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To cite this article: Chloe Watfern, Marthy Watson, Barbara Doran & Priya Vaughan (2025) A sad tree: visualising ecological emotions through bodies in place, *Visual Studies*, 40:2, 361-370, DOI: [10.1080/1472586X.2024.2328603](https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2024.2328603)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2024.2328603>



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Published online: 02 Apr 2024.



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VISUAL ESSAY

A sad tree: visualising ecological emotions through bodies in place

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In this time of climate and ecological crisis, we engaged with young people and their families to articulate feelings in and about the natural world. Our research question: how might the arts-based method of body mapping enable families to explore ecological emotions together?

By drawing, collaging, and placing found objects from the local environment, families' body maps evoked complex relationships to each other and the more-than-human. Here, we share images of their work and reflect on their meaning and process of creation.

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FIGURE 1. Rocks in my head.

Figure 1 extended caption: A young girl placed a pile of rocks at the centre of a head: her heavy thoughts about what's happening to the natural world. We noticed that one of them was covered in lichen, a living symbiosis unfolding across something seemingly inert and dead. And maybe that is what hope is: doing something, however small; placing one rock at a time in a pile and noticing how, together, they say something quite profound.

BODIES AS SCAFFOLDS

We are living through a time of ecological and climate crisis (IPCC 2022). Natural disasters, mass extinctions and uncertain futures of escalating threat weigh heavy on the minds of many (Figure 1). Such crises can provoke a complex array of emotions, from grief, anger, anxiety and guilt, to hope, purpose and determination (Pihkala 2022). In the same way, connecting with the natural world can help us feel joy, wonder, and peace, but we might also be reminded of the extent of loss and destruction that our ecosystems are experiencing (Chawla 2020). This is an intergenerational challenge, but we know that young people are particularly distressed (Hickman et al. 2021), and that they feel frustrated, ignored, and betrayed by older generations when talking with them about climate change (Jones and Lucas 2023). In this project, we wanted to know how the arts-based method of body mapping might enable families to explore such ecological emotions together. In this article, we offer insights into the facilitation process, as well as experiences shared by our participants. The images we created together help tell this story.

Our team had used body mapping in a range of other projects, and we imagined its potential to understand and evoke complex human responses to the more-than-human world in this time of crisis. Body mapping invites an individual participant to reflect on, and explore, their embodied and bodily experiences. As such, it has frequently been used in the context of mental and physical health research (e.g. see De Jager et al. 2016; Solomon 2007; Vaughan et al. 2023). We wondered: how might we adapt such a method to broach experiences that transcend the individual body, blurring rather than entrenching those well-worn binaries between nature and culture, individual and environment, human and planetary wellbeing (Horton et al. 2014; Malone 2016)? Informed by traditions of ecopsychology, our methodological framework understood the body as an 'ecological self', an ecosystem of its own and part of many larger, interconnected but fragile, living systems (Naess 1995; Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner 1995).

In late 2022 and early 2023 we delivered four intergenerational, collaborative body mapping workshops to family groups (young people aged 7–12, and their parents/carers).¹ Families signed up to the research workshops as part of a summer holiday programme, advertised by Randwick Council's Sustainability team. Focusing on creative engagement with nature and connection to place, we hoped to foster human and planetary wellbeing by inviting participants to map their bodies using found natural materials from the local area. Families traced their bodies on to large sheets of calico and then decorated their outline during a reflective and creative guided process (Figure 2). In our workshops, we used body mapping to understand subjective and collective *lived* and *felt* experiences

associated with being in and of the natural world, or the 'more-than-human' (Abram 1996). We hoped the individual bodies represented on maps would act as a

scaffold for the exploration of complex experiences and feelings that emerge from our connections to wonderful, but often wounded, places.



FIGURE 2. A body map adorned with natural materials.

BODIES IN MOTION

We began the workshop acknowledging the unceded Gadigal and Bidjigal Country on which we had gathered: the ongoing care for place upheld by first nations communities across the world, and in our local community, despite the ongoing injustices of colonisation (Foster, Kinniburgh, and Country 2020; Kimmerer 2013; Yunkaporta 2019).² We also acknowledged the ephemeral wetland and endangered coastal ecosystem directly to our south. We moved from our passive solar classroom to a small copse of gumtrees just beside it, where we progressed through a series of mindful and sensory exercises, inviting participants to reflect on, and visually represent, positive feelings, as well as anxieties, associated with the natural world. Reflective practice has long been recognised as assisting individuals to consider their own experiences (Dewey 1986; Schön 1984).

In the first exercise we asked participants to tune into their immediate surroundings by listening, smelling, looking, touching and then drawing what they perceived: the sound of wind in the leaves of the gum trees, the smell of eucalyptus and cut grass, magpies calling to each other. We began by inviting the families to gently close their eyes, or look softly to the earth, and take a few deep breaths, noticing the weight of their legs pressing into the ground, and the feeling of the wind tickling their skin. As they focused on their breath, we

asked them to imagine that they were breathing in the hard work of the trees in the copse around us, turning our carbon dioxide into beautiful, clean oxygen. 'And as you breathe out, imagine that you are feeding the trees. They are taking your breath and using it to help them grow. Like trees, we were once star dust, and we share the same elements as everything else on this planet.' Then, we handed around paper and pencils, and asked them to close their eyes again. We invited them to draw what they could hear and then touch, each for one minute, using marks to represent the sensations. 'For example, if a sound is soft and long, then you might like to draw a long soft line over and over again on the paper.' This exercise was intended to encourage the families to think about representing their non-visual feelings through abstract marks. One young girl was withdrawn and shy at first, but gradually began to make some light marks in the final exercise, when we found her a pink pencil. All other people participated without inhibition.

In the second exercise participants traced the outline of one hand on A4 paper. We linked to the previous activity, by talking about how we feel when we hear different sounds or see different colours in nature. We asked the families to write words describing positive feelings about nature on the inside of their traced hand, and things that made them nervous or uncomfortable on the outside of the hand (Figure 3). Our approach to this facilitation was gentle. We tried not to prompt or suggest

and purposefully refrained from using terms like *climate change* or *natural disaster*, preferring to let the contemplative process unspool and for young people

(and their carers) to share only what felt real and relevant to them.



FIGURE 3. Orienting exercise: positive and negative thoughts and feelings in and about nature.

Drawing on ideas and artworks created during these exercises participants then returned to the inside workshop area to create a group body map; each family group traced their bodies onto a single piece of calico (Figure 4). These outlines, and the spaces in-between, were drawn upon with pen and crayon, collaged with cut outs, and adorned with found natural materials (stones, leaves, flowers, seeds, bark, dirt, sea glass, shells). We offered materials that evoked connection with and care for nature as a kind of creative vocabulary. We set ourselves principles and worked within constraints: materials should be minimally processed, biodegradable, re-useable and evoke an organic aesthetic. ‘Found’ materials were sourced from roadside throw-outs or saunters in special places (beach, bush, park) – books diverted from landfill, bark and sticks salvaged from fallen branches (Figure 5).

Conventionally, art making workshops offer a palette of materials that are processed and refined through industrial processes. In art making, materials and their arrangements are texts. These are imbued with semiotic associations that can shape attention. For this workshop we intentionally curated materials to fit with semiotic associations linked to nature, natural processes and the kind of collecting that we do when walking in nature. In a more extended workshop, participants would be encouraged to gather materials while walking in nature. This would open up a wider discursive space in real-time. However, we were conscious of working with younger kids at time frames that would suit them and their families. We were also mindful of ensuring safe and ethical practices of collecting natural materials from the protected wetland around us.



FIGURE 4. A daughter tracing her father's outline.

Participants engaged with the materials we offered them both deliberately and intuitively. Sometimes they considered the symbolic or literal qualities of an object and how it would generate meaning in their map, at other times they simply selected an object because of its aesthetic or material appeal, with its meanings emerging later, as the participant reflected on their map as a whole. Participants were asked to purposefully consider where and how the materials were arranged on their body maps, in order to best express their feelings and experiences. As one participant reflected: '[I'm thinking about] where they can fit in and ... about what they feel like and what they might represent to me'.

Participants did not use glue or tape when creating their maps, they simply placed materials on to the calico (an act that felt particularly ephemeral when a large gust of wind blew through the workshop space, dispersing our collages and sending us scuttling to reconstruct them). At the close of the workshop, we dismantled the maps, sorting natural and collage materials into loose typologies and storing them for another day. We folded calico sheets, making plans to wash and reuse them. In the end all that remained were traces: a scattering of dirt on the floor, the distinct waft of eucalyptus, photos on an SD card, and our memories of thoughts voiced, and ideas shared. Later, we would return the lichen-covered stones to their home in the bush: remembering Tyson



FIGURE 5. A young boy spreading earth on his body map.

Yunkaporta's (2019) writing on the significance of stones, and aware of the living lichen removed from their natural habitat, we wanted to minimise the disruption caused by our gathering of materials.

BODIES IN PLACE

The body maps that emerged during our workshops were interconnected, porous and expressive, helping

participants explore and articulate their feelings in and about the natural world. Reflecting on the images and audio-recorded accounts participants gave of their work, we were drawn to details that resonated with our understanding of the ecological self – where the individual human experience is a part and function of a wider ecology of human and more-than-human others (Naess 1995; Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner 1995).



FIGURE 6. Fingers dotted by casuarina seeds.

The body maps offer metaphors for the ecological self, not only through the process of their creation, but also through their material forms. The final artworks are a record of the many relationships between self and environment, between parent and child, between humans and the more-than-human, that shape our emotional landscapes. For example, a young woman's hand reaches out to overlap her mother's torso, fingers dotted with casuarina seeds (Figure 6). A little boy forms a circle with his body, his mother cradled around him – 'which is what happens most nights anyway,' she joked. Participants chose to record these intimate gestures of love and connection between family members, marked by the natural materials of the local ecosystem.

In other maps, a child runs in nature, surrounded by an octopus, a family of ducks, and a chimpanzee making a painting. A father's head is drawn too small, then filled with sea glass and stones (Figure 5). A grandmother doesn't take part but sits watching from a close distance while her granddaughters play with oil pastels, flowers, and shells across a tracing of the single body of the elder girl. These choices all hold meaning, even if they weren't articulated in the recorded discussions we held with participants.

'Why did you pick paperbark for your feet?' we wanted to know.

'I don't ... I don't remember,' the little boy replied.

But he did know that the red was for a sad tree that didn't want to be knocked down.

'How does that make you feel?'

'Sad.'

At the centre of the little boy's curled body, just below his heart, and the earth that we collected for him from the garden outside our classroom, he placed a piece of bark – its surface marked by the zig-zagging motions of the larvae of the Scribbly Gum Moth (*Ogmograptis* genus) – beside it, the word 'talk' in black print on hot pink (Figure 7). Because the bark, he explained, holds words 'but humans can't understand it'. The body maps helped visualise how the language of the more-than-human is also our own vocabulary, although sometimes we forget it. Our ecological emotions are deeply connected to all of the bodies that make up a place: tree, moth, parent, child.



FIGURE 7. Bark holds words that 'humans can't understand ...'.

The young people taking part took seriously our request to consider and share their feelings and responded earnestly and openly. Unlike previous workshops we have facilitated (on other topics), children did not appear awkward or uncomfortable when invited to talk about their emotions. We speculate this was because the presence of caregivers and siblings offered a sense of safety and comfort. Children's feelings about their environment revealed their awareness of both local and global concerns connected to the Anthropocene and our changing climate. They told us (with words, drawing, and collage) that they worried about rubbish and waste, cut-down trees, animal homes [being] broken (Figure 3), climate change, natural disasters, pollution, palm oil, floods, bushfires, deforestation, petrol, coal, gas, over-fishing, loss of habitat, carbon dioxide, buildings, plastic bottles in the ocean, and cars. Sometimes these comments surprised both us, and their carers: for example, a mother told us she had no idea her son worried about palm oil. Carers worried about many of the same things articulated by young people and felt anxiety about their children's futures in an uncertain and changing world. For example, the little boy's mother used bark in her body too, at the place approximating her head, which was tucked in below her arms. She had

torn out the phrase 'the next generation' to sit alongside the bark: 'sometimes my brain can be very scrambled when I'm thinking about what's up for the next generation.'

Mirroring the two poles of feeling around which we structured the workshop (the difficult and the uplifting), a spectrum of emotions found their way on to the maps; a tug between joy and fear, hope and anguish. Young people reflected that walking, swimming, playing, running, finding clay, experiencing the elements, appreciating the vastness of the wilderness, seeing flowers, enjoying solitude, and watching birds and animals can make them feel calm, sleepy, happy, joyful, relaxed, peaceful, good, and free (Figure 8). Carers talked about how they tried to build *time in nature* into the lives of their children, while recognising and remembering 'we're part of nature, nature is part of us.' Three of the mothers who took part in the workshops were already working in early childhood roles, offering time in nature to other children. It's important to note that the people who joined our workshops were a self-selecting sample, many of whom were already interested and invested in the importance of nature for their children.



FIGURE 8. A joyous feeling captured by a young body mapper.

Which brings us to the more-than-human participants (Adams 2020; Tsing et al. 2021; Wright 2016) in this project: the Daddy-long-legs Spider (*Pholcus phalangioides*) who found their way into the silver dollar gum leaves (*Eucalyptus cinerea*) someone had placed along a limb (Figure 9); the Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) who entered the classroom for a few minutes, walking inquisitively across a piece of

calico already marked up with the bodies of a family; the ephemeral wetland on the cusp of our gathering point, home to an endangered ecological community of Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub, many of whose species have a symbiotic relationship with soil micro-organisms living in their roots. How did they feel, hosting our human conversations without permission?



FIGURE 9. Visiting Daddy Longlegs. One of many more-than-human visitors.

Body mapping our relationships to the natural world in a particular place informed everything from our choice of materials to the types of images that were created. Here, we have begun to explore our visual records and the

process of their creation, acknowledging the tensions between uplifting and difficult emotions, the felt and the articulated, the human and the more-than-human, that constitute the ecological self. Supporting other research

on the relationship between wellbeing and the environment, this project showed that families have much to gain from spending time in nature together, and that connection to the more-than-human underpins many of the positive emotions we experience in nature (Chawla 2020). At the same time, our research adds to an emerging literature on the worries of young children in the context of climate and ecological crisis. It's clear that the children who participated in our project were aware of a wide range of global issues, which caused them concern.

We conclude by stating unequivocally that body mapping was a valuable method of engagement. It enabled families to articulate complex feelings through new vocabularies, using all of their senses to respond to local natural environments and the global issues that they are implicated in. Body mapping holds potential as a tool for scaffolding intergenerational conversations about ecological emotions in a range of contexts – from research to education, mental health services to art institutions. We continue to explore its applications as we imagine new ways of navigating the emotional landscape of our times.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Randwick City Council Marine and Coastal Discovery program, in particular Peter Maganov, Julian Lee, and Helen Morrison. Thank you to Jen Mather for helping to co-facilitate the early *for-fun* iterations of these workshops. Thank you to our participants for generously sharing your reflections and artworks with us. This research took place on unceded Gadigal and Bidjigal Country. We pay our respect to Gadigal and Bidjigal elders who are the custodians of this place and whose knowledge and care of this Country stretches back into deep time and is maintained into the present.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

FUNDING

This work was supported by a Black Dog Institute Emerge Research Grant (August 2022) and by in-kind support from the Randwick City Council Marine and Coastal Discovery Program.

NOTES

- [1] The first two iterations were delivered for-fun at a community day in Randwick, NSW and did not involve a research component. The third and fourth projects were underpinned by research and received approval from the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee on the 16th of December 2022. Approval number: HC220816. This piece shares outcomes related to the research-workshops. Participants all provided written consent for their audio recorded discussions, and images of their body maps, to be shared anonymously.
- [2] During conversations with Gadigal, Bidjigal and Yuin Elder, academic, artist and activist Aunty Rhonda Dixon Grovenor, after the initial delivery of the workshop, we have discussed at length the ethics of making, gathering, and studying on unceded aboriginal land, as descendants of white settlers. We cannot do justice to the complexities of these issues in a single article. Suffice to say that our work honours the ecological wisdom of first nations knowledge-holders without intending to appropriate. We are forever mindful of the unique injustices of colonisation that continue to this day.

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