with method

A friend of Maria Nätynki, the first author of this article, frequently walks to touch and greet a majestic pine she calls “Mrs. Tree,” which stands in a primeval Finnish forest. She visits “Her Majesty” throughout the year, but especially when she is down or sad. She hugs its broad trunk, or rests against it, because it brings her solace. Apparently, there is something about this tree. It has powers that “spoke to her instantly” when she encountered “her” for the first time. Nätynki was intrigued by this relationship, especially as she herself does not have that kind of tie to natural bodies. Inspired by this peculiar “urge” to

touch a natural body, she wanted to explore similar meaningful touches, or affective tactile practices, by conducting a methodological experiment. The aim was to understand the co-researchers' sensory engagements with the natural bodies in all their richness, so Nätynki decided to expose herself to first-hand tactile experiences through "thick participation" (Samudra 2008) in the co-researchers' practices *in situ* (e.g. Samudra 2008; Stoller 1997). The method thus allows a researcher not only to observe but also to sensitize oneself to and "feel with" the field (Kolehmainen 2019). It thereby provides a researcher with the possibility of accessing the co-researcher's affective engagements with a chosen natural body on site, and simultaneously of using their own embodied experiences and interpretations as sources of knowledge production.

In December 2020, Nätynki posted a call on social media for people who regarded themselves as having a meaningful tactile connection with some natural body. These bodies were not predefined, so the call was open to tactile relationships with any kinds of natural elements. Water, pines, birch trunks, bark, moss, lichen, and rocks were mentioned as important natural bodies in the received 13 responses, 12 of which were from female respondents. All respondents lived in places with easy access to nature, and are accustomed to going outdoors and enjoying leisure landscapes (cf. MacNaghten and Urry 2001) such as trails in the woods or maintained winter swimming places. Three people who described themselves as regularly going out to touch their meaningful natural body were invited to participate in a touch-walk to carry out further elaborations.

In sensory studies, walking methods have previously been utilized to explore olfaction (Henshaw 2013; Low 2009; Tan 2013), soundscapes (Adams et al. 2008; Järviluoma 2002), hapticity of walking (Ingold 2004), and multisensorial experiences (Ingold and Vergunst 2016; Järviluoma and Vikman 2013; Järviluoma 2017, 2022; Lee and Ingold 2006). In human geography these methods have been used to perceive landscapes by foot (Edensor 2000; MacNaghten and Urry 2000; Macpherson 2009; Somoza Medina, Lois González, and Somoza Medina 2022). This study was inspired by the possibility offered by walking methods for investigating the embodied and site-specific emergence of sensory experiences and recollection. In sensory walking methods, the surrounding environment is taken not only as an actor which initiates reminiscence and narration (e.g. Järviluoma 2017) but, we propose, as a part of the transcorporeal sensory matterings that emerge between the bodies involved; the co-researchers', researchers' and natural bodies. In this research, walking and touching both formed part of the transcorporeal co-becomings with natural environments, elements, and beings.

Since the co-researchers' relationships with their natural bodies had lasted for years and were saturated with memories, Nätynki asked the co-researchers to narrate their "touch biographies" of tactile histories with their chosen natural bodies prior to the touch-walk. The idea of touch biography stems from Kinnunen's (2013) study, for which she collected ordinary Finnish people's written accounts of their lifelong experiences of touch and which Kinnunen and Kolehmainen later analyzed by applying affect theory (2019). It was anticipated that gathering touch biographies from this study's co-researchers would enrich the touch-walks. Two of the three co-researchers sent video diaries in which they recollected their tactile more-than-human relationship. They talked about the rituals and routines that inhered to touching, the history of this specific tactile relationship, and their overall relationship to the natural environment.

In February and March 2021, touch-walks were realized with three participants: Beth, Tina and Annie (all pseudonyms). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only two of the walks could be conducted in physical proximity. One took place via a FaceTime call across two continents. In this distant touch-walk, “authenticity” was simulated by walking in similar kind of environments and weather conditions, mediating facial expressions and other bodily gestures through smart phone. In this experiment, Nätyнки wanted to explore how far tactile relations could be researched remotely via technology. Relying upon mediated perception, Nätyнки could only witness and sense what technology permitted. The FaceTime call was thus more dependent on narration, as access to shared sensory matterings was limited, although it also provided valuable insights into tactical intercorporeal relations.

Walking in nature was an integral part of the co-researchers’ touching rituals. They all were accustomed to walk and took great pleasure in doing so. The walking routes and touched natural bodies meant enjoyable places for the co-researchers; something other than work or domestic routines, and sites of relaxation, togetherness, comfort, and calm (cf. MacNaghten and Urry 2001, 7). Walking to the sites worked as a “gateway” to the most cherished tactile contact with a natural body, since walking method attunes the participants to embodied ways of knowing where movement connects mind, body, and environment (Springgay and Truman 2018, 4). The co-researchers had chosen the routes and the sites, and Nätyнки followed their lead. She had no prior information on how the tactile encounters would occur. In the case of the distant touch-walk done across two sites via FaceTime call, Nätyнки was told beforehand what kind of landscape the co-researcher had chosen so she could mimic it as closely as she could in her site.

The walks, and the acts of touching that occurred during them, were recorded with a GoPro action camera. In the co-researchers’ recreational landscapes, they encountered corporeal and material, intimate and meaningful relationships with the ground, trees, streambeds, and water through touch. The co-researchers had established tactile contact with their significant natural environments through contact of their feet with the ground and touching the chosen natural bodies with their different body parts. Therefore, Nätyнки tried to open herself up to the studied “others” and absorb their sensory worlds as fully as possible (Stoller 1997, 45) by both walking and touching natural bodies, organic and inorganic, with her hands, cheeks, back, and feet. She sensitized herself to the earth beneath her feet, the rough texture of bark, cold water nipping her bare skin. Touch expanded into a whole-body awareness that incorporated the surface and composition of the natural bodies, the ground where Nätyнки and the co-researchers were moving, the breeze and sun on their skin, and the clothing (or lack of it) against their bodies. Thus, touch-walking attempts to grasp the more-than-representational; expressions, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, affective intensities, unexceptional interactions, and sensuous dispositions from these shared experiences (Lorimer 2005, 84).

Nätyнки harnessed her senses to attune also to sonic impressions from the environment, hints in the co-researchers’ speech, such as pitch, volume, intonation, cadence, and rhythm, and the co-researchers’ facial expressions and other gestures (Springgay and Truman 2018, 19–20). Such sensory engagements generated insights into transcorporeal, transmaterial tactile relations and their affective value. The documented touch-walks produced embodied-affective data (Kinnunen and Kolehmainen 2019), where sensory matterings were present in narrations, body language, affective experiences, and sensory

perceptions. The co-researchers were not asked to identify the affects related to their tactile relations, because that would have required familiarity with the term. Affects are sensations, feelings, and embodied emotions, as well as registers of experience best described as transsubjective, nonconscious, invisible, immaterial, and more-than-representational (Blackman 2012; Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Seyfert 2012). As an embodied, pervasive sensory experience, touch certainly evokes memories and utopias, and it (re)actualizes related meanings and affects (see Obrador 2012, 56). The emerging affective registers have their own temporalities: they carry past, present, and future, in partly unpredictable ways (Kinnunen and Kolehmainen 2019).

Beth

Beth is a Canadian pensioner aged 60 + . This calm, unassuming woman enjoys traveling, hiking, and walking. She is a person who absolutely loves trees. She goes to the woods approximately twice a week, often alone, and especially when she is stressed. This touch-walk took place in two locations: Beth walked on the Grand Trunk Trail in Canada, and Nätyнки in North Ostrobothnia, Finland. The weather was almost identical in both locations, with light frost and partial cloud, and the walk took place in coniferous forests resembling each other. Nätyнки called Beth via FaceTime so they could see fractions of each other's surroundings and share their sensory impressions, bodily expressions, and motions during the walk. Despite the distance, it was possible for Nätyнки and Beth to sense each other's presence by hearing breathing, talking and the sounds of walking and the surroundings, and by seeing facial expressions and movements of the body through the effective use of cameras in mobile phones.

Prior to the touch-walk, Beth sent a short introductory video to Nätyнки, in which Beth reminisced about her long-time fascination with trees. At the age of ten, the school had given Beth and her sister seedling trees, which they had planted. Beth's sister's tree had died, but her own had continued to thrive, even though it had been transplanted about 100 km away from its original location, into her sister's yard.

This was about 60 years ago, but when I go to my sister's house, I'll always have to look at my tree [emphasizing the words] – my tree [elongating the words].

When she talked about that tree, which had sprouted from seed and kept growing throughout the years, she repeated the words “my tree” and broke into a hearty smile. The affective recollection made her emphasize her achievement – her pride that the tree had survived all those transplantations.

The walk started with Nätyнки and Beth showing each other the surroundings at their own location. This technology-mediated touch-walking was heavily dependent on sight and hearing. Nätyнки had to tune into the sound of Beth's voice and scrutinize her slight facial expressions and subtle body language to detect affectively charged moments from both her narration and the acts of touch. Nätyнки asked Beth to describe her tactile experiences, which seemed challenging for her. Indeed, tactile experiences may be difficult to convey, describe and articulate through a common language and with the existing, insufficient lexicon (Guest et al. 2011; Macpherson 2009). Even though people easily recognize sensations that arise from within the body during activities like walking, there is a difficulty in communicating these corporeal feelings and haptic sensations. As

Paterson (2009, 766) states, “language is lacking, terms desert us, and such instantly recognizable experiences become barely articulated, or articulated barely.” This difficulty manifested itself as heavy sighs and bursts of nervous laughter several times during the walk, apparently when Beth felt uncertain. It seemed as if she thought her own narration was naïve or superficial. She apologized for her inability to verbalize her sensations by stating “I haven’t been analyzing this,” or “I don’t know what words to use.”

Touch-walk is about empathic attuning to multisensory and emplaced aspects of the (co-)researchers’ experiences (cf. Pink 2009, 63). Nätyнки attempted to ease Beth’s anxiety by suggesting that they just keep walking and talk about trees. After all, touch-walk is a form of “sentient participation” which opens an opportunity to the researcher and the co-researcher to share streams of perceptions, emotions, affective flows, and interpretations in embodied and verbal ways (cf. Kusenbach 2016, 154–155). This happened with Beth when she suddenly started to describe a springtime phenomenon, the circulation of sap, even though the walks were taking place at a time when the trees were dormant. For her, it was a moment when she especially enjoyed touching trees.

As the sap runs, you get little bubbles on the bark, and you push them. If you push them hard enough, you get the sap, and you get the smell of the balsam. So just even feeling the tree, the bark, you can see when the bubbles are small, and they get larger, and you feel they are getting softer and softer, so to me it’s the start of life, like the tree is coming back.

Something brought the circulation of sap to Beth’s mind, which speaks to the simultaneously determinate and indeterminate nature of sensory matterings (Barad 2012) and the multitemporality of affective sensations (Kinnunen and Kolehmainen 2019). In touch-walks, deliberate walking (through the forest) and intentional touching (of the trees) evoked various memories which may have lacked a clear sense of chronological time, and memories may also rush through subconsciously and unintendedly, through a fleeting glance, smell, or a quick brush. Hearing Beth’s joyful yet sudden recollections of pushing the sap bubbles with her fingertips made Nätyнки feel the same pushing in her own fingertips, too, and the need to experience this childlike play corporeally.

Sap carries energy out into the branches in springtime when new buds are forming. These life-sustaining liquids circulate in trees and, by touching the oozing sap, Beth connects to the “liquid” vitality of the tree. She felt that some sort of energy flowed to her body from trees, or even from single leaves on the ground; thus, she recognized trees as “vibrant matter” (Bennett 2004). She also felt that she received a part of the trees’ shared energy. Indeed, touch reveals our “withness with things” (Paterson 2007b, 95), “our being in a vibrant, quirky, overflowing material world” (Obrador 2012, 56).

Almost every time, I’m stopping and touching the leaf or the needles. I pick the leaves which have fallen. [...] Maybe I get their energy, I don’t know. [Sighing]. Trees interconnect with each other, and when I’m here, I feel part of the connection. I feel an energy coming from the trees.

The walk continued. Nätyнки asked Beth if she could touch a tree the way she would usually. She was at a spot where the trees were visible but out of reach, so she had to move elsewhere. She started walking faster, to a place where the branches would be reachable, and Nätyнки quickened her own pace too. Despite the distance and the ocean between them, the researchers were in sync with their walking rhythm, deepening their

bond. Beth reached a spot where she could take tender hold of a long branch. Her voice softened when she demonstrated:

When I'm like this [holding the branch in her hand], I feel like it is enveloping me . . .

Using the verb “envelop” indicated a sensation of safety. Beth said she felt “exposed” in her childhood environment, on the prairies, but not in the forest. Referring to Levinas’s concept of caress, Pau Obrador (2012; Obrador-Pons 2007) stresses nudists’ and sunseekers’ sensual delight in their peaceful relationship with natural elements. Nudism and sunseeking both express receptive modalities of touch. Beth’s haptic experience of the tree is highly receptive, but in a more intensive sense than a caress; she associates it with the feeling of being enveloped, held, or hugged. She also explained that the tree *was touching her*. There was “an intimate reciprocity to the senses” (Abram 1996, 277). We see this as an example of how touch, including its more-than-human forms, can generate a feeling of being held psychically (see Kinnunen and Kolehmainen 2019). Nätynki felt privileged since she was witnessing something quite intimate as Beth held the tree branch. However, she also felt like an outsider in this union, embarrassed even, because she could not relate to what Beth was experiencing.

Beth further described how being in the forest gave her the sensation that she could “walk through” the trees. Her feeling that the trees were enveloping and energizing her, and that she could walk through them, valorizes the porosity of skins and the transcorporeality of (affective) bodies. In transcorporeality, as Alaimo (2010, 2) describes, being human is intermeshed with the more-than-human world so that it is ultimately inseparable from “the environment.” Beth’s experienced transitivity of perception, the reversibility of the flesh, arose, to use Abram’s (1996, 76) words, “from the simple fact that our bodies are entirely continuous with the vast body of the land.” Sensory co-becoming thus happens across species (see Lykke 2019, 2022). Although this kind of co-becoming has been linked to the material processes of dying (ibid.), Beth affectively experienced a co-becoming that “undid” her sovereign “I” insofar as she could, at least temporarily, become *one* with the trees and their matter. Here, the traditional Western binaries of human/nonhuman and self/other both appear arbitrary, stressing the affective, material, and psychic entanglements of worlding practices.

Tina

Tina, aged 40+, is an entrepreneur who offers nature-assisted and Forest Mind method coaching to her clients. She previously lived in Finland’s biggest cities and was “estranged from nature” to the point where nature “felt frightening,” as she put it. Since moving to a rural area surrounded by forest, she has reconnected with nature. This played a crucial role when Tina suffered from severe burnout some years ago. She was in a condition where she could hardly get out of bed or summon the energy to move her feet. During that time, a particular pine became very meaningful to her – reminding us about more-than-human care that extends beyond intentional human care (Méndez de la Brena 2022; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

On a cloudy Saturday in March 2021, Tina took Nätynki to her tree. On the way there, she shared her touch-biography with Nätynki by describing her healing process, which had started with short walks. Once, when she had become too tired, she had leaned on

a pine that just happened to be standing conveniently beside the footpath. Tina had passed by this pine on her daily walks before her illness, and she had not paid attention to it. But after it gave her support when she most needed it, this pine became the goal of her walks. When she reached this tree, it was an accomplishment.

Every time Tina reached the pine, she removed her gloves and touched the tree trunk, since she wanted to feel the tree through her hands. When she had been sick, she had always needed to have skin contact with the bark. Tina had been exhausted and hardly able to function, and skin contact with this pine had provided her with a sense of being whole and safe. Tina's experience of receiving care by exposing her sensory body to the tree and encountering it through touch was even more intensive and vital than Beth's. Taking touch beyond manipulation to openness, reciprocity, and stillness (Obrador 2012) gave Tina the experience of being held by the pine. She explained her sensory routines, tactile experiences, and emerging affective energies:

I lean on the pine and sometimes put my forehead against the trunk. Then I start to look for heart shapes in the bark, because pine bark forms heart shapes. I draw my finger along those hearts and seek empowerment through them. [. . .] I am just there, in its lap. It is cradling me, and I receive its warmth. It lulls you, like saying everything is alright now. [. . .] You see that movement, the dancing branches, and hear the sounds when trees are talking to you. You are energized by the forest.

Research has shown that people seek a therapeutic power in forests and other natural elements. For Finns, forests have been found to offer sensations of naturalness and intimacy, provide feelings of joy, passion, and togetherness, and are experienced as places of peace and sanctity (Halla et al. 2021, 174). For many Finns, emotional engagement with nature and psychological benefits are more important motives for spending time in nature than physical activity (Rantala and Puhakka 2020, 495). For some people, as a study conducted in Great Britain also indicated (MacNaghten and Urry 2000, 170–171), the connection with nature is best achieved by spending time by themselves, for they value an unmediated sensory relationship with nature, just like Tina did. For Tina, the special bond with her pine was best cherished without the presence of other humans.

After hearing about Tina's story on the way to her pine, Nätyнки was expecting to encounter a distinctive tree; distorted, enormous, or otherwise deviant. Surprisingly, the pine tree they stopped at seemed to be just one among tens of similar pines that grew nearby; it was a typical commercial pine forest with neat rows of trees of the same size and age. However, for Tina, that one pine was special. Their companionship had begun by chance, but the repeated encounters had led to an intimate relationship which had therapeutic value for Tina.

Tina's case demonstrates how bodies interpermeate their surroundings and affects flow across human and nonhuman bodies (see Neimanis 2016, 76; Seyfert 2012). In particular, it exemplifies how some tactile assemblages of animate and inanimate bodies are not only "gatherings" but "happenings": the body becomes affectively contaminated by the encounter that directs its worlding (Tsing 2015). Not only did Tina have the ability to allow herself to be affected by the tree while in a vulnerable state (see Seyfert 2012, 35), but her case is also an example of trans-species communication (see Lykke 2022). Tina and her tree show how care, attention, and an embodied connection to the environment can develop into an intimate relationship (cf. Singh 2017) when more-than-human elements

are given agency and matter is not reduced to “just matter” (Barad 2003; Neimanis 2016). During the touch-walk, Tina was affectively moved when she recollected how she had felt thankful to the tree after her visits. As she told Nätynki about this, she had to pause and breathe deeply for a while before she could continue talking. Nätynki was also moved by Tina’s heartfelt gratitude toward the pine.

Next, Tina demonstrated how she greeted and treated the tree. She started to move around the trunk, saying that she often talked to the tree, admiring its features and shapes. Nätynki followed her, and together they walked around the pine, touching the bark lightly. Tina spoke gentle words to the pine.

You look very nice today with all your tassels and fringes [referring to beard moss on the side].
How do you look on this other side [going around the trunk]?

Tina started to look for the heart shapes on the bark that she had mentioned, which Nätynki had never noticed before. This demonstrated the intimate affective relationship between Tina and the tree, a tactile relationship that was an example of more-than-human intimacy (Kolehmainen et al. 2022). Tina showed the shapes to Nätynki and together they traced the hearts with their fingertips. She had done this during her illness to “exchange love-filled energy.” Tina felt energy radiating from the tree as warmth, regardless of the weather, although she could not find “any rational explanation for that.” Her ritual always ended the way it started: she leaned on the trunk, closed her eyes, and just swayed along with the subtle movements of the pine. This is how Tina and Nätynki ended up their experiencing, by leaning on the trunk. There they were, eyes closed, in silence, bodies dissolved into unity with the swaying pine. The sound of the wind in the forest followed the rhythm of the swaying pine as Nätynki and Tina leaned their backs against it.

Annie

Annie is a business designer, aged 40 + . Her work is very demanding, not least socially, so in her free time Annie practices yoga and meditation and retreats to the woods. One of her routines to unwind is winter “swimming,” which for her is more than merely a convivial activity. Indeed, she goes into waters throughout the year because, for her, “true nature contact” is transmitted only through touch. This, however, aligns with Finnish winter swimmers’ fascination with the activity since they experience winter swimming as a way of connecting with nature and sensing the surroundings. Especially during the pandemic, many swimmers felt that natural elements, in particular waters, became like close friends whose care and companionship they could count on (Heikura et al. 2022, 90). Annie also seemed to have this kind of relationship with “her” waters.

When Annie is staying in Oulu, which has around 200,000 inhabitants, she swims in a river that runs through the city downtown. But when she is at her partner’s rural cottage, she swims in “her pond,” a small forest pond “away from civilization.” Although both waters are important for Annie in their own ways, she senses and values them differently. The pond is a very specific being, whom Annie greets, catches up with, thanks, and talks to “about life.” In March 2021, Annie and Nätynki went for a swim in the Oulu river, a “substitute” for Annie’s pond in winter when the pond is frozen. They walked along the riverside path that Annie always takes to the winter swimming hole, which is kept open by a pump and is maintained

by the city of Oulu. During the walk, Annie talked about her swimming routine. Before she even left the house, she would always give herself a mental pep talk, because going into the icy water takes courage. Her gear is always the same: a woolly swimming hat, neoprene gloves, swimming shoes, and a swimsuit.

During the walk, Annie spotted ducks swimming in groups in the river. For Annie, aquatic birds represent her spiritual relationship with wild nature. Specifically, for her, the birds were reincarnations of her deceased loved ones:

Birds are always somewhere around. They fly before you, or near you. I think that they are messages from somewhere. A person from your life from somewhere because I believe in reincarnation.

Annie enjoyed watching the birds swimming close by and sharing the same water with her. However, she doubted whether the birds felt the same way. She thought that human beings had acted for too long as if they were superior to nature, and so the birds did not necessarily welcome people into “their environment.” In any case, she felt that she connected also with the feminine energy of her forebears by being in the water. Her female ancestors transferred “earthly female energy” through her skin in the water. Cultivating feminine energy is a way to seek balance (Salmenniemi and Kemppainen 2020), here connected with both transgenerational and trans-species corporealities.

Into the icy water they went. Annie greeted the “duckies,” as she sweetly calls them. Annie never really swims but stands in the water until she feels contented. Annie and Nätyнки stood neck deep in the river, their eyes level with the surface. According to Annie, this was the best way of sensing the water: the tactile encounter with the water was interconnected also with visual perception. Suddenly, they glanced at each other in surprise. Due to an undercurrent, the sand beneath their feet sank a bit and shifted off, thus altering their tactile engagements with the sand and water, and so becoming more conscious of them (see Obrador 2012, 64). Even if the tactile encounter is sought after and anticipated, the experience of embodiment may include something unforeseen, which may exceed the ability of the body to contain or absorb (Thrift 2008, 10). After regaining their balance, Annie wrinkled her nose in revulsion.

Nätyнки: You talked about the smell earlier [referring to Annie’s touch biography], but how about your pond?

Annie: No, no! I just dry myself and . . . of course, I go for a sauna in the evening, but no . . . It is so clear and clean! Not at all! Because it is totally odorless.

Even though Annie needed the touch of the water in the city too, she made a qualitative distinction between her waters. Annie referred to the impurity of the river by using adjectives such as “smelly,” “stinky,” and “muddy.” After every swim, she would scrub her swimming gear to prevent the “sticky stench” from pervading the bathroom. Many winter swimming enthusiasts share similar judgments with Annie. They would rather avoid urban, industrial environments and swim in peaceful and beautiful natural waters than in “dirty” waters or “boring” inside cold pools, as a study in Finland showed (Heikura et al. 2022, 91–92). Besides touch, Annie apparently gave olfaction a specific role in her sensory environmental relationships, both current and remembered (cf. Rodaway 1994). She contrasted the qualities of the river with her pond, which she felt was odorless,

clear, and so pure that it was unnecessary to shower after swimming. Swimming with Annie, as in touch-walks with other co-researchers too, indicated that occasionally touch was a compelling sensory practice that generated multisensory encounters (Howes 2019). It was challenging, if not impossible, to narrow perception down to the tactile alone (cf. Järviluoma 2019). Rather, the world displayed sensibilities other than our own, sensibilities that preceded consciousness and even body-based perception.

"When do you know you are ready to leave?," Nätynki asked Annie. Annie recalled her pond once more.

I stand there as long as I feel like I am part of the pond and unite with the water. I like to stay there until I feel the water moving. This happens especially on rainy or stormy days ... Then the pond swells. When I sense these small waves in my body, I feel like I am part of nature, part of that pond.

When swimming or being in the water, the touch of the water against one's body is no longer a salient object of awareness (Radcliffe 2008, 304). Becoming one with the water is the key experience Annie seeks, and it is essentially gained by feeling the movement of water through touch. Instead of enacting the kinesthetic modalities of touch during swimming, the feeling of being united with water in nature is more interoceptive and receptive (see Obrador 2012).

Further, the experience of becoming united with the water may become an event in a new kind of attentiveness to the ways of embodiment, such as the "body of water," as Neimanis (2016) calls her feminist posthuman figure. For Neimanis (2016, 30), water represents a particular kind of embodied and environmental materiality as a specific planetary habitat and "species-specific boundary." Following Neimanis, we believe that paying attention to the planetary movements, transcorporeal circulations, and sensory qualities (and politics) of water, including our own watery embodiment, pushes us to understand how we live as "wet and spongey bodies" (ibid.) in assemblages with other watered bodies. This also connects questions of feminism more directly to environmental concerns – not only as something we must deal with, but also as something we embody, intimately and diffusely (ibid.). Thus, we cannot escape our ethical agency.

Concluding remarks

This paper analyzed three co-researchers' deeply meaningful tactile relationships with natural bodies from the vantage point provided by cultural touch and skin studies, and posthumanistically oriented feminist new materialisms and affect studies. Two of the studied cases valorized an affectively charged relationship with trees, while one co-researcher had an intimate relation with water. All cases demonstrated how more-than-human touches carry affective registers of togetherness and reciprocal care. These companionships were studied by touch-walks, a method developed for this micro-research, which included walking together to the chosen natural body and touching it. Methodologically, this paper then contributed to discussions of sensory ways of knowing and the production of fieldwork research material by moving, sensing, and talking with co-researchers. Further, the study experimented with how sensory research material can be constructed via technological devices, in this case a FaceTime call and GoPro action camera.

The method required the researcher's full immersion in sensory practices and the exposure of her body to the transcorporeal energies that emerged across human and nonhuman bodies during the touch-walks. This was the first trial of the touch-walking method, but the authors received encouraging results from the experiment. Touch-walking complements other sensory walking methods, where touch has been only implicitly considered or walking itself has been scrutinized haptically. The main strength of the method was that it attuned the researcher's body to haptic knowledges of natural bodies, multisensory impressions of the environment and affective engagements with natural bodies in a way that extends beyond words. However, these experiences were grounded by asking the co-researchers to construct a short video touch biography, if they would, about their relationship with their chosen natural body. Two of them sent videos before the touch-walk, in which they shared their thoughts on and memories of their relationship and introduced their touch rituals. One co-researcher shared her touch biography by talking during the touch-walk. We certainly find the biographies to have enriched the touch-walks, and vice versa. Together they enabled us to understand how the sensory matterings happen, feel, and may be conveyed through language. Further, we suggest that besides touch biographies, it was the physical proximity and shared practices during the touch-walks that encouraged the co-researchers to reflect on their relationships and related affects, as Beth and Tina confirmed in their feedback afterward:

It [walking together] made me more aware of what I was feeling and touching. A deeper understanding rather than superficial. Overall, walking together helped me articulate these feelings. Walking with you [referring to Nätynki] helped me to get more immersed in it [touching]. It has made me aware of what I am feeling when I am touching trees. I feel calmness when I do it. Now that I think about it, I have touched trees that have died or those that have broken and fallen. I have silently said that "I am sorry for this has happened to them." (Beth)

I think that I could not have been able to create the same knowledge without you [referring to Nätynki] in my sensation experience. If I would have just written about them, I would have not realized so many things while we were in the woods. And, actually, what it has yielded afterwards as well. (Tina)

The studied tactile relationships with natural bodies provide concrete examples of how we become with and across bodies, insofar as the co-researchers experience themselves as becoming one with their chosen natural bodies. These relations are best understood as transcorporeal since the relationship between the human and the environment dissolves as the outline of the human is traversed by substantial material interchanges (Alaimo 2018). Our study reveals how the human co-researchers were not only traversed by material interchanges but intentionally sought to be traversed. The co-becomings fostered by tactile and sensual more-than-human intimacies are affective, material, and psychic. Transcorporeality also highlights that codependencies across species (e.g. Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Tsing 2015) are essential to an understanding of human existence and lifeworlds. Touch entwines temporalities, spaces, bodies, and affects.

Further, our co-researchers' specific relationships demonstrate intentional, sociomaterial constitutions of intimacy and its more-than-human constituencies (Latimer and López Gómez 2019) – in other words, particular worlding practices that make worlds by seeking and cherishing contact with natural bodies. The relationships between the co-researchers

and their significant natural bodies entail multilayered, more-than-human intimacies. The co-researchers had very personal attachments to the trees and water, yet they cherished those bonds in privacy, without the presence of other humans. The tactile relations discussed in this paper also exemplify how intimacy is made and unmade of and with multiple entangled materialities (Kolehmainen 2022) – and beyond, since experiences of becoming one with natural bodies are also material intimacies *in situ*, multivocal and multitextural entanglements between the human and nonhuman (Rajan-Rankin 2021). Thus, this article highlights the importance of seeing intimacy as a more-than-human matter that offers possibilities for sustainable and ethical coexistence across species.

The touch-walks opened sites of affective socionatural encounters (cf. Singh 2017) that were saturated with feelings of reciprocal care, but also reminded us that there are other ways of touching nature: violent, neglectful, uncaring ways. We agree with Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 32), who stresses the reversibility of touch and thus forces us to rethink the complex circulation of care between human and nonhuman bodies from the perspective of relational obligation. We think that the ongoing unprecedented ecological crises and accelerated extinctions force us to elaborate more sensitive and sensible environmental ethics (see Lorimer 2012; Obrador 2012) by asking how we relate to animals, plants, and inanimate bodies through touch, and what kind of agency we accept from them (cf. Alaimo 2008). Plants, water, rocks, and sand do not touch us intentionally, but they do respond to our touch, and they are part of the composition of tactile assemblages charged with affects.

We believe that alternative conceptions and ways of encountering matter, such as through tactile and multisensory engagements, may be one way to “accentuate the lively, active, emergent, agential aspects of nature” and “foster ethical/epistemological stances that generate concern, care, wonder, respect, caution (or precaution), epistemological humility, kinship, difference, and deviance,” as Alaimo (2010, 143) urges. Thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across bodies, transcorporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures (Alaimo 2010, 3). All touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the other is touching all others, including the “self” (Barad 2012). The touch-walks with the co-researchers indeed brought insights of being touched and transformed by natural bodies.

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