



Gesture, Landscape and Embrace: A Phenomenological Analysis of Elemental Motions

by Stephen J. Smith

Abstract

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh of the world' speaks to an embodied connection to the spaces we inhabit deeply, primally, elementally. Flesh suggests water and its circulations, air and its respirations, earth and its conformations, fire and its inspirations. Flesh speaks to our bodily relations with the elements of a more-than-human world. This paper explores the felt imperative to these relations where, as Merleau-Ponty put it, 'all distance is traversed' and wherein movement arises not specifically in the body, but in the nexus and intertwining of bodily engagement with the world. There is a primacy to movement that registers in the living body in its carnal ties to the elements of the world's flesh. The 'radical reflection' on the 'flesh of the world' to which this analysis aspires in turn bears upon the general field of gestural reciprocities and connections, providing the insight that intimate gestures of the flesh, such as the embrace, are primordial attunements, motions of rhythm and reciprocity, that emanate from the world in identification with it. The embrace is fundamentally, elementally, a gesture of landscape dwelling. A phenomenology of elemental motions provides the textual reminder that to be at home in various landscapes means to know what it is to be embraced corporeally, sensually, within the human and especially the more-than-human folds of the world.

Introduction

The promise of a loving connection to one another and to the world around us is contained within the notion of 'an embrace'. No ordinary gesture, an embrace is irreducible to the clasps and grasps, the holdings and enfoldings, or the comforting and supporting motions of persons coming together. Embracing another, and that which is other, is the founding gesture, the originary state, the comforting, supporting, sustaining, nurturing union of flesh. It is the "echolalian" space to which Julia Kristeva refers, the connection of mother, child and world in the amniotic fluidity, "liquid warmth" and "inner surf" of the womb (Ackerman, 1990, p. 78). It is the "oceanic feeling" described by Sigmund Freud where the infant

"seems to merge with the beloved or its environment" (Ackerman, 1999, p. 17).

The space of otherness is compressed to slivers of light in the creases and folds of cuddling, cradling and carrying an infant around. The toddler knows, too, the distance that can be breached by an embrace that dulls the pain of falling down, arrests the fear of shadowy imaginings, soothes the tiredness of too much action, or lessens the agitation of too many attentions. The older child, the teenager, may have less need of this comfort and support, or so it seems. A hug, a pat on the back, a foot rub, walking side by side, an arm resting lightly on the shoulder - these are the remnants of the full-bodied gestures of earlier years. On the playground we see bear-hugs, gropings, tackles, the rough-and-tumble pinning and grabbing motions of

The *IPJP* is a joint project of [Rhodes University](http://www.rhodes.ac.za) in South Africa and [Edith Cowan University](http://www.edithcowan.edu.au) in Australia. This document is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or in part via any medium (print, electronic or otherwise) without the express permission of the publishers.

preadolescence. "Come and give your grandmother a big hug" becomes a bothersome chore, especially for the adolescent who now fantasizes about a more carnal embrace. That clammy-sweet smell of loose, powdered flesh lays claim to a virility lying low, obvious at other times in the striated flesh of motion, yet suffocated for the moment under the weight of an old woman's nostalgic yearnings.

Embraces change in form, from the amniotic fluidity of the womb, the maternal and paternal comforts of childhood, the ribald play of adolescence, to the carnal fluidity of lovers entwined. As well as this change of form to an overt sexuality, there is the widening, encircling, encompassing and extending meaning of the embrace. A gesture of affiliation and attachment, there is also a gesturing towards a communion with others and with an expanding world. The embrace of a child foretells the possibility of a child-like embrace of the world. It intimates a sense of being at home in the world, although not necessarily in any developmental way, but more so by way of lived reminders of the 'chiasmic' space of difference between self and other (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1968) that can be breached, if only momentarily.

Child-like Embraces

An embrace that is not just by the other, but of another, a place, an event, a landscape, seascape, aircscape or firescape, resides in physical memory, blood memory, in an expressivity that may not be distilled in specific recollections, or in "meanings conceived inwardly", but rather as anticipations of "contacts our body will make" and impressions of "embraces our body has already made and no longer makes" (Lingis, 2004, p. 39). Such an expressivity is of a space and time of animation that is prior to the 'I can' of human intention. It is of a kinaesthetic landscape, a space and time of transcendental motility (cf. Sheets-Johnstone, 1999), in which what I can and cannot do is first of all a capability that is "more than the 'I can' of the body itself" (Irigaray, 1986, p. 248).

This transcendental expressivity, transcendental only in referring to an originary gestural landscape that is not confined to the 'I can' of human intention, discloses another side to the embrace, a worldly side, from which the embrace appears at times to originate. We receive an embrace. We are swept up in an embrace. The embrace intimates an elemental vitality that may be taken up as human intention, yet is really only "held together in movement" that expresses a "natural typology of being" moved beyond oneself (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, pp. 21-22). Memorable embraces are those that leave an impression on us. Their lived meanings, which are retained in certain

memories of childhood, remain phenomenologically accessible. The task, however, is not to separate the posited experiences of children and the possible experiences of adults; it is to recollect, remember, imagine and describe recognizably a child-like sense of landscape animation - an embrace of the flesh that is not just of the world but received *from* the world as a folding, enfolding and unfolding of elemental space and time.

A spacious embrace

The embrace is so deeply rooted in human experience that its meaning is at once literal and figurative. After all, it is the emotional registers, transcendent meanings, the sense of possibilities prefigured in the tangible moment, that make hugging or even holding a child seem like an embrace. Conversely, it is the narrowing of intention, self-preoccupation, and personal registers of feeling, that make this tangible connection to the child seem more like grasping, clutching and clinging to another body which, under such pressure, feels squeezed and smothered. The embrace expresses a mutuality laying claim to a space not only within but also beyond the here and now. For, as well as another person, one can embrace an idea, a religion, some change, literature, a new way of living, and so on, and one can in turn be embraced by family, a fellowship, community, an order and by events and spaces that, for some, carry sacred value. There is capaciousness to the space of the embrace.

Susan Griffin (1995, p. 182) writes:

It is as if the land has curled up to embrace me. Everything is erotic. The intense yellow of the fields. The heavy heat and deep shadow Fireflies at night. Dark sudden rain clouds. Early morning milk warm from the cow. Berries bleeding into my hands and then into my mouth as I pick them. Rough hair and sweat of the pony I ride bareback.

This passage summons a host of childhood memories, but there is also something more to these words - some sense of being at home in the world that is heard in the line "It is as if the land has curled up to embrace me."

The child climbs trees, finding purchase on limbs that spring back against her weight, to secure a resting place amidst the thicket of leaves. Her initial trepidations are assuaged by the taste of the breeze, by the gentle sway of the outermost branches, by being held in the tree's embrace. Children play Hide-and-Seek in the early hours of evening. The shimmer

of the day's heat gives way to cooling twilight and, in the waning light, silhouetted shapes scurry behind bushes and boulders to merge into the folds of the night. A new day dawns, early morning light, sun stars dance on the water. The child races to the water's edge. He rushes into the waves in a burst of vitality and comes up coughing and spluttering. He retreats to the shore, advances again, back and forth, ebbing and flowing with the waves, until he lies in the shallows, rolling with the wash of froth and foam that laps around him. Those who remember being so embraced by the land, the thicket of leaves and branches, the evening, an early summer morning, know the spaces of rapture, delight and even ecstasy that punctuate a childhood and extend as possibilities of worldly connectedness into adulthood.

There is a tangibility even to figurative embraces that uncovers, strips away, what it means to be at home in the world and with others. In this touch and being touched, this compelling sense of connection, comes a realization that the meaning of being at home is about being embraced by the world, sensuously, erotically, corporeally. It is the carnal moment, vulnerable in another's arms, caressed and soothed in a capacious intimacy. It is "the instant" that "contains the moment as a tear contains the ocean" (David, 1996, p. 58). It is an embrace that contains the world, if but for a moment.

A timely embrace

Living in the moment, eternity in the moment, is the intimate embrace of which Rainer Maria Rilke spoke:

A tenth of a second, the duration of a sigh
 such moments should be celebrated.
 This highly subjective, immeasurable,
 rebellious time should be taken seriously,
 fully experienced. It should be examined, a
 piece of golden dust, a little yellow patch
 on a wall in Delft from a Vermeer painting
 Crumbs of reality, bursts of light, these
 tiny experiences appear as parts of reality,
 of light, of silence, just as Cezanne's
 brushstrokes are part of the mountain. In
 order to take them into account, to
 "understand" them, it would be enough to
 acknowledge their unquestionable status as
 particular experiences. And to give this
 particular intimacy the essential place it
 should have in the narration of a truly
 human history, enlarged, improved, lit from
 within, enriched by its own shadows.
 (David, 1996, p. 55; see Rilke, 1982, p. 34)

What makes for the intimacy of the moment and the moment's eternity is the gesture, fleeting though it may be. No idle movement, the timely embrace transcends simple motion to express an emotional simplicity. It arrests the chatter of words and lays out a truth to enduring relationships. There is realization, in the moment, of what was latent all along.

An embrace is the gesture that sets upon time, summoning many pasts, receiving possible futures, capturing the intensity and poignancy of this moment, here and now. The joys of anticipation and realization merge. A player received by team-mates in the moment of scoring, or an award winner turning to friends and family at the auspicious moment, embrace one another and invariably turn to soak up the adulation. The mood and feeling of their embraces linger, just as the comforting hug in distress, disappointment or grief releases tears that cement a bodily connectedness. One lingers in the moment, yet the moment is just that - fleeting, spontaneous, yet all the more thoughtful and thoroughly sincere for it. But maybe the sporting embrace and the award congratulations look, at times, quite rehearsed. Like celluloid lovers running toward one another in open-meadowed or sandy-beached clichés, one braces emotionally with sigh or smile for them coming together. The embrace suffers by running before itself. Alternatively, in memory, as if holding a snapshot, the moment of togetherness is savoured, only to lose over time its poignancy, pungency, vividness, its delight or compelling sadness, which is in effect its touch, tangibility and the sense of being touched over time. Here the embrace suffers by running out of itself.

The embrace is always of a particular time, a particularly intimate moment, yet phenomenology and indeed life itself obliges us to address, as Rilke did, "the essential place [the embrace] should have in the narration of a truly human history, enlarged, improved, lit from within, enriched by its own shadows". Imagine the arrival of a loved one, say, a son or daughter from whom one has been away for some time. Anticipation can be barely contained, yet one wonders what this child, let us say of barely three years of age, will remember of past times together and what it will take to create again the closeness of those times. Any concerns are misplaced as soon as the child arrives. He sees me, runs to me, and throws himself into my arms. Smiling, giggling, turning back and forth between others and me, he holds tight as we carry one another through this moment of reunion. Now, remembering this time, the moment remains elusive, past, no longer existing, except in the resonances of present moments. The recollection blurs with other memories of being greeted by this

child, his siblings, and of these children's comings and goings at different times. It runs into the image of a much older child, as a sixteen-year-old, himself leaving home for an extended period. What traces of a particularly memorable embrace that now remain lie in the recognition of a child long grown up, finding his own home in the world, and other children who have come along since. As then and now, the timely embrace is not just a remembering of ourselves. It is not what we hold onto that matters, even if that were possible. Following Emmanuel Levinas (1987), it is the moment of giving oneself up that time itself embraces. And that is the most present, most real, most ourselves we can be.

Who can wilfully extend an embrace? Beyond its margins of comfort, support, intimacy and momentary engrossment, it so quickly becomes cloying, clinging, constraining, weighty and confining. The duration of the timely embrace, however, is timeless "because what you cover so tenderly does not disappear because you can sense underneath that touch some kind of pure duration" (Rilke, 1978, p. 32).

The Rapture of Childhood

There is agency to the embrace. Better still, there is intentionality of touch, of kinaesthesia and of the flows and circulations that animate the flesh. As Catherine David (1996, p. 147) reminds us: "Between an absent-minded stroke and a loving embrace, the distance is the same as that between a daily gesture made consciously and the involuntary trembling of hands afflicted with Parkinson's disease." As with eros, the touch of the caress is irreducible to the motivations of ethics, law, politics, religion or pedagogy (cf. O'Neill, 1992). This touch can, however, be reduced phenomenologically to the sphere of memory and autobiography for the sake of discerning a contact with the world rooted in childhood and the rapture we now know in child-like moments. The gestural focus becomes highly particularized, essentially personalized, for the sake of discerning most tactfully the elemental connection to the world that is embraced.

The spell of the senses

When I was in elementary school I learned a poem that I still recite from time to time. It is entitled "The Surfer" and the lines that speak most compellingly of a world embrace are the following:

He thrust his joy against the weight of the
sea;
climbed through, slid under, those long
banks of foam -

(hawthorne hedges in spring, thorns in the
face stinging).

How his brown strength dove through the
hollow and coil
of green-through weirs of water!
Muscle of arm thrust down long muscle
of water;
and swimming so, went out of sight
where mortal, masterful, frail, the gulls
went wheeling
in air as he in water, with delight.

Turn home, the sun goes down; swimmer,
turn home.

Last leaf of gold vanishes from the sea-
curve.

Take the big roller's shoulder, speed and
swerve;

Come to the long beach like a gull diving.

The poem is memorable for me because it points toward an experience I grew up with of playing in the waves - of "the hollow and coil" that enfolds yet is the recessive space that affords a fluid connection to the wave. It addresses the sensual embrace, the thrust of joy against a worldly weightiness, "brown strength", "muscle of arm thrust down long muscle of water", brute physis that hollows and coils and makes an ecstatic moment. The flesh calls louder than the caution "Turn home, the sun goes down, swimmer, turn home."

The trick to getting beyond the break in bodysurfing is to keep diving to the bottom as the waves crash above. Feeling the swirling, sucking mass of water atop, there is comfort in the still point below. Champion bodysurfer, Mark Cunningham, describes it thus:

It's just so wonderful to be totally
immersed in it That's what's so
invigorating, satisfying, soothing to me.
God, just that sensation of water flying
by, rushing like a fire hose against my
chest. The sense of speed which is
phenomenal. Just threading the needle
through those white liquid hurricanes,
spinnin' down trying to get you.
Swimming through the shore break,
diving under the close-outs, being there
face-to-face with a closed-out wave, and
just submerging at the last possible
second as the lip goes right over your
head. (Jenkins, 2003, p. 192)

The only trouble is that you do have to come up for
air and can never be quite sure there is not another

dumper poised to put you through the washing cycle. But once in deeper water, beyond the impact zone, you float in a sudden calm, scanning the horizon for incoming swells. A set approaches. You let the first wave pass, the second, and just when you fear the opportunity has been lost, a third, larger wave forms. You start swimming with powerful lunges, pulling yourself just ahead of the steepening wave face, head and shoulders down, pressing down, legs rising, and feel yourself sucked back, lifted onto the wave and carried to its crest. The wave starts spilling downward, rolling upon itself, and from its shoulder you slide down and across its glassy curving face.

Then there are the angry seas - grey, wind-whipped, frothing at the mouth, spewing up detritus. You would be crazy to surf these seas, but when you are young and invincible, they beckon too. They wave in a more malevolent, sneering, ironic way. They challenge your powers, your strengths and strokes, your nerve.

There is something primordially comforting about the embrace of the sea. Clarice Lispector (1974, p. 162) writes:

There it is, the open sea, the most incomprehensible of non-human existences. And here is the woman, standing on the beach, the most incomprehensible of living beings ... Their mysteries can only meet if one surrenders to the other: the surrender of two unknowable worlds, made with the confidence with which two understandings give themselves up.

A long-time surfer sees this surrender in the motions of surfing where “[w]omen surfers tend to go with the flow rather than battling the break ... women surf with such fluid grace because there is a unique symbiotic relationship between them and the water” (Dixon, 2001, p. 17). Another writer, Roger Housden (1993, pp. 180, 181), expresses a similar yet less gendered sentiment:

We, too, are blown through with the same voice that speaks on the shore, and even hums a low, low murmuring, too low for our ordinary ears, in the rocks and the stones and the still mountainside. Somewhere in the heart of the crashing wave, at the heart of the listening human, is a sound so delicate and constant it is almost unbearable to hear. It is utmost ecstasy, and beckons our dissolution. In India, musicians have always spoken of *anahata*, the nameless

sound within every sound. Few sounds can draw us more closely to it than the voice of the ocean.

Today I am looking out of my window at the green, purple and orange lorikeets squawking in the bottlebrush and wattle trees, hearing the kookaburras laughing in the background. The temperature is 26 degrees as I head off to catch the water taxi to Stradbroke Island. This is one of the large sand islands of Moreton Bay with surfing beaches stretching forty kilometres or so. Here the water is crystal clear, the sand squeaks so finely, and a few naked bodies signal an animal sensuality to this magical place. Here I realize why my fellow Australians are so laconic; it’s because the world does so much of the work for them. Here “the spell of the sensuous” (cf. Abram, 1996) is cast. The swirling vortex of pleasure appears in the coil and hollow of the perfectly breaking wave. Salt air in the nostrils, caked on the skin, crusting over the ruddy flush of a day on the beach.

Yesterday I rode downtown to the centre of the city where a chlorinated lagoon has been created, complete with white sandy beach and palm trees. Sitting there amongst all the flesh, I experienced sadness at this titillation of the senses, this smorgasbord of sensuality. Like a playboy pictorial, all the beautiful bodies appear out of place, foregrounded too starkly, up for view rather than being part of the view I will have today of a human-nature connectedness. I think to myself: What will it be like to dive into the waves, entering a flow which brings the sides of human nature together? What will it be like to dive into the secretion of erotic engagement, not held or held back by a source, and experience a deep caressing in that moment when I glimpse another self swimming as if in a great watery world beneath all definitions I have been given? What will it be like to do this, without drowning?

It was not always so. My earliest memories of the ocean were of standing at the water’s edge, staring into green mountains that threw themselves at me, watching the bobbing heads of those I knew disappear from view, feeling a panic that beyond the froth at my feet lay hidden forces well beyond the ken of a four-year-old. As a child on family holidays at the ocean I would much prefer to swim and play within the calm reaches of the river estuary, within the protective enclave of buoys roped together, than around the rock groyne where surf and beach collided. Not until the bodily vigour of puberty arose did the rollicking, rolling ocean call to me. By this time, not even the follies of surfing, whether being caught in riptides, pounded into sand bars, or gasping for air above

swirling, sucking dumpers, could break the spell of an ocean sensibility. Surfing, windsurfing, surf skiing and ocean kayaking were later pursuits, extending the comfort of the protective place, whether a backwater or pools left behind by the receding tide. An ocean of billowing forms that rails against the possessive form needs to be entered fully in the fluidity of appreciative, synchronistic motions; it needs first to be entered through the tranquil enclave of still, gently lapping waters.

Beyond my grasp

We mostly pursue different registers of worldly connection that have to do with gaining “optimal distance,” a “maximum of visibility” and “sharpness of perception” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. 250, 302), what Dreyfus (1996) calls “maximum grip”. Always grasping, taking hold of ideas, reaching for words, too often we are left gasping, vainly clinging to things that can’t be held or that simply seep away. Marriages break up, friendships wane, moments of joy and delight come and go. That’s graspable, but then the best dissolves, and that’s not. More positively, children move beyond the places and spaces under parental view. They test the hold we have on them just when we must learn the art of letting go. They grow up to the extent that we relinquish our grasp on their childhood. Their lives admit a much wider, encompassing comfort in the elements of the world.

The solace and solitude of playing in the waves, surfing in the ocean or, in myriad examples of the rapture of childhood, being part of the motions of the landscape, make us mindful of the limits of the grasp and, indeed, of that grasping at the world that “transforms the life of the world into something finished, dead, because the world thus loses its own life, a life always foreign to us, other than us” (Irigaray, 2002, p. 122). Whispers of the ocean, sounds that Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1955) says come as “gifts from the sea”, murmurings of the ebbing tide, these are the sounds of being alone yet connected. Sitting, watching, or wandering the beach in solitary pleasure, one hears what it means, as Rilke says, to love the distance that makes it possible to see one another whole and against a wide sky. As Lindbergh (1955, pp. 114, 115) tells it:

For it is only framed in space that beauty blooms. Only in space are events and objects and people unique and significant - and therefore beautiful. A tree has significance if one sees it against the empty face of sky. A note in music gains significance from the silences on either

side. A candle flowers in the space of night. Even small and casual things take on significance if they are washed in space, like a few autumn grasses in one corner of an Oriental painting, the rest of the page bare.

The supreme task of living is to love the distance between all that one loves and to live by it. For the depth of the flesh is truly a proximity through distance (see Cataldi, 1993). Looking distantly across the ocean, being drawn into a landscape that rustles and moves and beckons to us, we feel the solace of connectedness, beyond nostalgic, possessive desire, grasping, craving and longing, to things here and now. The thought intrudes that it is time to go home, and certainly there is a palpable undertow in that direction; however, the waves, the motions and emotions of the moment, summon a living in the present. “Turn home, the sun goes down; swimmer, turn home” the aboriginal muse says. Yet the eros of the present, the sounds, smells and tastes of the moment anchor us. A creative, passionate, sensuous life, we hope: “Muscle of arm thrust down long muscle of water; and swimming so, went out of sight where mortal, masterful, frail the gulls went wheeling in air as he in water, with delight”.

We return to the ‘embrace’, reminded now by what has been known in some lived experiences and desirous of what is possible in the folds of the world we presently inhabit. Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 271) also rethought his relation to the world and to others, and in some working notes he wrote shortly before he died he said: “the body *stands* before the world and the world upright before it, and between them there is a relation that is one of embrace.”. To feel the folds as hollows and coils, a receptivity to the “thrust of joy”, of “muscle of arm down long muscle of water”, of spaces, places that open and close, is life-affirming, life-generating. In a real sense, it brings fecundity and voluptuousness to daily existence. It is supremely erotic, this imagination and invagination of the flesh, yet all too often we end up swirling and tumbling in vortexes of desire, denial, disappointment and depression. Ah, but that’s the risk!

Elemental embraces

The Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood (1972, p. 74) recalls a time of childhood, swimming and diving in a lake, when motions were the primary means of connecting to the world.

I go off the dock and wade in from the shore, slowly, splashing water over my shoulders and neck, the cold climbing

my thighs; my footsoles feel the sand and the twigs and sunk leaves. At [one] time I would dive and coast along the lake floor with my eyes open, distance and my own body blurred and eroding; or out further, diving from the canoe or the raft and turning on my back under the water to look up, the bubbles fleeing from my mouth. We could stay in until our skins became numbed and turned a strange colour, bluish-purple. I must have been superhuman, I couldn't do it now. Perhaps I'm growing old, at last, can that be possible?

This recollection strikes a chord with the following narrative taken from Carlos Eire's (2003, pp. 12-13) remembrances of childhood in pre-Castro Cuba:

Havana by day. Hot, yes, and radiant. The sunlight seemed at once dense and utterly clear. The shadows were so crisp, so cool. The clouds in the blue sky, each one a poem; some haiku, some epic. The sunsets: forget it, no competition. Nothing could compare to the sight of that glowing red disk being swallowed by the turquoise sea and the tangerine light bathing everything, making all of creation glow as if from within. Even the lizards. The waves, those turquoise waves, splashing against the wall of the Malecón, splashing, leaping over it to flood the road, lapping, lapping, lapping endlessly, eternally. Even in the worst of storms the waves were always a lover's *caress*, an untiring *embrace*, an endless shower of *kisses*. [italics added]

Of course, I didn't think of it that way back then. Get lost. I was a boy. Images of hugs and kisses were unspeakably repulsive. Waves were fun, not sappy drivel. In the worst of storms my brother and I would ask our father, Louis XVI, to drive our car down the Malecón to be swallowed by the breakers. And King Louis was nice enough to comply.

"You know, kids, the saltwater will wreck the car," he would remind us. But he would have as much fun as we did, perhaps more, driving through the surf. And he didn't really care that much about the rust. We loved it, especially when a surging wall of water would nearly tip us over, and the windshield wipers couldn't

race fast enough against the deluge. Sometimes we would pack as many of our friends as we could into the car, and my father would bravely take us all to be swallowed by the waves. Car surfing. Without seatbelts, of course. If Havana had been in the United States, the road would have been closed to traffic, and Dad would have been imprisoned for recklessly endangering the lives of children.

The experience of the ocean is mediated, and quite possibly the adult acts irresponsibly in exposing the children to the elements; but still the recollection captures an elemental sense of movement such as was intimated in Margaret Atwood's description of swimming in a lake. Of particular note in this recollection, and that to which Eire has drawn attention, is the sense of gestural connection to the seascape - of waves that "were always a lover's caress, an untiring embrace, an endless shower of kisses". Of course the child says "Get lost!" to this identification of his identification with the seascape; yet, like the growing child who claims to be too old for demonstrable shows of affection, but falls into an embrace, is comforted by a caress and connects with a kiss, there is an enduring significance to these gestures that is lost neither on the child nor on the adult. And so comes the eventual realization that "those clouds, those never-finished, ever-changing poems; and the blazing sunshine, that transfiguring, everlasting kiss; and those waves, those endless caresses - all of them bore witness to the dialogue between a son and his mother" (p. 137).

A realm of gestural identifications is hereby opened up - one that has deep ecological value - by this turn to the primary motions of what would normally be considered the affectivities of human relationality. A fully fleshed-out analysis of the embrace is needed. What is its Oedipal significance as indicated above? What human relations are engendered by an embrace that seemingly carries women's affectivities for the ocean, the tides, water and its circulations? What is the emotional expressivity in the motions of the elemental flesh? For the moment, however, it will have to suffice to indicate a promising direction of such an analysis. In this regard we need glance no further than the landscape and to those deep ecological renditions of landscape connection that highlight the primary motions of connection and identification, not just as metaphors, but as tangible, palpable ways of being in touch with the flesh of the world. David Abram (1996, p. 131) writes of the "enveloping earth"; Barbara Kingsolver (2002) rails against the "possessive embrace", which is hardly an

embrace at all (p. 73), for the sake of “the dark embrace of trees” (p. 85) and “the embrace of a world that engages us in its design” (p. 191); while Glen Mazis (2002, p. 3) gives sustained attention to this “embracing earth ... [that] holds onto us, giving us the weight to walk, work, and love”. These writers, like Margaret Atwood and Carlos Eire, draw attention to the elements of human identification and their deep roots in the elements of nature. Fundamentally then, the earth supports and embraces, water waves beckoningly and caressingly, air and fire kiss and colour the flesh of human existence in a more-than-human world. A child-like embrace is the palpable, kinaesthetic reminder of our being flesh of this earthy, watery, airy, fiery world.

Conclusion

To be at home in the world is to feel those motions of earth, sea, air and fire that comfort, envelop, fold and enfold us. A phenomenology of embodiment has shown that we are more than a body-subject correlative to the world, and that we are, in the first instance, thrown into spaces and times that animate us as moving, sensing, emoting flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty’s ‘I can’ is, prior to the conscious grasp of movement, a movement potentiality that registers in the motions of the world.

The embrace, like those other cardinal gestures of intimacy, the caress and the kiss, releases the flesh from its self-containment and reminds us that the flesh that sustains us is indeed an “element of being”. It is flesh

[that] is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term “element”, in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139)

Flesh is elemental in its infusion by, and layering of, the elements of water, earth, air and fire. These

elements seep into, support, inspire and warm the flesh of human existence.

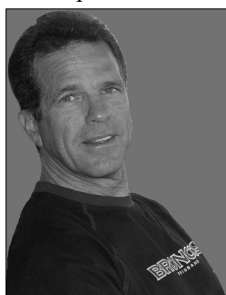
In an embrace we come to understand that we are “of a flesh that moves with this movement of the world” and that, instead of always resisting the world’s appeal, we can be drawn

into this larger rhythm in order to be alive and add back to the larger mix [our] own distinctive rhythms This sentient responsiveness only occurs because flesh of all kinds are moving vectors within the world in a kind of circulation among things that is their real body. (Mazis, 2002, p. 2)

We come to understand that we “can perceive things at all only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world that we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself *through* us” (Abram, 1996, p. 69).

How might we become more at home in the world? Which is to ask: How might we be embraced by the land, the sea, the sky and fire? Let us create rituals, communities, practices that turn on the embrace. Let us find solace in the human appropriation of the embrace, as fathers, mothers, sisters, friends and lovers. Let us take up disciplines, religious or otherwise, that reconnect us to the breaths, sounds, icons and events of landscape immersion. All these ways shall remind us of an animation beyond the human grasp. But phenomenology has a distinct part to play by drawing attention specifically to memories of child-like embraces that evoke a sense of being at home in the world. Phenomenology describes incarnate being in the world as a memorial text, an analysis of the space and time of sensuously lived experiences, and as a remembrance that traces the flesh as an element of being connected to others and to an otherness that is beyond solitary existence. Phenomenology is a mimetic or representational practice that seeks to embrace the possibilities of being more corporeally at home in the world. It is a textual practice of fleshing out the elemental motions that sustain human life and attest to the sustenance of a more-than-human world.

About the Author



Dr Stephen Smith is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University in Canada. He was previously a member of the Department of Human Movement Studies at the University of Queensland and the Faculty of Education at what is now the Mt Gravatt campus of Griffith University in Australia. His areas of research include the phenomenology of childhood, gesture theory, eco-phenomenology and place-centred pedagogy. Stephen completed his doctoral degree at the University of Alberta in 1988. His writings and publications since then have taken a lifeworld phenomenology approach, as indicated in his book *Risk and our Pedagogical Relation to Children*, published in 1997 by SUNY Press. Stephen has been Director of Professional Programmes at Simon Fraser University for the past seven years, with responsibility for the development and administration of local, indigenous and international teacher education programmes.

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ackerman, D. (1990). *A natural history of the senses*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ackerman, D. (1999). *Deep play*. New York: Random House.
- Atwood, M. (1972). *Surfacing*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- Cataldi, S. L. (1993). *Emotion, depth, and flesh: A study of sensitive space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- David, C. (1996). *The beauty of gesture: The invisible keyboard of piano and T'ai Chi*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Dixon, P. L. (2001). *The complete guide to surfing*. Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press.
- Eire, C. (2003). *Waiting for snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban boy*. New York: The Free Press.
- Griffin, S. (1995). *The eros of everyday life: Essays on ecology, gender and society*. New York: Doubleday.
- Housden, R. (1993). *Soul and sensuality: Returning the erotic to everyday life*. London: Random House.
- Irigaray, L. (1986). The fecundity of the caress. In R. A. Cohen (Ed.), *Face to face with Levinas* (pp. 231-272). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Irigaray, L. (2002). *Between east and west: From singularity to community* (S. Pluhacek, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jenkins, B. (2003). Kaku. In C. Willis (Ed.), *Big wave: Stories of riding the world's wildest water* (pp. 185-210). New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.
- Kingsolver, B. (2002). *Small wonder*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Levinas, E. (1987). *Time and the other* (R. A. Cohen, Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Lindbergh, A. M. (1955). *Gift from the sea*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Lingis, A. (2004). *Trust*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The *IPJP* is a joint project of [Rhodes University](#) in South Africa and [Edith Cowan University](#) in Australia. This document is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or in part via any medium (print, electronic or otherwise) without the express permission of the publishers.

- Lispector, C. (1974). *Soulstorm: Stories by Clarice Lispector* (A. Levitin, Trans.). New York: New Directions.
- Mazis, G. A. (2002). *Earthbodies: Rediscovering our planetary senses*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *Signs* (R. C. McCleary, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- O'Neill, Eileen (1992). (Re)presentations of eros: Exploring female sexual agency. In A. M. Jaggar & S. R. Bordo (Eds.), *Gender/body/knowledge* (pp. 68-91). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Rilke, R. M. (1978). *Duino elegies* (D. Young, Trans.). New York: Norton.
- Rilke, R. M. (1982). *The notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (S. Mitchell, Trans.). New York: Random House.
- Sheets-Johnstone, M. (1999). *The primacy of movement*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Wright, J. (1962). The surfer. In I. V. Hansen (Ed.), *The call of the gums: An anthology of Australian verse* (p. 123). London: Edward Arnold.
-