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Kindness as Water in the University

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ABSTRACT. If kindness were a thing, what would it look like? A rose without thorns? A cat without claws? Acts of kindness are often associated with feelings of warmth and softness: things that makes us feel comfortable, cared for. When we think of kindness as a form of activism, however, we find ourselves likening it to water: a liquid body of micro-resistances that can carve out routes in rock. As academics working in the often unkind institutional context of the neoliberal university, we experience kindness as an activism that is flowing, that pools around and seeps into the solid form of the neoliberal university, being shaped by and shaping it. Such kindness could be viewed as weak, when up against strong institutional structures and policies. Yet we find value (and even power) in the weakness of kindness, a gesture that emboldens us to move away from anthropocentric, proprietary and competitive modes of relating to others in the university, towards relations with them that are multi-specific, non-proprietary and collaborative. This article explores a liquid ethics of kindness through interleaving the forms of essay, story and poem: one apparently stable, the others flowing around and through it.

Keywords: kindness; response-ability; alliance; becoming-other; neoliberal university; pluriversity

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Trigger warning: This article includes representations of sexual harassment in the university. The content may be disturbing for some readers. We encourage you to care for your safety and wellbeing.

The Syllogism

*What is water to us?*¹

water is the condition of life
it is what sustains us
replenishes us
we are gestated in water
our bodies are made of water
even on a cellular level
water connects
and differentiates
it is life-enhancing

What if kindness were water?

kindness is the condition of life
it is what sustains us
replenishes us
we are gestated in kindness
our bodies are made of kindness
even on a cellular level
kindness connects
and differentiates
it is life-enhancing

What if the university were kind?

is the university the condition of life?
does it sustain us?
replenish us?
does the university gestate us,
comprise our bodies,
even on a cellular level?
does the university connect
and differentiate?
is it life-enhancing?

Prelude

What if kindness were water? On water as the gift of life and kindness as watery

We read an interview from the *Believer* magazine, in which author and teacher Paul Lisicky is talking about what he would put in a box to leave behind when he dies, about what really matters. As we read, this passage flowed onto the page:

My father was asking, *how do you want to matter? How do you want to live outside the confines of your mortal body?* I think that, back then,

writing physical books would have been the way to live beyond the cage of my death. I still want my books to matter, but the things I would want to put in that box are harder to quantify.

Kindness

in everyday interaction.... I think about the attention and listening and encouragement I've given to my students.

I'd want that to be there. But, like kindness, it doesn't have a shape.

It can't really be contained. It's amorphous. My love for animals, my respect for nonhuman living creatures....

I think the best we can do is

hope that those expressions are taken in by others.

But they're certainly not anything that could be put in a box. Maybe recognizing that is part of growing up

or acceding to the limitations
of what art can do. (Singh, 2021)

Lisicky is asking, what matters to him (or to anyone, he implies)? We would agree with him that kindness matters – in fact, we would probably go so far to say that kindness *is what matters*. But what is kindness and how does it come to matter? Let us first respond to the first part of that question. As he argues, kindness certainly isn't something that can be 'put in a box to leave behind.' It is not box-shaped; it can't be contained. We would agree, but we would argue that this doesn't make it amorphous. For us, this makes kindness like water. And, although it can't be boxed and passed down, like an asset, it can be passed on, like a gift. That leads us to the second part of that question. We would agree with him that kindness comes to matter when it is 'taken in by others.' For us, this means that kindness comes to matter like water does, that is, as the gift of life.

Maybe, then, we can better understand what kindness is if we better understand what water is? What does it mean to say that water is the gift of life? It certainly feels like it is when we

- dive into it or quaff it deeply on a hot day
- drink in the petrichor, rooty and ozonic, after summer rain
- watch it revive a thirsty plant overnight
- feel the gravity of a teeming river, an ocean swell or a massing thunderhead
- sense the occult watercourses beneath our all-too-settled cityscapes.

And we intuitively understand the movement of water as 'a model of the natural world' (Worster, 1993, p. 124). We sense its movement in the circular economy of

nature, in ‘the movement of water in an unending, undiminished loop’ through nature via the cycle of evaporation or transpiration and precipitation, and in the life cycle that underlies human myths of ‘birth, death and return to the source of being’ (Worster, 1993, p. 124). And, like life, water seems contradictory: it is ‘equally the most enigmatic and pragmatic of substances,’ as Jacquie Clarke (2010, p. 115) writes. It is not alive, but it sustains life. It is commonplace, but shape-shifting. And it is everywhere, but it often hides. But once you start looking for it, you see it everywhere. To do so might be called, after Deleuze (1986), ‘liquid perception’: ‘a perception ... which no longer ha[s] the solid as object, as condition, as milieu’ (p. 80), a perception that looks for the aqueous, or even the fluid, in things. But, because we are such ‘watery beings’ (Hunter, 2021, p. 236), seeing water everywhere rapidly becomes about more than perception, it becomes about action at a distance, or ‘gravitation.’ As Clarke (2010) puts it: ‘our bodies are made up of water, as we gravitate towards bodies of water’ (p. 116). And it becomes about liquid acts and affects through which we become ‘hydrated,’ and thereby related. It’s about wateriness not as a resource but as a reservoir, a source, of relatedness. But to see our wateriness as what might relate us with other beings is not to immerse ourselves in sameness and dissolve ourselves, in a kind of ritual de-identification with ourselves as individual human beings – although, in part, it is that – it’s also to inhabit, insofar as we can as undeniably human beings, the worlds of other beings, such that we can imagine how beings are in the world differently. This is the gift of water: the embodiment of a sameness that allows us to experience difference.

So the lesson of seeing water as the gift of life is not that we must accept ‘liquid life’ (Bauman, 2005) as the late modern condition. Life today often feels like, as Bauman (2005) puts it, ‘a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty’ (p. 2), in which we are driven not only to begin again over and over but also to be an individual. To accept this as our condition would be to accept that our difference from other beings, humans and otherwise, divides us from them, such that we are all ‘dividuals’ (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5). The lesson of seeing water as the gift of life is that – to echo the well-worn lesson from Bruce Lee (Silliphant & Rogosin, 1971), ‘be water’ – we can *become water*, become more watery, accept our relatedness to other beings as a sameness that allows us to experience difference.

But how is to do so to be kind? How is kindness like water? It has something to do with kindness as a kinship, a becoming-related – or ‘making-kin’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 2) – that relies, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2010, p. 235) puts it, not on filiation but on alliance. Filiation implies that I am like you because I am related to you, literally, that one of us is a child to the other. Alliance implies that we are different but related; that we are bound to each other by a treaty, not heredity. For de Castro (2015), alliance embodies Deleuze’s concept of ‘disjunctive synthesis,’ which is ‘a relational mode that does not have similarity or identity as its cause ... but divergence or distance’ (p. 224) – which are both words for difference.

Alliance thus implies a relation between allied beings that involves what François Zourabichvili (2012, cited in de Castro, 2020, p. 225) calls an ‘asymmetric reciprocal implication,’ namely, connection or communication that involves ‘a reciprocal contamination of points of view’ (pp. 168, 121) – if we understand a ‘point-of-view’ as a way of being. This reciprocal implication creates what Deleuze (1997, cited in de Castro, 2020, p. 239) would call ‘a zone of indistinction, of indiscernibility, or of ambiguity’ that allows for a ‘becoming’ that is ‘an unnatural alliance’ (p. 78). Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004, p. 238) example of such an alliance is that of the wasp and the orchid to reproduce, which allows for the becoming-orchid of the wasp and vice versa, but which won’t produce a wasp-orchid. So becomings involve a kind of kinship between beings; they are alliances. And they can give rise to kindnesses, or the sharings and renewals of worlds. Where water is concerned, for human beings, becoming water expresses our kinship with water – and with other watery beings. Becomings are alliances are kind *are watery*.

If we accept that we can become watery, or be kind, how do we do it? What does it mean to act out of kindness? Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis (2013), in their essay ‘Water and Gestationality: What Flows Beneath Ethics,’ describe a watery ethics that suggests what an ethics of kindness might look like. They argue that water is sustaining, or ‘gestational.’ It supports and facilitates life: it ‘flows beneath the human as its condition of possibility’ (Chandler & Neimanis, 2013, p. 64). And, while it forms our bodies, because we are ‘beings composed mostly of water’ (Chandler & Neimanis, 2013, p. 62), it also informs how we relate to each other: ‘what we see (or otherwise sense) in the body of another is ... water’ (Chandler & Neimanis, 2013, p. 68). How so? Because ‘water *models* a mode of sociality that we, as human [beings], repeat – ... a becoming-responsive to others, both human and more-than-human’ (Chandler & Neimanis, 2013, p. 62). That mode of sociality that involves a becoming-responsive to human and more-than-human others is an *ethics* in Deleuze’s sense because it exercises ‘the capacity for affecting and being affected’ (Deleuze, 2005, p. 59) that is common to all beings. This becoming-responsive allows us to be open to our becoming-other – and others’ ... to the liquidity we share. Watery alliances generate differences in ourselves.

But water does not operate as a frictionless medium. It operates across membranes, which communicate: they enclose *and* they connect. This is because membranes exhibit a kind of ‘viscous porosity’ (Tuana, 2008, p. 188, cited by Chandler & Neimanis, 2013, p. 71). Like other mediums, membranes at once allow for interchange and resist change (not for nothing do Deleuze & Guattari [1983] use the phrase ‘lignes de fuite’ [p. 277], lines of escape – or better, leakage – to describe forces of change). Our skin keeps out water, but also allows it in and out as necessary. So, to become watery is not to immerse ourselves in sameness and dissolve ourselves. Watery communication allows beings to remain different. As Chandler & Neimanis (2013, p. 71) put it, ‘The membranes that distinguish and separate [or differentiate] us make us multiple and, as plural, imbricate us in social

relations.’ Our becoming-responsive allows us to be open to our becoming-*other* – and, again, to others’ ... to our different viscosities. Watery alliances generate differences from others.

What if the university were kind? On the university as watery

What if this watery ethics, which is about becoming-responsive, or ‘response-ability’ (Barad, 2012, p. 208), about alliances that give rise to kindnesses, what if this watery ethics were to find a place in universities? What if the university were kind? Maybe that’s too much to ask. What if the university were to offer a place for kindnesses – in particular, *educational* kindnesses – to happen? Oakeshott (2004) says that the university offers the ‘gift of an interval’ (p. 28) in life when you have time to think, cloistered from the world. Maybe it is an amniotic sac, which is a kind of membrane. No, that’s not what we’re saying. The ecclesiastical, then elite history of the university might seem to set it up as such a place, but its increasing capture by capitalism means that it’s more likely to be a haven for ‘transcendental capital’ (Sturm & Turner, 2011), capital as a force that is necessarily mobile and un-response-able – and thus casually unkind. Instead, we would say that, at its best, the university offers a place for educational kindnesses to happen because it allows people to come together to share and thus renew their worlds: to share and renew those thoughts and things that help human beings – and, hopefully, more-than-human beings – live together. Of course, it’s not the only educational place where such kindnesses can happen: education can happen in all sorts of places other than formal institutions, for example, as it does in what Harney & Moten (2013) call the ‘undercommons,’ where black and other minoritarian education that is normally outcast from formal education happens. And, because formal education is institutional, it often pushes its kindnesses to one side (as often happens with care, collegiality, conversation, etc.) or covers them up (with talk of competition, credentials, ‘capabilities,’ etc.). But a university, when it works as it should, can serve as a *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, a ‘community of teachers and scholars’ who come together with the response-ability to share and thus renew their worlds: a ‘pluriversity’ (Sturm & Turner, 2013, p. 56). Implicit in this common undertaking is a kind of ‘refusal’ to see the university as captive to capital and its casual unkindnesses, a refusal that is not a blindness but a desire to look elsewhere, to attend to ‘life as plural’ (Chandler & Neimanis, 2013, p. 79).

In this essay, we, as three academics working across a large neoliberal university, consider how such response-ability might play out. We offer a series of narratives that evoke our experience of trying to be like water, to be kind, to attend to life as plural amid the all-too-solid institutional logics of the university of transcendental capital. And leaking into these narratives are a series of poems that posit alternative liquid logics that suffuse the institutional body-at-large and suggest a different university, one that is watery and thus response-able and plural. The first two stories articulate kindness by its absence. They imply what kindness *could have* looked like, had the university operated differently. The first of the

stories is an institutional fiction that pieces together aspects of the gendered university that we have experienced, witnessed and had told to us. The second is a report on the lived experience of exposure to the institutional fact of university bureaucracy after the insulation of a COVID-19 lockdown. These two unkind stories operate according to the principle of the *via negativa*, using apophasis, or the practice of affirming something by denying it (see Zembylas, 2005).

to touch on
the absence of something
can give us precise
information
about
the thing that is missing

what we work *for*
is the thing
that is missing from these two stories

we found we could more precisely evoke the
tenderness of kindness
through

engaging with its absence

Such apophasis represents a kind of refusal. It evokes situations where a lack of kindnesses reveals an existential need for it. We refuse to see the university as captive to capital's casual unkindnesses; we want to look elsewhere, to attend to 'life as plural' (Chandler & Neimanis, 2013, p. 79), to be kind. For us, writing and sharing these stories is a way of 'touching the bruise' of institutional cruelty – and, in a sense, undoing its hold. For the most part, these are not cruelties that have emerged through deliberate action or an intention to disrupt the wellbeing of another. Instead, these cruelties emerge through the bureaucratic structures of a large neo-liberal institution, in which the orientation of care is simply not centralised in everyday structures. Our third story collects a series of narratives of quite a different university – a university nourished and replenished by haphazard kindnesses that erupt despite the daily pressures of institutional life.

Interlude

*Kindness, like water, cannot be produced, guaranteed, documented,
accountabilised. managerialised.*

*Kindness doesn't come out of nowhere. The institution doesn't provide it, but
people want it and create it.*

Kindness is interstitial rather than substantial. It is not a thing we leave behind us like a book or a painting; it is an imperceptible movement – momentum – that resists accumulation, measurement or ownership. It is oriented to care, milieus, slippage,

the need to be held by the places we spend time in and to hold others.

Leaky, unproductive behaviour:

*generosity,
listening,*

*the unimportant magnificent,
drifting.*

Perhaps we serve the water that makes up most of us, holding and releasing each other all the time:

*something flows and something is parched,
holds and releases,
thriving and drought,*

*care and cares,
sustenance and*

distress.

First Movement

[Please note that this section contains representations of sexual harassment in the university.]

It was raining that evening – not that he noticed. The blinds were shut in his tenth-floor office, and he was so absorbed at his computer that he didn't hear the rain set in. It hadn't always been like that. When he first moved up to the tenth floor, he would stare out of his new window, congratulating himself on nabbing one of the best views on campus. He would greet visitors with a grand sweep of his arm, saying, 'Blue skies for blue sky thinking,' before chuckling at his own cleverness. But the sun would warm the room and bounce off his screen, so he started to close the blinds and switch on the overhead lights instead. Pretty soon, he didn't bother opening the blinds at all. But he liked knowing the view was there.

That particular wet evening, a calendar notification popped onto his computer screen. He groaned. That equity seminar was starting soon. What a bore. The last thing he wanted to do on a Thursday night was listen to some poster boy for political correctness preach on 'How to be an ally for women in the academy.' As a member of the faculty leadership team, he was already an ally for women. A

promoter of women, a hirer of women. He was even chairing an investigation into a woman's formal complaint – hell, you'd almost think he was one himself. Those equity events were irritating: everyone competing for the moral high ground and trying make you feel guilty. What a waste of time.

Still, it was important to show his face. The Faculty was making a big deal of equity these days, and if he didn't show up, people might say he was part of the problem. He was applying for promotion, and, with the Dean attending, it would be a good opportunity to network. And, he recalled with a smile, the email had promised beer and pizza. That decided it; he would go. He popped a breath mint.

It was actually good timing, he reflected, as he waited for the lift. He'd been working on his promotion application, describing his 'commitment to equity and diversity.' The seminar might give him some nice turns of phrase. So far, he'd written about the sexual harassment investigation that he'd chaired. It had been a tricky case with lots of emotions, but he'd brought a high-level perspective and was able to see things objectively. Some poor fellow had fallen head over heels for his female colleague, and one day mustered enough courage to tell her. The lass was oversensitive and blew it out of proportion. Sure, the guy's language had been clumsy, but he sympathized: love turns men into fools. She had been a right madam though, filing a complaint, refusing to be in the same room with the poor guy, even though he hadn't touched her. What a piece of work! Hell, if he'd been in her place, he'd have been flattered! It was a classic case of misunderstanding between the sexes. How did they put it? Men are from Mars, women are...?

The event was underway in one of the new classrooms. It had been designed for 'modern learning' and, with its fancy technology and mobile furniture, was nothing like the grand lecture halls he had taught in back in the day. Near the glass wall stood two white trestle tables with neat rows of craft beer and pizza boxes laid open like overlapping dominoes. He grabbed a bottle. The liquid fizzed cold and bright down his throat. Ah, at least they'd got that right. The Dean was greeting people on the other side of the tables. He'd go over and show his face, crack some jokes.

*

She sat in her office on the first floor, marking student essays. When her computer screen flickered, she glanced up. It was a calendar notification. The university sent them all the time. She didn't use the calendar herself – she recorded all her appointments in a separate system – but it was built into the university email infrastructure, and she couldn't turn it off. She couldn't stop it from sending her reminders about events that she never planned to attend.

Like this one. She winced at the title. Of course, she wasn't going to the equity seminar. It would only upset her; these things always did. The university loved its catchphrases – zero tolerance policy, workplace wellbeing – but its actions seldom matched the language. The interviews for her sexual harassment case had been completed weeks ago, and she still hadn't heard anything. Last week, she had emailed the senior academic chairing the investigation to ask when she might learn

the outcome: he had passed her off to HR, who had passed her back. Eventually, he had replied with a ‘Soon.’ It was now months since the incident, and being on campus, knowing her harasser was still there, unpunished, was torture.

Best not to think about it. It was home time. Time to pick up the children and join the migration to the suburbs. She put on her raincoat, walked down one flight of stairs and headed towards the exit, passing a classroom on the way. Inside, people were milling around – unusual for this time of night. A few women and many more men, and in their hands were bottles of beer. Of course! They were there for the seminar.

She willed herself not to look, yet her head turned to see who had come. There was the speaker, downloading his slides, and the Dean, smiling and chatting. It stung to see people acting jolly at such an event. Still, she mustn’t make a fuss. HR had warned her not to tell anyone about the incident: that could be seen as trying to influence the outcome and they must follow process.

But the process was cruel: meeting the investigators and the apathetic HR manager, describing the incident and the events leading up to it, writing them down, providing more information, re-reading emails, wondering if she had provoked her colleague’s behaviour somehow. And responding to the Chair’s extraordinary question: ‘Can you explain to us why you were scared?’ She hadn’t slept through the night, since her normally meek colleague had come to her office and threatened to fuck her because she had asked him, weeks back, not to call her a ‘girl.’ How cold his face had been as he said the words, repeating them three times to make sure she understood, sneering that she ‘can’t handle the truth.’ They had asked why she had been scared; did they really not understand? Did she have to spell it out? That, in that moment, she was suddenly, overwhelmingly, aware of her vagina – that something might soon be in it that shouldn’t?

She’d been diagnosed with PTSD, prescribed sleeping pills. The incident had been horrifying, but the process had been worse, and being at work, carrying on as if everything were normal, was so distressing that she was planning to resign. The Dean threw back his head and laughed. As he moved, the person he was conversing with came into view. It was the chair of her investigation: the one who had questioned her reaction; the one who was holding back the process. There he stood, his face flushed and greasy with pizza, joking with the Dean. And, before she had time to think, she was opening the doors to the classroom.

*

He had finished his second slice and was challenging the Dean to a third, when he sensed someone near him. He gave an offhand greeting before registering who it was. ‘Oh, *hi!*’ he stammered. He waited for a response, but she just stood there staring, not smiling. This annoyed him. It wasn’t a funeral, he thought; she should lighten up. She could be quite pretty when she smiled, but now she looked downright unpleasant – just as she had in the interviews. It wasn’t attractive and didn’t help matters. Why was she even there? Conscious, though, that the Dean

was watching, he tilted his head, stretched his eyebrows into a sorrowful arch, and asked in his most empathetic voice, ‘How *are* you?’

The question threw her. In the clap of rage that had made her spin around and march into the classroom, all she’d thought about was showing her face. She’d thought that that would be enough. That when he saw her, he’d realise the irony of his presence at the event, put down his bottle and hurry back to his office to write up his report. But there he stood, with that weird Mother Teresa expression on his face, asking how she was – as if he understood what she was going through, as if he was not culpable in her distress. He repulsed her. She hadn’t asked him for sympathy; she just wanted him to do his job. That was the real question: his continued presence in the room. But, in the moment, under the glare of the fluorescent lights, all that came out of her was ‘Fine.’

He closed his eyes and smiled. ‘I’m *so* glad to hear that.’ He enjoyed helping people in need. It was good she’d come, and nice of her to say hello, especially in front of the Dean. He hadn’t written the final report for the investigation: he’d do that next week, after his promotion application. He couldn’t tell her this, of course, but to reassure her that he hadn’t forgotten, he leaned towards her, as if to confide and said, ‘Do you know what? I’ve been busy. *So* busy that – you won’t believe it – today I almost forgot to organize my conference travel!’

At the front of the room, a woman tapped the microphone. Bodies shuffled and shifted. He mimed in exaggerated gestures his regret that they must end their conversation and attend to the speaker. And because there was nothing she could do, and nothing she could say, and because she had never planned to attend the event in the first place, and because she needed to pick up her children, she turned around and walked out.

*

After the seminar began, he slipped out and headed back to the lifts, whistling. The networking had been successful: a nine out of ten. What a stroke of luck to have the Dean see him support that young woman. And at a seminar on allyship! He stepped out into the tenth-floor lobby, which was surrounded by floor to ceiling glass. Usually, he would walk straight past the view, but on this particular evening it stopped him in his tracks. He realised it was raining.

It wasn’t the fear of getting wet: his car was parked in the basement of the building. It was the spectacle of the sloping rain, moving across the sky in sheets. What a meteorological marvel. How incredible that something so simple could be so stunning! Yes, he repeated to himself, it was a meteorological marvel. He liked that. And he resolved to drop it into conversation the next day.

Interlude

*& she says, the kindness that supported
me through this time happened in spite of
the system
and not because of it.*

*In the terror of
emotions,

a break

from the
vacuum.

The break
is named banter,

disarming with the slip of a look,

and suddenly her blood can flow again.*

Second Movement

It is the beginning of the day. From the bus, she walks to the library to renew her books, which can no longer be renewed online but need to be manually returned and re-issued so she can hold on to them for (hopefully) another year. Three books by Anne Carson:

- *DeCreation*
- *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*
- *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry*.

For the work she is doing on kindness, fluids and universities, these books are touchstones, forming a kind of ground of return. Over COVID-19 lockdowns, they became friends, company, transport, opening intense spatialities beyond the closed borders, a happy replacement for literal travel. She's excited to renew them, to escape the precariousness of their being overdue, loaded with fees and laced with guilt. The plan is to keep them in her hands and have them at her elbow for the research meeting, talismans from which pour a rush of language that moves with the intense poetics of water – evoking a kindness not of niceness, more in keeping with Karen Barad's (2011) account of the fundamental watery queerness of nature. When she thinks of the kind of poetic jumps that she wants to make between kindness and water, Anne Carson is the high-jump champion she looks to.

She explains to the librarian that the books are overdue and need to be manually renewed. She places them on the desk and reaches into her bag for her card. But her card is not there, and as she turns back, neither are the books. 'I'm sorry, I haven't got my card. Can I take the books with me and come back with them when I find it?' 'No,' says the librarian. 'I checked them back in. Now I can't release them without a library card.' They both know that she explicitly stated that she needed to take the books with her. But this is a hard 'no.' An institutional no. The no of mechanised systems and the rigid restrictions that emerge when institutional

scale meets technological constraints. This is not a responsive zone. The world where the books are kept follows immovable rules, and one has to be in a very special club to get out a book without a library card. This is the university. Its systems have their own power. No matter whether the librarian would have liked to allow her to leave with them, he absolutely cannot. She could suffer a mental health break for the loss of these touchstones – floods of tears, floods of pain – and it would make no difference. There is absolutely no way that she is taking the books with her.

Every cell in her body wants to howl with frustration and loss. She knows that this is an outsized response, but the current of loss (theft!) has overcome her. She swears a bit, under her breath, then leaves through the electronic gates, down the stairs, a palpable absence of weight where the books should be. It's not easy returning to work after weeks of lockdown. Suddenly, the pieces of her are distributed in different parts of the city, and her bookcase can't come with her to work, and her daughters are an hour away, and she has to bring her lunch prepacked in a container, and all the comforts that nourished her, held her together, have to be shed as she walks for the bus, not thinking about germs. People expect her to have the words for her experience in chance conversations, but the parts of speech are locked out of her mouth in the most jolting and cruel of ways. She is raw and unsure without the magic cloak of her books.

Interlude

*it was a weird little moment of
back-handed kindness,*

*as the Chair of the Review Committee
removed the floor
& removed the carpet
& removed the insulation
& stuck the knives in:
the kindness –
they got to stay –
was such a sharp
shard of glass*

without blood, though,

*that they could pull out &
look at*

quizzically,

at the oddness of the university.

Third Movement

Walk with us through the campus ...

Figure 1 University of Auckland Campus and Environs

- | | | | |
|---|-------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
|  | 1. Barracks Wall |  | 9. The Kenneth Myers Centre |
|  | 2. Kapa Haka |  | 10. The School of Music Library |
|  | 3. Old Government House |  | 11. Rec Centre |
|  | 4. Alfred Nathan House |  | 12. Waipapa Marae |



- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
|  | 5. Albert Park Fountain |  | 13. AUSA House |
|  | 6. Grounds of Old Government House |  | 14. Albert Park Band Rotunda |
|  | 7. The Clock Tower |  | 15. Statue of Queen Victoria |
|  | 8. The Law Faculty |  | 16. Owen G. Glenn Building |

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1. Barracks Wall

The portal in this wall is only wide enough for two people to pass through at once. Located centrally on campus, there forms a bottleneck on the hour, every hour as students swarm on either side, anxious to get to their next lecture. There they stand, watching the faces of strangers trickle through, gathering speed as they flow into open space. Occasionally, one face recognises another and they smile, waving backwards at each other, carried by currents flowing in opposite directions.

2. Kapa Haka

A statue of a Māori security guard, *Kapa Haka* (2008) by Michael Parekowhai, stands sentry at the portal watching over the open area bordered by Alfred Nathan House, Old Choral Hall, the Clocktower and Elam B (now Dance Studies). The irony: he looks in, while the wall (built from 1846-1852 by Māori stonemasons) existed to keep Māori out during the New Zealand Wars (Coates, 1990). His mana is palpable.

3. Old Government House

They remember the One Country Two Laws symposium in July 2006 to celebrate Barry Barclay's book *Mana Tūturu* (2005) – a tohu for our times with its meditations on Māori law/lore and 'intellectual property' – at which Barry was introduced by Dr Pita Sharples, who arrived with his ministerial retinue, asking 'so what's this about, then?' Barry offered a typically kind and leisurely kōrerō, of which only a video fragment survives (Ngā Aho Whakaari, 2016). His theme was that 'tikanga is designed to protect and care for those things that can not speak for themselves' (Barclay, 2005, p. 266). The irony of the event taking place on the former seat (1856-1865) of the colonial government was not lost on the organisers...

4. Alfred Nathan House

Remembering PhD oral examinations here: the sense of a jubilation and release, of lift and bewilderment that this marathon of research is complete. Remembering those post examination moments, a moment of rainfall after drought: finally, the weight of the clouds releases and a new transformation begins. It's a moment that entwines the banal and the extraordinary, and the kindnesses of seeing each other through the years of research, of sticking with it and each other, of holding on.

5. Albert Park Fountain

Each year, 120 sixteen-year old school students from all parts of the country come together for a residential Science Summer School. For two blissful weeks, they live in the university halls of residence, do science by day, and party by night. One year, during team photos, a few of them jumped into the Albert Park fountain. Someone threw out a statistic: 'Do you know that 20% of the water in public fountains comes from urine?' This spread through the cohort as only a juicy

statistic in a science camp can, and one of them took it back to their school and investigated it for their science fair project that year. The project won a regional prize. But, the student confessed, the science was dodgy.

6. Grounds of Old Government House

Participants in the Livable University Rethinking Learning Spaces Symposium in November 2014 undertook a hikoi with Stanley Jones (the Grounds and Precinct Manager at the University), the ‘Tree Man.’ He introduced them to the species and histories of the larger trees of the heritage precinct, those of which planted for the first royal visit (of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh) in May 1869 had presided over goings-on on campus for close to 150 years.

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They sought refuge in brief meditations from the inward storms of anxiety on a bench in the grounds next to Maclaurin Chapel: the embrace of the sun, the souging of branches, the chatter and calls of birds around, the rise and fall of breath and return of calm ...

7. The Clock Tower

In 2007, a friend, composer Claire Cowan asked for a poem from which to develop a choral piece. The piece was performed in the central atrium of the Clock Tower, with the voices echoing up: ‘this is a world with paper walls / made stronger with each memory / surround me in that which is infinite / i want always to have the memories of our touch / rain down upon me (and sing me whole).’

*

In 2011 and 2012, they join student protests in the Council Room of the Clock Tower at in the Council meeting considering rises in compulsory student fees (and are expelled). (In 2013, they join students in the Old Government House lecture theatre for the meeting via video feed, and are afraid because they can’t stop themselves giving the Vice-Chancellor the finger for again announcing a maximum rise in the student fees.) From 2013 to now, they attend countless meetings of University committees in which they are buoyed by the goodwill and work of colleagues who have faith in education, only for their collective efforts to be scuppered by functionaries who were once educators. In 2020, they join the small powhiri for the University’s Te Reo Māori policy in the Council Room, and feel proud ... but whakamā for launching another tohu that will likely founder on institutional fact.

8. The Law Faculty

In search of the waters that sustain the campus, they once made a pilgrimage to the spring in the Law Faculty carpark that is all that remains of the waters of Te Wai Ariki, the ‘chiefly waters,’ that fed the pā on the current site of the University (see Lees, 2019). Above the tap, a plaque identifies the spring as ‘a life-giving source of potable spring water close to the ancient [pā] Rerenga-ora-iti [that] continues to

deliver its gift today.’ For them, it is a reminder of the long and vexed history of the site: the name of the pā, which translates as ‘the leap of the few survivors,’ commemorates a raid in about 1680 when Ngāti Whātua raiders from the north attacked the resident iwi Ngāti Huarere there, with the survivors leaping from the cliff to their death (Auckland City, 2004). (The site was known by Pākehā settlers as Flagstaff Hill or Point Britomart until it was dynamited to create fill for the reclamation of Commercial Bay to the east on which Auckland’s swanky Britomart Precinct sits.)

9. The Kenneth Myers Centre

Beginning work at the UoA meant befriending the studio spaces. On level two of the Kenneth Myers Centre is a large studio that has held friendships, performances, rehearsals. A studio is a place where dreams take shape and languages enter their cycle of lift, fall, nourishment and growth. Having access to a studio is one of the greatest kindness anyone can provide for an artist. Also, in 2006, on their first day of work at the University of Auckland, a young academic met their husband for the first time. He was working on the ground floor of the Kenneth Myers building. He helped order a clock for the studio (and painted the map that tethers these words). The clock is still there.

10. The School of Music Library

The Music Library was a sanctuary where you could spend summer days, even as a student in a different part of the country, listening to the music students rehearsing and reading the rich range of periodicals. With very little money, you could feel utterly at home, with all the time required to process critical concepts and poetic language. Realising now that this library is gone, what a buoyant luxury those days were, as you floated, buoyed up and borne on by a current of new ideas.

11. Rec Centre

The gym is a great leveller, although it took one student twenty years to realise it. On their first visit, they coerced a friend into accompanying them. Together, they changed into their exercise gear, crept down the stairs, got to the viewing platform and paused. From there, they watched people working out in the cardio room below, running, cycling, climbing, knowing how to start the machines. After thirty seconds, the student turned to their friend. ‘Shall we go?’ ‘Yup,’ and they turned around, walked up the stairs and left. Communal exercise indoors is not for everyone, but over the years, the student grew to enjoy the gym. Now, the once-shy student sees professors they formerly thought scary, red-faced and huffing, and smiles, knowing they look the same. We are all bodies that move, exhale, blush, sweat.

12. Waipapa Marae

The pōwhiri for the Undisciplining Dance symposium in 2016 – remembering Pita Turei interacting with the pou of the marae as intimate whanau, remembering Charles Koroneho’s moving kōrero, the vibrancy and vitality of the space was tangibly animate, gathering a group from across the world. In our waiata, we cleansed the space with the water of song. The space held us with anchors to past and future, a dance community, dancing, in place.

13. AUSA House

On the day in March 2020 that New Zealand went into COVID-19 lockdown, a mobile phone disappeared in the process of pouring necessary objects from an office and joining the river of cars evacuating the city. On the return to university months later, an attempt to recover the phone was made at the Students Association Lost and Found office (a little oasis of holding-on in an institution requiring neutral, reset spaces), a number left just in case. Another five months later, a notification arrived that the phone had been handed in. Refinding it meant recovering chat threads with friends going back years, when some international friendships were first made; photos of children growing up, and songs they wrote with messages to their grandma – most of it hadn’t been backed up. The return of this little archive was unspeakably hopeful after the losses of 2020; it was a marvellous find, a marvellous return, replenishing in a state-of-emergency year.

14. Albert Park Band Rotunda

Of all the public spaces in all the world, Albert Park is the one offering them the most consistent and profound kindnesses through their life. As a young teenager, the university’s orientation week Summer Series rock concerts were a highlight of the year for them – from about thirteen, growing up in a conservative Auckland suburb, they could experience alternative music and arts that gave them hope for the future. Throughout their life, they have walked through these trees, watching the magnolia tree come into bloom, meeting friends at the fountain: all simple things that allow breath and space to nourish existence as fluid.

15. Statue of Queen Victoria

The statue of Queen Victoria (erected in 1899) at Rangipuke/Albert Park, was the site of the first Gay Liberation protest in NZ led by Ngahuaia Te Awetokutu in 1972 (Longley, 2020). Since learning this fact from their friend Richard Orjis, they always pause for a moment at the fountain, a moment for time travel and gratitude. There was also the day when, on one of Richard’s Queer Walks of Shame, Richard and others rediscovered the AIDS Memorial in the park, buried under grass beneath a shrub. To them, the intense research that Richard and many others do and share about this park and its contradictory histories is a massive kindness, to know how places have oceans of time beneath them. Worlds exist in the depths of history beyond what we can see.

16. Owen G. Glenn Building

In 2014, they developed a site-specific choreography project in the internal atrium of the Owen Glenn Building – a group of twenty second-year students work to make the spaces cascade with movement. It's an intense collaboration in a building that exemplifies the corporate university. They work with pattern and gesture and flow within the tidal rhythms of the lectures, to make the university dance.

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In 2012, they take a class of about fifty Writing Technologies students to the lobby of the Owen Glenn Building to sit on the floor in groups and map the flows of movement through the lobby – around them (Occupy-style). The class are almost immediately 'moved on' by security guards: 'you can't sit here; you'll have to move'; 'who is the teacher here?'; 'this is not a teaching space.' The class move to nearby tables and chairs to make like students ...

Postlude

The first two stories above articulate kindness in the shape of its absence. They imply what kindness *could have* looked like, had the university operated differently. The third story – one of kindnesses – presents something different. Because we were unable to walk our campus together in person in the COVID-19 lockdown of autumn 2021 in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, we decided to respond together to a map of our campus 'heritage trail' as a virtual way to remember the many and small kindnesses that particular places on the campus evoked for us. Our digital walkthrough (Gabrys, 2021) of the campus allowed us to experience it at a spatial and temporal distance, albeit diffracted through the settler-capitalist narrative of the university's 'architectural and historic attractions' (Morrow & University of Auckland Business School, 2005). Each of us annotated the pdf map with our watery responses to each location to assemble a collage of comments, which a colleague rendered in watercolour and digitally.

The resulting assemblage sketches out many alliances in and through time: of humans and humans (via eyes, ears, voices and bodies; looks, sounds, words and movements); humans and buildings, artefacts and machines; humans and birds; humans and trees, stones, brass *and water*. It outlines alliances that are becomings, kinships, sharings and renewals of worlds that body forth both differences in ourselves and our differences from others. Its kindnesses brought a new us together virtually and actually – and deeply nourished us through a time that was potentially personally distancing and existentially disorientating – with the liquid logic of its act of shared remembrance. For us, this shared remembrance embodies the idea of a university as a pluriversity: a community of teachers and scholars who come together with the response-ability to share and thus renew their watery worlds.

Glossary of Māori Words and Names²

kapa haka: group performance of ceremonial music and dance

kōrerō: speech, narrative

mana: prestige, authority

marae: open area before the meeting house (wharenuī), the marae precinct

Ngāti Huarere: tribal group from the Hauraki Gulf and Coromandel near the Auckland region

Ngāti Whātua: tribal group from the Auckland region

pā: village, stockade

pou: pillar

Pākehā: settler, European

powhiri: formal welcome

reo Māori: Māori language

Tāmaki Makaurau: Auckland ('Tāmaki of a hundred lovers')

tikanga: custom, protocol

tohu: sign, landmark

waiata: song

whakamā: ashamed

whanau: extended family

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. Conflicts that the editors consider relevant to the content of the manuscript have been disclosed.

Transparency statement

The authors affirm that the manuscript represents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the research being reported, that no relevant aspects of the study have been left out, and that any inconsistencies from the research as planned (and, if significant, registered) have been clarified.

NOTES

1. Note that we have chosen to present the authors' names in alphabetical order, not by level of contribution, in the spirit of collective authorship embodied in its shared remembrance.

2. All definitions are from Moorfield (2021).



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