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Finding *Satoyama* – Forest bathing as a creative practice of knowledge creation and healing in/with/through damaged landscapes

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Abstract

Many people in the Western world are estranged from the more-than-human world, which negatively impacts their health and well-being. This article investigates the effect of forest bathing as an intervention on how designers and other citizens can reconnect with nature. Walking, talking, and sitting spot practices are not only research methods that help to understand the histories and interdependencies of a landscape and contribute to society and science, but can also be used as mental health promotion tools to generate self-care, especially when dealing with the experience of wounds through the inner and outer landscapes in which we engage. This article is based on an extensive review of a multidisciplinary body of literature. Although mainly conceptual, this article is empirically informed and illustrated by my experiences in Japan. By sharing an autoethnography of experiencing a Japanese landscape through five walks along the same trail over 1.5 years while exploring the deepening journey into the forest bathing practice, this article illustrates the opportunities and benefits of deploying forest bathing in landscape architecture and other regional and urban planning interventions. It also examines the concept of self-care and environmental citizenship and how they emerge in the forest bathing practice.

Keywords: *Satoyama; forest baths; human-nature connection; self-care*

1. Forest bathing as a method of engaging with the more-than-human world

Between a tributary of the Araragi river in the Kiso Valley and the old Nakasendo walking path in Japan, two cypress trees were grown into each other. An old information board with Japanese text and drawings tells the love story of trees that have found each other as they grow. I can barely speak Japanese, but there is a sign with an English translation a few meters away. From one of the four previous walks, the walk with a friend who can read Japanese, I know that it is a translation. This trail is full of information boards with little texts about cherry trees and other nonhuman nature. In the shadow of these gigantic coniferous trees there is a small birch. I sit there and observe the trees closely for a half hour. The battery of my camera had died. I hear the river babbling and I smell the wet earth. My chin feels cold. It was December. I was still grieving about a lost relationship, and I should have been in the office to work on my PhD, but by sitting in front of the trees, the sadness, the loneliness, the

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anxieties, and guilt dissolved. Suddenly, I felt the need to record the sensations, my experiences, and the observations of the effect of these trees and their stories on the Self. I decided to draw the cypresses, the birch, and write little observations and stories that I had noticed and that had touched me. This engagement with the more-than-human world is forest bathing, a translation of the Japanese term *shin-rin yoku*.

As early as the 1970s and 1980s, the Japanese government recognised more ‘diseases of affluence’ and linked them to urbanisation. In the 1980s, the government launched a Shinto-inspired program. In 1982, the Japanese government coined the term ‘forest bathing’ and named the program *shin-rin yoku*, which encouraged urban dwellers in particular to ‘bathe in the atmosphere of the forest’ on weekends. Forest bathing is recommended in Japanese society to alleviate anxiety and other mental health conditions and to promote positive health. Evidence suggests that exposure to bacteria and chemicals in the natural environment benefits the microbiota of the human body. These ‘invisible’ interactions boost immunity and physical health. Clinical psychologists, neurologists, and medical scientists are all conducting further research on this concept (Hansen et al., 2017; Kotera et al., 2020).

Recently, more evidence revealed that forest bathing is not only a health intervention but also an intervention for developing human-nature connections, particularly in places where alienation is high (Vårhammar, 2021). Forest bathing should be regarded as a creative practice of knowledge making. This article raises awareness that forest bathing is more than just ‘a healing practice’, but also an artistic/research practice and a radical strategy in participatory design that involves more than just the human world. Forest bathing is an act of self-care and can be a tool for political², personal and scientific goals. In this article, I argue that the creative practice of forest bathing can help to educate and create knowledge for a more sustainable future while also healing the self³ and the caring relationships we have with the landscapes with which we interact.

This article is about my personal-academic engagement with forest bathing. The objective of this manuscript is to propose a practice or method to find knots or attunements with assemblages in the more than human world landscapes that are part of us, to create experiential knowledge and understand how we can intervene and disrupt landscapes and for which reasons. Part through my experiences and part through theoretical review where I synthesise different disciplinary threads, I ask questions of space, eco-human relations, walking and care, before I share my experiences of forest bathing during my doctoral studies in Japan. In this way, I employ a radical strategy in autoethnography to reflect upon and revisit

²This remark can be connected with the origins of “self-care” as a political tool found in Black feminist thought, such as Audre Lorde’s *Burst of Light*. In this work, Audre shows her vulnerability by writing about her lived experiences of coping with cancer. Her autobiography is an autoethnography, because it sheds light on the intersectionality of disease, disability, race, and sexuality. Thinking and writing about self-care is a radical political act of resisting protocols and mainstream ways of doing research and knowledge creation, often at the expense of mental health. But as this is a political act, it exposes me to resistance from the system and to the wounds, losses, and damage in the landscapes around us, or further away from us, but still connected with us. In this period, I connected with other people in Belgium resisting the burnout society and finding healing through forest bathing or organizing virtual and live circles on topics such as forest bathing, nature connection and healthy landscapes. In my mind, I found coalitions with authors that I never met, like Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway. By doing forest bathing, and especially by talking and writing about forest bathing, I became part of coalitions and started to understand my own eco-citizenship. This manuscript can be read in the same way as Audre Lorde’s work, weaving experiences, and theories.

³The concepts of self-care and the Self are complicated, especially when they are understood through (Black) feminist thoughts (Lorde) and concepts like transcorporeality (Alaimo). The personal is political, and there are no clear or hard borders between our bodies, and the socio-ecological systems with which we continuously interact.

our relationships to ourselves, plant-human relationality, knowledge creation, and academic practice, ethics, and how we engage with the more-than-human world on conceptual, emotional, and material levels. The goal is to provide a novel conceptual-practical framework for self-care and knowledge creation.

This manuscript zooms in on guided forest bathing or the combination of guided forest bathing and solitary walking as a creative practice of knowledge, healing, and caring. Caring for science, society, or oneself often takes a significant amount of time as educators and researchers, which can create more precarious conditions for researchers like us, such as early career researchers on track or even not yet there due to mental health issues (Sellberg et al., 2021). Caring for science and society entails taking care of oneself (Ives et al., 2017). Therefore, I present a practice that helped me understand and create knowledge about wounded landscapes and viable solutions during my doctoral journey in Japan, as well as tend my wounds. Broken relationships, isolation, identity loss, and the consequences of these damaged landscapes and the self are all wounds.

I share my situation more explicitly, inspired by feminist and anthropological theories on standpoint and objectivity. I am an early career researcher in environmental science, with research interest in circular economy, urban sustainability, and landscape, who spent my childhood interacting with bacteria from Northwest-European soils. I conducted my research in Japan from October 2017 to February 2020, visiting both rural and urban areas. I participated in a rural revitalisation project with other doctoral students and a dozen Japanese professors from April 2018 until February 2019, which introduced me to the *sato-yama* concept.

The other researchers and I created a landscape biography to better understand landscapes and the humans, plants, and other species that inhabit them. This approach incorporates archaeology, social anthropology, and cultural geography. It enables an understanding of “the interrelationships between spatial transformations, social and economic changes and the construction of regional and local identities in the region” (Roymans et al., 2009, p.337), which can aid in rural revitalisation through cultural and natural heritage management, environmental management, and the creation of meaningful futures for communities and individuals (Elerie & Spek, 2010).

Next to this rural revitalisation project, I documented my changes in subjective ideas on citizenship, healing and identity in research diary notes, blogs, and social media posts to deepen my kinship with this valley, involving others (friends and strangers) in co-learning and exploring this valley.

These encounters have been documented in English⁴ and Dutch⁵ blogs, some of my blogs have been published in a Belgian critical journalism magazine⁶. These blog posts are my primary source of information for recalling memories of learning about and understanding the people, plants, and histories of the popular Nakasendo trail. “Photography is an armed version of the solitary walker” (Sontag, 2014, p.55), I reasoned. Active noticing and walking are not the only methods; I often combined them with photography or once sketching to

⁴ Stories from the Wood Wide Web – Collecting human testimonials about deep nature connection (woodwidewebstories.com)

⁵ Since 2020, I manage and write for a Flemish website which aims to be an information portal for anyone interested in forest bathing <https://www.bosbadenvlaanderen.com/>

⁶ <https://www.mo.be/auteur/wendy-wuyts>

have some visual stakeholder analysis (pictures of solitary trees) as evidence, which was also done by others (e.g. Vissers, 2021; Gan & Tsing, 2018) to understand coordinations, relations and knots in assemblages in the more than human world. My methodology involves reading, writing, field trips, walking (Dunne, 2020), and forest bathing.

Walking as a method is discussed by designers and researchers in terms of rules, prompts, and parameters. My rules included not listening to music or podcasts while walking but allowing myself to take notes during and afterward. As mentioned above, I had no prompts but only goals each time I walked the same trail. The parameters were stories about nature connection (e.g. information boards with a story or name of a tree, resonating with animist belief), often intertwined with stories about nature as medicine (e.g. tea plants) and—and the need to find traces of narratives about rural revitalisation and circular economy.

2. Questions and concerns from an eco-citizen

2.1. Repairing the broken human-nature connections

A growing group of regional/urban planning and landscape architecture scholars and practitioners are engaging with the multispecies turn in their studies, designs, and interventions (e.g. Bergers et al., 2023, Bracke et al., 2022; Houston et al., 2017) as a reaction to perceived broken human-nature relationships. Many people in the Western world are estranged from the more-than-human world (Abram, 2012; Soga & Gaston, 2016) because they mostly live in cities with little or no access to green spaces and lead busy, technology-oriented lives. In many Western countries, there are almost no efforts to promote eco-socialisation in society and education systems, and developing relational skills is often limited to developing them only with other human individuals. Children also spend less time in nature than previous generations, which hinders their development (Louv, 2008). This human-nature alienation harms health and well-being because people fail to recognise that they are part of a web of life, interbeing, and landscapes. People are unaware of the environmental damage they are causing and the harm the surrounding damaged landscape is causing them. In *Bodily Natures*, Alaimo (2010) illustrates how “the environment is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (p.4). Even more, she traces toxic substances through global circuits to the network of our biological membranes, emphasising how everything is affected by each other.

Repairing, in this manuscript, does not mean removing all the toxins from our bodies and environment. Repairing the broken human-nature connection is caring for oneself and others because humans are part of ecosystems, webs of life, or assemblages (e.g. Gan & Tsing, 2018). Various processes are ongoing in which creative forces repair broken relationships while acknowledging the capacity and agency of people, animals, objects, and other materials (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004), such as the assemblage of an estuary, a salt flat, an archipelago, and an island in Southern Chili over a decade (Blanco-Wells, 2021). Blanco-Wells (2021) describes these networks as engaging with processes of care and ecologies of repair. He refers to de la Bellacasa’s (2017) posthumanist ideas of care, which states that care-full repair should be done not only for moral or naive affective reasons, but also for self-care. de la Bellacasa (2017) reminds us that we are entwined with other beings, and what affects them affects us as well. Repairing nature and landscapes requires us to repair ourselves. If we recognise this interconnectedness, we will see how other beings, such as plants, can also play a role in repairing damaged landscapes, such as those seen in Sweden’s heavily polluted post-glass

factory plants (Lindström & Ståhl, 2020). Creating a bright future becomes less daunting when we realise we are not the only ones with the necessary skills and abilities.

However, before repaired ecosystems can thrive, we must bring people into conscious contact with the landscape and, to some extent, induce an ontological turn and engagement in the post-humanist paradigm (Bracke et al., 2022; Houston et al., 2017). Spending more time in nature can help develop emotional affinity (Kals et al., 1999), leading to greater care. For example, Riechers et al. (2020) demonstrated how the human-nature connection is critical in landscape evolution and sustainable management. Richardson et al. (2020) demonstrated how human-nature connection and simple activities that promote it led to more environmental conservation practices. Ives et al. (2017) highlighted the link between inner and outer sustainability.

Landscapes have been an excellent entry point for place-based sustainability research that emphasises relational thinking and recognises the interactions between different natures (Chakroun & Droz, 2020). However, before creating a participatory design that includes a more-than-human world, designers may need to experience the meaning of the human-nature connection (Akama et al., 2020). Landscape architects and other designers could address deteriorating human-nature connections by designing landscapes and interactions. These interactions can also help them find nature-informed solutions to the world's various crises. However, many frameworks for reference for expanding the (participatory) design to include landscapes and other living beings are still lacking (Akama et al., 2020).

This article examines concrete ways in which designers and educators can reconnect themselves and other citizens with nature in order to better understand it and, hopefully, take adequate care by investing more in self-, and the environmental care practices. This article is based on an extensive review of a multidisciplinary body of literature (e.g. feminist theories, decolonial theories, posthuman theories, geography and anthropology theories with a multispecies turn, environmental health, ecopsychology, environmental justice, concepts like transcorporeality, critical plant studies and other branches of ecocriticism). Although mainly conceptual, it is empirically informed and illustrated by my experiences in Japan.

During my previous years of research, questions that accompanied me and my actions included how we designers could collaborate and work consciously with, for example, water, weeds, and worms. How can we include the invisible, backgrounded, or *nobodied* (Plumwood, 2002; Wuyts & Marin, 2022), as well as those who are stigmatised as 'not caring' about sustainability? What design tools or methods might be appropriate? Various studies investigated the power of repairing together (van der Velden, 2021), composting together (Morrow & Davies, 2021), walking together (Ernsten et al., 2018), and walking and talking together (Anderson, 2004). Togetherness and relationality are important for land connection in Indigenous practices such as sharing circles, which is an 'integral part of strengthening physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional health and well-being' (Stelkia et al., 2021). Participatory practices can be a vehicle for temporary feelings of togetherness, as illustrated by Van Klaveren (2012) in her artistic research with Indigenous Arctic communities.

Examining Indigenous practices for integrating the self into nature is one approach that promotes togetherness and land connection. However, there are some legitimate ethical concerns about relocating a person in this manner; the risk is that Indigenous practices are viewed as instruments rather than modes of knowing and being. Therefore, it is preferable to

investigate practices/radical strategies that are indigenous (or common or folk) to one's culture.

This article focuses on forest bathing. Forest bathing is commonly associated with Japan, but it is also a common or folk practice in Belgium, my birth country in Northwest Europe. During my time in Japan, however, I became acquainted with the concept of forest bathing.

The Japanese government or researchers did not invent the practice of forest bathing. It is a new label for a practice of a certain eco-citizenship that has existed since the beginning of time; however, due to human-nature alienation, this label was created to emphasise that a relationship has been broken. Forest bathing, some people have told me in the past four years, is based on Shintoism and plural thinking, but it grew out of observing a broken pluriverse in practice among many Japanese people. I spent several years in Japan, where I experienced forest baths and visited sacred sites that embodied the plurality of different worlds. I experienced forest bathing as medical consumerism and missed the longing for sacredness in one of their certified forest therapy centres. I was already aware of the brokenness between nature and myself at the time. I have lived 'the difference' between a place where plurality is not foregrounded but still a part of everyday life as a result of my experiences in Japan, knowledge gained from long stays in Thailand, New Zealand, and Ghana, and interactions with shamans and medicine women in Peru, Mexico, and Colombia, and Sufi musicians in Pakistan. For nearly a decade, I have reflected on how monotheism and other worldviews ended plurality in Belgium and transformed my birth country and other Western ecologies with similar histories into post-nature societies, using literature (e.g. ecofeminist work) and thousands of conversations.

However, I would like to argue that plurality can still be found in this post-nature society, hidden beneath many layers of monotheism and capitalism, in small patches of forest, and in nearly forgotten stories and rituals. Forest bathing approaches emerging in Europe and North America are influenced by ancient European wisdom and practices, which often use stories from European land. The Western approach is appealing to European and post-colonial settler societies such as the US and Australia, which often feel like they have 'shallow roots' and are drawn to non-human nature stories to find a sense of deeper belonging (Lien & Davison, 2010).

The presence of a guide is a significant feature of the Western approach. Forest baths and their variations are directed by guides worldwide. Previously, research on forest bathing was conducted on experiences without guides; however, more evidence on their roles was collected (e.g. Kim & Shin, 2021). In August 2018, I learned about the practice of forest bathing, which inspired me to start a blog about my interest in nature connection and to investigate the practice in Japan. I finally began my training in September 2019. I am a forest therapy guide who has completed a six-month programme early 2020 that includes self-development and awareness about my eco-citizenship. Therefore, I could argue that the experiential knowledge I gained came not only from forest bathing but also from my training where I had to practise self-guided forest bathing using prompts and rules.

While writing this article, I guided over 30 forest baths in the US, Japan, Belgium, and Norway. Sometimes I organised free forest baths to promote the practice, but more often in conjunction with workshops, as a form of activism, to engage participants in sensing pains and problems of the natural environment and nudge more dialogues about kinship with other

species, the experience of silence and emptiness, and other ‘injustices’ among our kin. I wanted to challenge my participants’ cognitive understanding of nature and the landscapes they inhabit as well as their sensory experiences.

2.2. Learning by walking and forest bathing in 2018–2019

This article employs a radical strategy in the form of narrative autoethnography. It describes an autoethnography of five walks in Japan’s Kiso Valley between August 2018 and December 2019. I partially follow the approach of Lien (2021), in which she shared an autoethnography of her encounters in Northern Norway and retold stories to demonstrate the various realms of memories, presences, and futures of the Giemaš. In her experimental paper, she discussed her human encounters and engagement with ontological work, as well as the existence of different worlds and realities (see also Escobar, 2018) and posthumanist ideas on landscapes, such as acknowledging the uncanniness/spirits (Tsing et al., 2019). During the same period, I was also introduced to forest bathing or *shinrin yoku*: first, as a reader in August 2018, then as an active participant in June 2019, and finally as a guide at the end of 2019.

During that 1.5-year period, I learned about the Japanese concept of *satoyama* thanks to a rural revitalisation research project in nearby villages. *Satoyama* (*Sato*: arable, liable land, homeland, *yama*: mountain) refers to the traditional Japanese rural mountain environment and is the border zone or area between the foothills and the cultivated world. Several Japanese experts have stated that this is where the majority of interactions (and conflicts) between humans and animals occur. It is only a recent concept that emerged from rural forest revitalisation projects (Takeuchi et al. 2003). In a few ecocritical texts (e.g. Bates et al., 2017), I read *satoyama* as a place with many environmental issues because of experiments with nuclear energy and processing of waste (from cities). On the other hand, *satoyama* landscapes exist only as result of human disturbance or assistance, mostly from farmers, which made this an interesting concept for posthumanist scholars to discuss ideas as assemblage (Gan & Tsing, 2018). It represents the Japanese people’s connection, embeddedness, or rootedness to the traditional cultural landscape and non-human nature (Basu et al., 2020). Gan and Tsing (2018) noted how “Japanese love *satoyama* woodlands as a theater of Japan’s famous four seasons” (p.115). When I studied the Japanese circular economy and contemplated on what it meant in concrete practices and designs, I saw *satoyama* as an alternative model, a framework for reference on how to create a circular landscape, in contrast to the deterritorialisation approaches observed in both European and Chinese discourse (Wuyts & Marjanović, 2022).

Although I had been reading ecopsychology books and human geography courses for many years and was familiar with concepts such as the more-than-human world, my six-month training as a forest therapy guide helped me reach a new level of understanding. Previously, it was more an intellectual or cognitive concept, but the training gave me an embodied somatic understanding of eco-citizenship and my part in landscape assemblages that are changing, like I am changing. In 2018, I was involved in a rural revitalisation project in the same bioregion/valley in Japan, clinically diagnosing problems, reading about Japanese concepts of nature and landscape management, such as *satoyama*, as well as the various histories of this

place⁷, and fiction work by famous Japanese authors (e.g. Natsume Soseki⁸) to propose ideas to the local governments.

This article investigates forest bathing as a possible method for experiencing the theories of posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 2016) or understanding our biosocial relations (Tsing, 2015) by engaging with a landscape and all the imagined groups of beings. If this is a possible method for experiencing what sociologists have been discussing, can post-humanist experiences lead to more multispecies sustainability (Rupprecht et al., 2020) in social studies like anthropology and geography (Lien & Pálsson, 2021), or more solution-oriented disciplines like landscape architecture? Can forest bathing make us more tentacular, allowing us to better understand the complexities of the various ecosystems of which we are a part? In uncovering these various realms and selecting retellings, I also take a political stance in this article (Mol, 2002). In this autoethnography, I will pay close attention to my political ideas and traumas, which may obscure foreground encounters and modes of knowing and being. The objective of this manuscript is to propose a practice or method to find knots or attunements with assemblages in the more than human world landscapes that are part of us, to create experiential knowledge and understand how we can intervene and disrupt landscapes and for which reasons. On purpose I do not discuss what an ideal eco-citizenship entails and if and why which reasons for intervening and disrupting are right or wrong.

3. Re-connecting experience-based Western approaches to guided forest baths with theoretical reference frameworks

3.1. Theoretical introductions

This subsection does not provide an exhaustive list of all previous research that influenced me in the past years. Chronologically, exposure to theories and ideas of ecofeminism and ecopsychology theories and decolonising pedagogies influenced me before I discovered the multispecies turn in geography, planning and anthropology. Each of these bodies of thought deserve their own chapter or article explaining how it influenced me to locate forest-bathing as a space and practice for developing “radical” strategies of “participatory design” that integrate human and more-than-human perspectives and forces. This brief overview is only a basic exploration and a non-exhaustive selection of all the constellations of work that formed my practical-conceptual framework.

3.1.1. (eco) feminist theories and decolonising methods

Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* introduced me⁹ to the history of boundaries, of the delimitation and privatisation of (female) bodies and common land and the capitalist need for boundaries between individuals and so-called other resources in order to exploit them. In the same period, the works by Maria Miess and Vandana Shiva on eco-feminism let me reflect

⁷ For example, forestry and forest management have been subject to stringent regulations since the 17th century. These were so strict during the samurai era that cutting down certain trees in the Kiso valley (north of Nagoya) could result in the death penalty. “A head for each felled tree, an arm for every broken branch,” was the punishment. These trees were destined for powerful families’ houses and temples, as well as Buddha statues.

⁸ Soseki’s novel *Three-cornered world* is recommended for its interesting dialogues between characters about differences between rural and urban landscapes, the fluidity of Japan, landscapes, and so on.

⁹ This book was recommended to me during a visit to a permaculture farm and a social woman-led enterprise in the Nepalese mountains, spring 2013. I visited this place after other profound experiences and realisations about so-called waste and materials when I was the guest in the house of Nepalese friends in Kathmandu.

more on the exploitation of nature and women's bodies by capitalist systems. I registered for extra courses in university and other fora to learn about feminist theories, socially constructed categories as gender (e.g. West & Zimmerman, 2009) and focused especially on the critical theories challenging binaries between nature/culture, man/woman, pure/dirty (e.g. Ortnor 1972). Val Plumwood's work (1993) let me reflect about concepts on backgrounding and mastery of nature and recognitional justice. Their ideas prepared me for exploring the self, the ecological self, and the socially constructed boundaries between the self and the landscapes in which I (wanted to) immerse(d). Should we abandon binaries? Yes. Should we destroy limits and boundaries? This question is trickier to answer. As Carson wrote in her book about love, selves require boundaries and love is about working with these boundaries, not destructing them. Wilk (2022) wrote in her essays how we can find death by landscapes, when we lose ourselves totally to the landscape and lose any sense of the self. Finding *Satoyama* is also about balancing between the self and the ecological self and the landscape, working with borders.

3.1.2. Environmental justice and environmental health

Environmental health and environmental justice are two bodies of knowledge and movements of the late twentieth century that influenced what I perceive as ecological citizenship and caring for the self and the landscapes. OneHealth engages with theories on socio-ecological systems and considers the linkages between human health, animal health and landscape health (Zinnstag et al., 2022). One Health challenges the boundaries between human bodies and the landscape, pointing out our porous membranes. Environmental justice, especially the body of knowledge on tracing the unjust distribution of exposure to contaminants, unearthed highlighted the porosity of our bodies. The ideas of environmental health and environmental justice are also present in Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality in her *Bodily Natures* (2010), because they "mark significant material interchanges between human bodies and the environment" (p.3). This brings me to another body of research that I want to articulate:

3.1.3. Posthumanist bodies

When I started forest bathing in Japan and especially when I struggled with mental health issues like eco-anxiety, solastalgia¹⁰, grief and eco-shame, I found solace and grounding in Haraway's book *Living with the trouble* (2016) and Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) that challenge binaries and call for thinking in assemblages. These books were not only my introduction to posthumanism, but they were anchors to process my grief, accept loss and cope with anxieties. For example, on several occasions, I struggle with anxieties about the microplastics, parasites, metals in my blood and bones, because of my own porosity and the exposure to all these invisible flows of chemicals, hormones and other materials entering my endocrine and other systems. In earlier years I looked for pristine areas or for so-called cures, detox treatments or cures to make my body clean or pure 'again'. However, Tsing, Haraway, Braidotti and other posthuman scholars reminded me that the concept of purity does not work in a transcorporeal world with membranes and other soft borders. Boundaries materialize

¹⁰Solastalgia is a form of emotional distress resulting from perceived negative environmental change. It is characterized as a form of homesickness felt even while still at home, due to unsettling changes in one's familiar environment (Albrecht, 2005; Albrecht et al., 2007). Distinct from solastalgia, eco-anxiety pertains to distress about future potential losses, similar to "pre-traumatic stress". For instance, I harbour eco-anxiety for beech forests facing extinction, and solastalgia for already extinct species.

in social interactions (Haraway, 1998). Forest bathing is a method that helps us transgress these boundaries in order to experience these interactions with the more than human world.

3.1.4. Critical plant studies and queer ecology

The fourth body of thoughts come from critical plant studies and queer ecology. In my tea plant studies I felt occasionally ashamed of my plant awareness disparity; I could not recognise many plants, or I could not recall if they were safe for making tea during my forest baths.

In my search for understanding my own plant blindness (e.g. Lawrence, 2022), I learned that this was not my fault, but a result of the curricula and the political economy in the country of my childhood that did not recognise the importance of plants as allies and companions (Selliah, Povilaityte-Petri & Wuyts, 2022). In critical plant studies, plants are no longer objects, but living agents (Vieira & Ryan, 2015). The introduction to critical plant studies and queer ecology taught me that many plants and animals can be co-creators and collaborators in research and practice. They can be plant companions (Haraway, 2007; Marder, 2016), such as the water lily, a self-reproducing plant that works as a team member and challenges human notions of mobility (Gibson & Gagliano, 2017). Furthermore, we realise that by acknowledging their intelligence¹¹ and kinship, we are becoming (one with) plants and animals.

Becoming (one with) plants also entails unlearning and distancing from the dominant structures and discourses in human society (Colebrook, 2010). Many plants and animals do not 'become' one according to the binaries observed in most modern Western thinking. For instance, queer ecology explains how many plants and animals are bisexual and gender fluid, implying that queerness is 'more natural' than homophobic behaviour (Wilk, 2022). Another inspiration comes from the plant theory of Neall (2015) who questions -like Deleuze & Guattari - the individualist biases in understanding life and calls for removing walls and other hard borders between individualists that can lead to competition. Coccia (2019) also illustrated how plants can teach us about working with borders, (self) care and love. By being immersed with each other, by being taken over and penetrated, by transgressing soft borders, plants procreate (Wilk, 2022). Finding *Satoyama*, through forest bathing, is following the example of plants, becoming (with) plants and landscapes and is about crossing borders and finding care and knowledge.

3.2. Walking away from walking

Walking is regarded as a method of gaining both health and knowledge. Walking's physical and mental health benefits have been documented in the public health literature. In terms of knowledge production, various scholars have highlighted how walking allows for a deeper understanding of space around us in both built and natural environments, as well as fosters communication and interaction with others, due to the power of place (Anderson, 2004). Existentialist ideas such as 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 2010) and the phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and landscapes (Tilley, 1997) recognised that place, which is made but has agency, should not be considered a subject. Walking can influence knowledge formation, such as identity. Walking is a tool to revive collective memory and make stories visible in a variety of fields, including ethnography, arts, urban planning, and

¹¹ There is a lot of debate about whether plants have intelligence because they lack neurons and a brain like animals. However, we may wish to question the anthropocentric criteria that define intelligence.

psychogeography, and it is used globally for a variety of reasons, including developing an understanding of people and histories (Shared Walks, 2021). Some researchers believe that both knowledge production and healing can be beneficial. For example, Anderson (2004) describes how radical environmentalists were able to relieve stress by walking or ‘bimbling’ away from protest sites.

Walking is an umbrella term for a variety of ethnographic methods (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008; Vergunst & Ingold, 2016), including walking while interviewing (Jones et al., 2008). Walking as embodied research is of particular interest to me, as is the way the performance collects and produces knowledge through various senses. For instance, Ernsten et al. (2018) considered the body, landscapes, and performance (of walking) as archives. They organised walking seminars to imagine alternatives to the intertwined human and non-human catastrophes of the Anthropocene. They also collaborate with ‘resource people’ who stop by during the walk to tell the researchers about their research, activism, or passion, thus integrating their knowledge with the researcher/designer.

Other researchers have investigated walking-for-thinking as an alternative space for research (Keinänen, 2016). Solnit created an entire autoethnography about the various meanings of walking (Solnit, 2014). Another well-known work is strollogogy on the perception of the environment and the challenges that our generation faces (Burckhardt, 2015). Gros (2014) also described various ways of walking and what they reveal about the people. Other researchers, activists, and practitioners have demonstrated the political and psychological significance and impact of walking as a method of transportation (MacFarlane, 2012; Solnit,

2014). De Certeau (1984) demonstrated for New York how walking is a humble method of engaging with the city and urban practices, comparing it with remote methods of examining cities. Molderez et al. (2022) introduced the alternative pedagogy of the eco-flâneur “to unite soul, eye and hand, three elements that are brought into connection by Walter Benjamin and that are vital for a sustainability mindset” (p.6). They invited students and teachers to take a slow walk in a space with an invitation or prompt to see what is going on and changing in the city, as well as how street life is being transformed towards sustainability. Molderez et al. (2022) demonstrated how educational methods incorporate knowledge creation as well as being affected by what one observes. Other researchers have also engaged with Walter Benjamin’s flâneur, like Susan Buck-Morss (1986). Many of these scholars, including Walter Benjamin, focused on urban spaces in their walks. In my own studies of landscapes and reterritorializing circular economy, I criticise the urban-rural divide and the metabolic rift in circular economy planning (Wuyts & Majidi, 2022). Forest bathing can be done everywhere. The *Satoyama*, tamed and wild world are frameworks for experiences of comfort and safety but are not aligned with artificial borders and definitions of what is urban or rural. By forest bathing in the so-called rural areas (like the Kiso-valley), I learned also about the relationships with the so-called cities such as Nagoya and Tokyo and the relationships between the mountains, the forestry, and the unsustainable housing consumption and production in Japan and the global capitalist circuits of construction materials. I saw the under-managed evergreen forests. I experienced the steep mountain slopes that explained the need for dangerous manual work in forestry, making it less competitive with clear-cut forestry in Finland on the world market.

Although walking has its benefits, I recommend ‘walking away from walking’ as a method to investigate guided forest bathing or the combination of guided forest bathing and solitary walking as a creative practice of knowledge and healing. Within a few hours of participating in a guided forest bath, participants become aware of their relationships with the natural environment. The focused exercises, called invitations, revolve around sharpening sensory perceptions, slowing down, stillness, focusing on details, and stories of connection, and include ritualistic activities that appear to influence participants to experience nature, leading to a tendency to form subject-subject relationships with non-human entities. However, forest bathing is more than just a natural based health practice. It is also used as a form of subjective activism (Ohlsson, 2022) or as a means of experiencing creativity, transcendence, and mindfulness (Farkic, 2021). Through the deepening journey in the forest bathing practice that began in 2018, I started to see the landscape more through prompts, or rather more open to answers that the more-than-human world can share, followed by necessary questions that enrich my experience. Richardson et al. (2022) noted that spending time is not only sufficient to promote the human-nature connection, but so is actively noticing. I contend that guided forest bathing differs from walking or forest bathing on your own because of the prompts and invitations. As a trained guide who has participated in guided forest baths, I receive prompts, especially when I slow down and take a break, that is, finding a sitting spot and actively listening. To understand – even immerse – in the complexity of landscapes and learn about the various histories that contribute to the palimpsest of a landscape (Corboz, 1983), I adopted a slow science approach as a form of resistance to the allures of capitalist sorcery (Stengers, 2018; Stengers et al., 2011). I spend a lot of time in the landscape, paying close attention to individuals, assemblages, and systems. I engage in deep, sincere, and active listening, trying to be democratic by not always listening to the same voices and silences to understand why different processes occur over short or long periods. I practise ethics of care for the more-than-human world (de la Bellacasa, 2017). Although I learn facts and stories about landscapes from books and other written sources, acquiring knowledge that usually requires face-to-face contact and participation in embodied practices is difficult.

As mentioned above, forest bathing emerged as a practice due to the broken human-nature connection and the search for ways to restore it. *There* are various levels of human-nature connections (Ives et al., 2017). According to Giusti et al. (2017) and Giusti (2019), we can categorise actions and practices as ‘in nature’, ‘for nature’, and ‘with nature’. Ingold (2000) and Gibson (2014) have argued that the boundaries between the self and the environment are porous, and perceptions and ideas such as human-nature connection are the result of entanglement with the social environment as well as the total environment. Tilley (1997) introduced a new application of cultural relativism to landscape interpretation and the relationship between people and landscapes. He described how individuals experience the world now and in the past, using the relationship between ‘being’ and ‘being-in-the-world’ to reveal the ‘objectification’ process by which people separate themselves from their world. To be human entails establishing a gap between oneself and what lies beyond and then attempting to bridge that gap through perception, bodily actions, movements, emotions, and awareness, all of which are structured and given meaning through belief systems (Tilley, 1997). Developing these ideas of interconnectedness (Latour, 2007) and actor-network theories (Abram, 2010, 2012) calls for being aware of the more-than-human world and reminding ourselves that we are animals if we live more through the senses. Bennett (2010) discussed how all materials, including rocks and waste, have a vital force. However, in post-nature

societies, this knowledge of interconnectedness is often not obtained through ‘hard’ scientific methods and institutionalised knowledge protocols and trajectories, leading to its erosion through experience and awareness of interconnectedness. It is difficult to quantify the experience. Some studies, such as phenomenology, have provided experiential protocols and frameworks for conscious experiences from a first-person perspective, such as, Petitmengin et al. (2019), who work with meditation and (micro)gestures. Walking is yet another way to experience this interconnectedness (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008). Walking is a creative knowledge practice that has been discussed and applied in numerous designs and sociological studies, but forest bathing is a more powerful (artistic) practice of both knowledge creation and healing.

3.3. Practising forest bathing and experiencing Satoyama

Notably, Western approaches/schools of guided forest baths are based on experiential knowledge rather than theory on social science. For example, I was trained by the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy (ANFT), one of the largest associations educating guides and promoting the practice (ANFT, 2022). In ANFT, forest therapy or forest bathing is defined as evidence-based integrative wellness practice that benefits both people and nature (Clifford, 2022); however, there is little evidence about the benefits for more-than-human beings. The practice of forest bathing arose from previous experience by ANFT leaders and further experimentation by various people, rather than from theoretical studies. In the past decade, they taught trainees, like me, a sequence of invitations based on previous experiences with indigenous practices, meditation, nature guidance, and experimenting with various invitation setups. The experiments focused on the relational aspect, acknowledging the emotional component of human experience, and creating experiential knowledge, which led to more imaginal experience¹², meaning- finding, and deep listening. The ANFT-guided walk is a structured walk with several phases. The first phase occurs in the so-called tamed world and involves establishing rules as well as introducing and acknowledging the land, often by sharing environmental history. It starts with two invitations to sharpen senses and slowdown in order to make people more aware of their bodies and relationships. The second phase involves entering the *Satoyama*, a kind of liminal space that is wilder but feels safe to relax in, as opposed to the wild world, which requires more outdoor skills. The middle part of the sequence is the most imaginative, with people encouraged to follow their hearts and have imaginative encounters with more-than-human worlds. In Kohn’s *How Forests Think*, questions are raised about how we can attune to relational thinking in landscapes. Finding *Satoyama* is about attuning to this relational thinking. It can also be compared with Area X in VanderMeer’s fiction work *Annihilation* (2014)¹³. *Satoyama* is not only a marker in space of time where humans can attune, but it is also a state where the feeling of self gets reconfigured as a result of the attunement to the relational thinking of landscapes. The ANFT trainers introduced me to a second meaning of *Satoyama* (other than the meanings found in the Japanese revitalisation of rural forests and landscape literature, as in Takeuchi et al. 2003), which they use to define

¹² Although not confirmed, the source of this information could be Japan. The Japanese consider the idiom *Isbin-denshin* (以心伝心) to be part of their culture.

¹³ In the speculative fiction novel, Area X represents an isolated coastal region, cordoned off from public access for thirty years. In the 2018 cinematic adaptation, this locale is known as *The Shimmer*. Elvia Wilk, in her essay *The Word Made Fresh* from the collection *Death by Landscape*, elucidates how Area X also serves as a liminal or transitional zone where characters experience self-annihilation. She posits that such self-annihilation could potentially pave the way for ecosystem preservation and relational care.

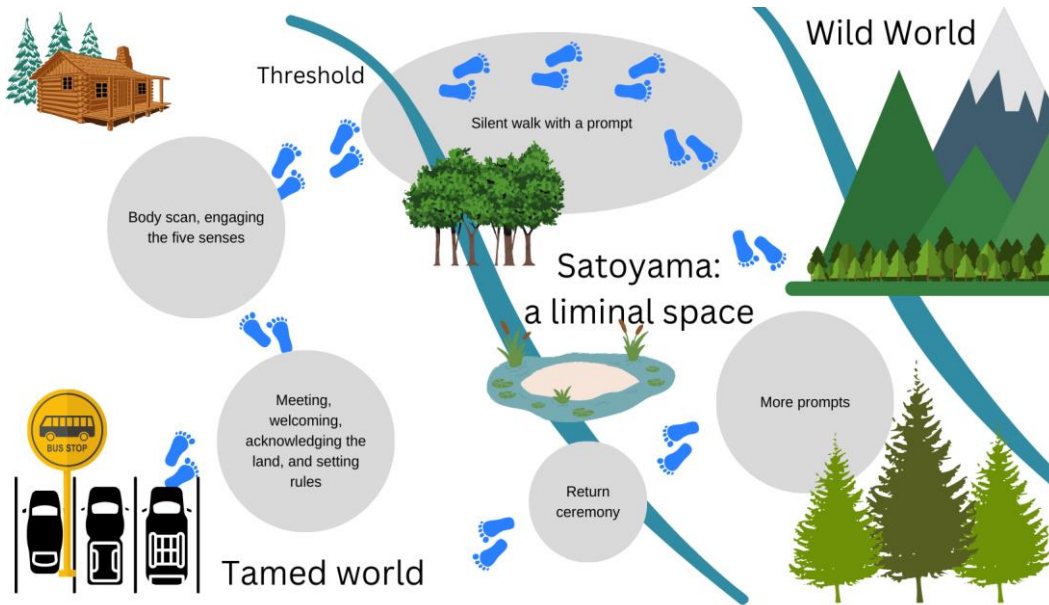
the ‘world’ between the tamed/civilised and the wild world: the world where forest bathers lose track of time and come to new understandings or find treasures or resources that are required for their return to the tamed world. The wild world is a non-human area of the land where only ‘initiated’ people are permitted. In some cultures, these are designated as sacred or forbidden areas. The tamed world is one in which everything is at the service of (capitalist) society, where the speed, comfort, and hygiene of (elite) man come first, and where control by norms and standards leaves no room for a pluriverse.

Tamed versus wild nature may be present in the Japanese worldview of nature, which is reflected in garden design (Hendry, 2017). Some argue that the concept of wilderness is not known in Japan (Hayashi, 2002). Originally, no Japanese words for nature existed, but if there is anything that resembles the Western concept of wilderness, it is a belief in mountains. As the mountains are sacred, they may represent the wild world. ‘Wild’ means sacred. This brings us back to the concept of *Satoyama*: a fluid, changing land or space between the wild and the tamed world, where most human-non-human interactions occur.

The final phase is the return to a tamed world. The guides issue short prompts as invitations to participants (and themselves). In between these invitations, there are moments where participants share observations of encounters or sensory experiences with others.

Figure 1

A structure of a forest bath walk



Source: Author (with the use of Canva.com)

3.4. Caring for the self, science, and society

To address the complex social-ecological sustainability challenges we face locally and globally, impact-driven caring and place-based transdisciplinary research are required. However, many scientists and social scientists struggle to balance the competing demands of scientific rigor

and excellence, societal impact and engagement, and self-care. This is especially evident in the growing body of literature on early career researchers describing the difficulties of pursuing a transdisciplinary research career in social-ecological sustainability research (Sellberg et al., 2021). Developing the need for a balance between science, society, and the self, I am interested in demonstrating how methods such as forest bathing and walking, which included active noticing, contributed to my scientific outputs while also benefiting others and my mental health. We cannot deny that “we affect and are affected by the landscape we move through” (Bender & Winer, 2001, p.15). In particular, when researchers follow the same path as I did in this article, they create a sense of belonging and self (Bender & Winer, 2001). As I have shown, this can be therapeutic because you learn that self-care is already a subjective concept. Encounters with landscapes have long been known to have healing properties. Previous research has focused on therapeutic landscapes (Bell et al., 2018; Brooke & Williams, 2021; Rose, 2012). Through my autoethnography, I want to highlight how walking and forest bathing harness the power of therapeutic landscapes.

4. The Experiences

I went on the same walk five times and got different experiences and mental health effects each time. The trajectory began with leaving the bus in Magomo (the final bus stop) and ended at the Nagiso train station; at times, I stopped walking in Tsumago and at others, I continued to Nagisa. I took the Nakasendo trail, which is known for its traditional houses and culture and runs through the Kiso valley, which is often associated with mountains¹⁴. The Nakasendo trail (中山道) literally means ‘middle mountain way’ and is an ancient route that connected Tokyo and Kyoto during the Edo period. I saw the same trail in various seasons and with various human companions. Each time, I encountered a new landscape, discovered new assemblages, and learned new stories about Japan and sustainability and coordinations. I played a different role every time: 1) newcomer, 2) explorer of the same location, 3) guide for my parents, 4) wounded guide, 5) forest therapy participant, and 6) self-guided forest bathing visitor seeking multispecies and relational stories and solace. The following descriptions should be read as ‘material’, distilled from my diaries, social media and blog posts and memories, and will be discussed afterwards.

4.1. The first walk, as a newcomer, with a group of international students

The first walk felt more like an adventure because everything was new. I was part of a large group that went hiking in mid-August 2018. In the height of Japanese summer, hiking in the mountains is preferable to hiking in lower humid areas, as we did. The heat caused some of us minor discomfort. However, when we were walking in the forest, the airflow was excellent. Despite being in a large group, when I walked alone or between people, I just enjoyed nature and myself in silence. I recall being drawn to a lonely cherry tree in full greenery near the beginning of the trail and being concerned about the presence of bears in this area. Environmental safety is critical during guided forest bath walks. Therefore, I do not consider this a forest bath, but rather a shared walk.

One of my companions was Japanese, who pointed out things like a cucumber and eggplant with broken chopsticks, known as *shoryoma*, that had been placed at a bridge to commemorate

¹⁴ “The entire kisoji is in the mountains” is the first translated sentence of Toson Shimazaki’s famous Japanese novel *Before the dawn*, which appears in the marketing of the nakasendo.

the Obon celebrations a few days before. They represent the animal spirits that bring ancestors to this world and return them. I was already aware of animist and Shinto beliefs. These ideas were introduced to me in several ways (written texts and Miyasaki animation films such as *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*) and were what initially drew me to move to Japan a year earlier; I wanted to experience it and become a part of it, hoping that it would make me stronger. Although I lived in a city and spent most of my time at work, witnessing this unknown ‘story’ or connection with the ancestors and spirits in this landscape captivated me. This was a landscape of pluralities—the co-existence of humans, animals, rocks, trees, and even spirits—that I wanted to experience. A few weeks after this shared walk, I learned about *shinrin-yoku*.

4.2. The second walk, as an explorer of the same place

The second time I went hiking was with a Chinese friend in late October. I assumed that hiking on the same trail would be monotonous. However, I was relieved that there were no ‘dangerous parts’ on the trail. I asked my friend to translate Japanese texts for me so that I could learn new things about the history of this landscape (including about the two intertwined cypress trees). This was not a forest bath, but a shared walk. I do not remember much about this walk.

4.3. The third walk, as a guide for my parents

In March 2019, I went on my third walk with my parents. They visited Japan for the first time in two weeks. I explained Japanese practices and customs to them. During this walk, I had a variety of experiences. I was more connected to my parents than to the surrounding landscapes; I do not recall much about the walk. However, I recall pointing them to a particularly beautiful, lonely cherry tree that I had noticed during previous visits. I had the impression that the tree had a special meaning for me and that one day I would figure it out. I greeted the tree silently as if it were an old friend.

4.4. The fourth walk, as a wounded walker in a wounded landscape

The fourth walk was more emotional because it was with my ex-partner, who had come to visit me for a few weeks and to whom I was still emotionally attached. I wanted to show him the real Japan and share some of my first-hand experiences with him so that he could understand my struggles and why I was the way I was. I wanted him to understand me by allowing him to interact with the landscape. I realised this later and felt compelled to restart the relationship. Letting him fall in love with me again by allowing him to fall in love with the landscape that influenced me did not work. However, social interaction with my unrequited love intensified this walk, where many memories were imprinted in my mind, both with him and with the landscape. My ex-partner offered prompts and new perspectives. When we were in a quiet spot, he remarked that the landscape reminded him of home. I inquired if it was because of the silence. He then indicated the distant sounds of the chainsaws. Only then did I notice the chainsaw sound and understand why he associated it with rurality. I was struck by how, even when walking with others, we perceive ‘silence’ differently and thus experience the same place or hike in a different manner. When I look back to my notes and blogs, I can observe that I started to understand it was not only me, a citizen, who was wounded, but that the landscape was also wounded. In this fourth walk, borders were sensed in a more intense way, not only between me and the landscape, but also between me and my ex-partner. I did

not transgress any borders there, but they were painfully present. This experience of love, identity and borders inspired me to start a fiction book, where both love and toxicity come when the character(s) open themselves.

4.5. The fifth walk, as a forest bath participant

Two weeks later, I took my ex-partner and other friends to one of Japan's 62 certified forest therapy bases in the same area with similar landscape. The staff had told us two days before to wear long sleeves, pants, and socks to protect ourselves from the blood-sucking hill worms in that area. Despite the presence of these worms, most participants' measured stress levels decreased following the forest bath.

According to the Japanese forest therapy guides, these worms can now be found all year. These worms were not present during the allocation of this forest therapy base; however, this was a godforsaken location. As humans have reduced their territory, animals, like deer and boars, from higher elevations descend in search of food, bringing these leeches with them. Hence, the guides told us, Ghibli Studio selected these worms for the Princess Mononoke film. This curse is always brought to the human world by animals from higher altitudes, from more remote areas, who are losing territory.

4.6. The sixth walk, as a forest bath guide trainee

In September 2019, I began my training at ANFT. The most visible mission of this organisation is to train guides so that more people can enjoy the benefits of forest bathing. Its hidden agenda is to heal the 'broken' relationship between humans, assemblages, and non-humans. I committed to these two missions. I followed a relational approach to sense the web of relationships or assemblages in which we find ourselves. My trainers introduced the *Satoyama* concept, which differs from *Satoyama* found in Japanese landscape literature. With the introduction of this concept, the Kiso Valley and Nakasendo walk became even more sacred to me, altering my perception of this landscape. I imagined finding *Satoyama* the next time I entered the spirit world. The training changed my perception and imagination of the landscape through which I had visited in the past year. The sixth walk was done alone, with more sitting spots than the others. As I touched the lonely cherry tree just outside Magome with my hands and back, I rested and imagined hopeful futures for myself, the tree, and even people who do not yet exist. The battery of my camera died, and I had nothing left to record but my own senses when I took a seat in front of the two intertwined cypresses and entered the *Satoyama*.

5. Discussion

5.1. Understanding the (ecohumanist) theories behind the pedagogy

Ecohumanism is the field that calls for examinations of ourselves, the soft and hard borders between our bodies and landscapes, our citizenship, agency and our emotions and subjectivity in a web of complex relationships. It is about finding ourselves but also losing ourselves in ecosystems, landscape, and the environment.

We performed various practices during our training as forest therapy guides, such as sitting in a spot for at least 20 minutes, exploring the history of watersheds to which we belong, affective mapping of how the water connects us with others with whom we feel kinship,

drawing maps of relations with non-human nature with which we felt connected, and learning about local plants from which tea can be made. However, this approach is not novel. During the training, we did not hear which theories were behind the pedagogies. I learned afterwards what would be the possible theories behind the forest bath guiding pedagogies and connecting them with ecohumanism. I read my own practices through the ecohumanist lenses that I discovered in the past years. Some ‘invitations’ in a forest bath or exercises as part of a forest bathing guide training could be coupled with/traced back to insights in environmental education, artistic research, anthropology (e.g. arts of noticing; Tsing, 2015), geography methods (affective mapping), and decolonial pedagogies (e.g. Nxumalo & Villanueva, 2020). In my experience, Tsing’s frameworks were the most appropriate to understand how the methods in forest bath trainings are about making diagrams and understanding coordinations and assemblages in multispecies landscapes. Tsing (2015) proposes a strategy she calls the ‘arts of noticing’ to study this web of life, which she employs through ethnography and a renewed understanding of natural history. In her words, “This kind of noticing is just what is needed to appreciate the multiple temporal rhythms and trajectories of the assemblage” (p. 24). The outcomes are also similar to the multispecies ethnographies and cartographies of assemblages (Kirksey, 2015; Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010) or the diagrams and understanding of coordinations (Gan & Tsing, 2018).

The practice of studying tea plants, as part of the 6 months training as forest bath guide, has led me to become interested in medicinal plants. I learned the name of the plant that had intrigued me on another walk in the Kiso Valley and at my sitting spot in a city park where I took a weekly break from city life in a tea shop in Magome. The wind appeared to whisper when it passed through the trail. I was scared the first time I walked alone because I was in bear territory and thought I heard a bear or a boar approaching me. I learned one of the plant’s names from the Japanese locals: *Kumasasa*. Furthermore, to my surprise, I learned that this plant could be used to make tea. After a few hours, I was waiting for my train in Nagiso and noticed that I could order this tea. When I lived in Belgium and went forest bathing, I came across a plant that resembled a *Kumasasa*. This prompted me to consider the Anthropocene, or the changing effects of humans. Other humans, like me, travel and (un)consciously bring new plants with them, some of which become feral (Tsing et al., 2020) and/or invasive, even harming native plants. Since returning to Belgium, I have been thinking a lot about my shallow roots, belonging, and the rationales that people use to vilify other humans and plants that do not have as deep roots as their perceived ones, some ideas and feelings that I later found in the work of Lien and Davison (2010) on Monterey pines in Australia. My ecohumanist journey began before I even knew what the term meant.

Returning to this sixth walk in December 2019, I recall sitting next to two cypress trees that had merged after 300 years. You can read the story of these trees, rocks, or other beings on a wooden plate nearby. This gave me the opportunity to reflect on what it says about societies when people share romantic stories about non-human nature. It confirmed my initial impressions and romantic, naive image of Japan as an eco-spiritual nation. However, my desire to immerse myself in this spirituality introduced me to texts and films that questioned this romantic image and demonstrated how this romantic image is commodified in Japanese tourism marketing for Western seekers of wisdom. At some point during my city life in Japan, specifically in a yoga studio where I had found like-minded souls, I met a Japanese woman from the US who spoke about the lost culture of Japan, which is only alive through

commodification. I became disappointed about my own naivety regarding many ideas like ideal places, landscapes, and cultures.

5.2. From self-care to relational thinking

Ecohumanism is about examining our citizenship, agency and our emotions and subjectivity in a web of complex relationships. I want to argue that forest bathing is not a practice of self-care, because it is inherently linked with relational thinking. By sharing my own experiences from a walker to a forest bath participant, and then guide, I want to open debates how forest bathing affects my civil experience of space and time and can be a method for the theories that inspired ecohumanism.

Back to the two cypress trees in the last walk, deep listening and imagination inspired me to sketch the tree as well as all the words and feelings I had about these trees and the place. It provided me with solace and messages to help me cope with the grief and anxiety I was experiencing at the time. It made me realise there is no such thing as self-care in a vacuum and it made me remember that I am an ecological citizen in a world where everyone is fundamentally dependent on the care of many beings in the world.

As explained in the previous section on critical plant studies and queer ecology, many plants and animals can be co-creators and collaborators in research and practice. However, I do not claim that all plants and animals should or could be allies. They are mostly and sadly immobilised by humans for their economic gain (e.g. corn, potato). I saw rice fields in Japan but had no feelings for them. Or maybe I did; maybe I felt repelled. Knowing *Satoyama* in my second year in Japan, I stopped eating rice for at least a year to take care of my body and detox from my carb addiction. Later, I observed that other people investigating vegetal intelligence have been through similar attunement and changes (Ryan et al., 2021).

In Japan, I often took a shortcut through the city zoo to a sitting spot to relax after work. Although the sitting spot provided me with rest, I occasionally passed the caged polar bear and felt incredibly sad that it was not living in its natural habitat. In some ways, I felt a bond with the animal. Nonetheless, these plants and caged animals can serve as a reminder of human alienation from the vegetal and animal worlds, as well as the fact that they have no understanding of what it means to be alive (Irigaray & Marder, 2016). The sadness I felt while watching the polar bear prompted me to look up more information about zoos and sustainability on the Internet. My investigation taught me more about animal ethics and a body of research on intuitive animal-human interaction.

I cannot claim that I succeeded in attuning in relational thinking of the polar bears, the cypress trees, the rice, or the *Satoyama*, because I had still sense of my own sense and the borders between my body, the body of these polar bear, or of these trees or Kumazasa plants along the Nakasendo trail. What I observed about myself in the past 3-4 years is that I became more secure to collaborate with relations, what is between and betwixt, in my art and academic work since then.

5.3. A creative practice of knowledge creation and healing

While the first four walks were considered walking without too many prompts, the later walks, while I was being trained in forest bathing, provided a distinct experience. Feelings of a safe environment, as well as assistance and interventions, were key factors in both walks and forest

baths for profound experiences of knowledge creation and healing. Initially, I did not feel safe because I was afraid of bears and other unknown dangers, but I gradually gained familiarity with and trust in the landscape. Although interactions with the more-than-human world were intense, interactions with human companions created even more togetherness, as they often provided me with unconscious prompts and invitations to experience the landscape differently, leading to more land connections.

Writing this autoethnography, as well as questioning and evaluating my experiences with the *Satoyama* landscape, is a form of artistic reflection. Walking, being influenced by my training to be a forest therapy guide, and actively noticing changed how I experienced Japan and its embedded landscape. This sparked my interest in locating concrete local and specialised translations of abstract concepts like the circular economy (Wuyts & Marjanović, 2022). I also felt uncomfortable about this active process and artistic experiences that I could not fit into the knowledge protocols and trajectory of a Japanese engineering department.

Other scholars, like Laura Rendón (2012), criticized the lack of addressing non-academic needs of students and provided her model of Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) pedagogy, based on Toltec wisdom and Aztec culture (Garcia Mazari & Minnis, 2023) which educates “for Wholeness, social justice, and the cultivation of wisdom by validating the lived experiences of students as sources of knowledge” (Rendón, 2012, pp.135-136).

This pedagogy was not present in my doctoral studies, and I had to create my own compass that addressed my non-academic needs and validated my experiences. Like Garcia Mazari and Minnis experimented with autoethnography, I made many personal, theoretical, and other notes in diaries and logbooks, re-wrote and edited them in iterative rounds as an attempt to make sense what was happening to me emotionally. I was dissatisfied in the final year of my Ph.D. (in 2021). I expected these experiences to produce something extraordinary, but I did not know what. They were ‘not (there) yet’ (Rogoff, 2021). I was struggling with the knowledge protocols and trajectories I had to follow to ‘receive my Ph.D.’. Other students found data using inherited knowledge and established methods, and I felt compelled to position myself towards the ‘not yet known’ or articulable (Rogoff, 2021). It was here that *Satoyama* influenced me. I am not looking to debate formats, protocols, or trajectories, but rather to create a space where people can walk their own path in their learning and design journeys. In my Ph.D., I wanted to reterritorialize the circular economy, but I did not realise it at the time. Interestingly, reterritorializing is “the process by which the rhizome breaks out of its boundaries (de-territorialises) and then reassembles or re-collects itself elsewhere and elsewhen (reterritorializes), often assuming a new or shifted identity” (O’Sullivan, 2006, cited by Rogoff, 2021, p. 53, referring to Deleuze & Guattari, 2004)—the process by which knowledge assumes a significant form, destabilises its relation to other fixed knowledge and acquires an affective surplus.

I did not only want to reterritorialize the circular economy, but also my Ph.D. trajectory. I wanted to make the invisible visible in order to ensure that the emerging circular economy discourse does not repeat the same injustices and fails to recognise the importance of caring for other beings, such as landscapes and waste (Wuyts & Marin, 2022). For example, through my forest bathing training and walks, I have reflected on the concept of abandoned places and vacant houses. They are viewed as a disease in Japanese media discourse, but from a multispecies perspective, there is no such thing as abandoned. Speculating on vacancies is a colonial practice, as I will discover later by reading more work on decolonising geography (e.g.

Noterman, 2022). Debates about rewilding and giving land back to nonhuman nature is part of the political act of eco-citizenship.

After my PhD defence, I got more confidence of adding multispecies just critiques in my next papers (e.g. Wuyts & Marjanović) and other work (e.g. my fiction work, e.g. Wuyts, 2022a; Wuyts, 2022b). I co-authored a paper with one of my new tribes engaging with multispecies approaches on nature-based health knowledge creation in cities (e.g. Selliah, Povilaityte-Petri & Wuyts, 2022). Since doing forest bathing, writing, and talking about forest bathing, I cannot observe and describe places, cities, regions, rural neighbourhoods anymore without the multispecies lens - in my academic work, my fiction and other artwork. For a current sub-project, I am reterritorializing imaginaries of circular cities and regions, by adding the perspectives of whales, fireweed or other beings in the narratives about the past, present, and future of this place. For example, I am challenging the use of administrative boundaries in metabolic studies as analytical units for preparation of circular city planning (Forthcoming work).

There are always other species that inhabit one place, and there is hope that even a polluted and remote place will contain a seed for a new life. I was already repairing by actively noticing, seeing the connections and changing my perspective, and observing the more-than-human world with greater sensitivity. Recognising is the first step towards repairing (Blanco-Wells, 2021). In my previous papers (which were published in my PhD), I referred to Pierce and Lawhon (2015) as the method for obtaining these insights. However, my forest bathing (guide) practice includes not only walking but also a combination of methods and practices. A PhD dissertation was not the right way to express. I have been working for almost three years on a novel that includes multiple intermezzos in which I imagine how the selves of my human characters develop while they are exploring *Satoyama*. It is an example of reverse phenomenology (Tilley, 1997). The story idea came to me while I was living in Belgium during the first year of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe. Even after three-four years, I can recall and imagine what other events and encounters might occur to shape my character. I am still experimenting with *Satoyama* in my artistic work, and I am finding it not only in my imagination, but also in other forest baths and landscapes I am guiding. This liminal space easily comprehends other human-nature relationships and generates ethnographies beyond humans or other assemblages, as well as stories that respect and acknowledge the plural universe. Future work can engage deeper with education and pedagogical frameworks like Laura Rendón's application of "sentipensante" (2012) in order to provide compasses and clear methods for imagining alternative possibilities and narratives for landscapes.

5.4. Ethical concerns

Ethical guidelines are needed to avoid harming others and ourselves. Entanglements in the landscape do not always result in the positive effects of belonging. Landscapes and stories are both constantly changing because of various human and non-human agents. When certain agents, such as weeds, take over a landscape, different feelings and narratives can emerge among residents because the current landscape tells stories that their inhabitants do not want to be a part of (Førde & Magnussen, 2015). Some plant agents can give the impression that the landscape is deteriorating, contributing to human-nature alienation. In later forest baths, I noticed how some forest bathing methods make even more landscape transformations visible to people, causing sadness and increasing eco-anxiety. Therefore, including ethical

notes about forest bathing or other nature-based therapies is important. Linda Buzzell, an ecopsychologist, has identified two distinct levels of ecotherapy (Buzzell, 2016), one that uses nature solely for human health and the other that seeks to repair humans' alienation from nature. These practices include using some aspects of nature to improve one's psychological, physical, or spiritual well-being while remaining anthropocentric or human-centred. For example, natural materials may be used, but people may not ask permission from the natural world, thinking about how materials are collected, or give something in return. The relationship is extractive and non-consensual if the earth is viewed as a material rather than a living organism. It is essential to cultivate a sense of reciprocity and concern for our kin. "We're moving from the great lie of separation and superiority to the deep truth of interdependence, connection, and interbeing. This can be hard because it is so different from much of mainstream society" (Buzzell, as cited by Newcomb 2019, p.11).

To avoid harming ourselves in our academic careers, we must follow ethical guidelines. As part of the requirements for my doctorate, I had to follow institutional knowledge protocols and trajectories. I had to ignore the idea that *Satoyama* had an impact on me in both healing and knowledge creation for a while and let it compost, adding insights into performative methods, phenomenology, and posthumanism to make it richer. Ironically, I had to develop my own compass of *sentipensante* to address my non-academic and academic needs and to graduate, but the current academic institution forced me to hide this compass in the space and time of evaluations. Writing this paper is not only for myself, but for other students and researchers who struggle with lack of *sentipensante* in the curricula and tracks they have to follow. I was under a lot of stress and struggled with knowledge protocols and trajectories, as well as pressures, until I self-sabotaged. I have no evidence of the healing effects other than memories of how my body and mind felt after spending time in *Satoyama*.

Ethics also refers to not causing harm to our bodies and minds. First, understanding and listening to vegetal intelligence is difficult because we do not share a common language. One of the biggest barriers I encountered during my doctoral research in Japan was linguistic and epistemological, both of which are common in transdisciplinary research (Nikulina et al., 2019). When I began my place-based research in Japan, I did not know the language and had only limited exposure to books, animation films, and other media, so I did not know how people thought and behaved in Japan. These impediments tested the scientific rigour of my doctoral research and were intertwined with mental health issues (e.g. feeling of missing out, feeling isolated, and feeling as if my values and worldviews are challenged). Can information obtained through the senses contribute to science, society, and the self? In my limited experience, I would say yes, but I will not claim that this is replicable. However, this article may also be useful to researchers who are conducting studies in cultural landscapes in Japan or other countries but do not speak the local language (yet). This article will inform them that they are not alone in their desire to listen to landscapes actively and democratically without knowing the (human) language. During my last walk, when I was more trained in forest bathing, I had a few mystical experiences where I transgressed some boundaries. I made some drawings and notes about the intertwined cypresses, but I could not capture what I learned, unlearned or what I conveyed when I got enveloped by the landscape or attuned to the forest's relational thinking. I was not sure how these notes and drawings could serve my doctoral work. I was insecure if I did not repeat what I know and read the landscapes, the cypress trees, the Kumazasa through my biases. Was I really attuned to the forest? Or was it all imagination or opinion? To some extent, art and imagination can help in translations and interspecies

communication (Irigaray & Marder, 2016), but we must avoid human exceptionalism in multispecies ethnographies and other outcomes that may result from this (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010).

Second, while I used forest bathing to deal with my eco-anxiety, high anxiety, and loneliness during my doctoral studies, it also increased my awareness of other beings in pain in my surroundings, such as the polar bear in the zoo. However, one could argue that I was projecting my pain onto the polar bear. I have had some self-dialogues, but I am still learning who I was back, who I am today and what kind of citizen and ancestor I want to be. Later, by reading Wilk's "death by landscape", I realise that immersion and opening up myself can be both an experience of toxicity and love, of losing myself and finding myself in the landscape.

Hence, I am constantly checking my wounds and the wounds of the landscapes and people around me, so I cannot draw any conclusions from these ongoing reflections.

6. Conclusion and future directions

In ecohumanism, self-care is about love for the environment in us, about finding yourself in nature and losing yourself in it. Forest bathing is a method, or even a lifestyle, for finding *Satoyama*, this state of finding and losing yourself, realising that the forest is in you, and you are in the forest. *Satoyama* is like Area X in VanderMeer's *Annihilation*: space and time where the self is immersed, taken over, overgrown, penetrated by the environment. Forest bath practices introduce structures and soft borders where social interactions with the (ecological) self can happen, where eco-citizenship can materialize and care and knowledge can be found. (Finding) *Satoyama* is a conceptual-practical framework for self-care and knowledge creation.

This article illustrates the opportunities and benefits of deploying guided forest bathing in landscape architecture and other design and artistic fields by sharing an autoethnography about experiencing a landscape through five walks over 1.5 years while exploring the deepening journey into the forest bathing practice. Walking, talking, and sitting spot practices were not only research methods that helped understand the histories and interdependencies of a landscape, including those I walked through (such as the walk through the zoo), and contributed to society and science, but they can also act as mental health tools that generated self-care, particularly to cope with the experience of wounds in the landscape in which we engage. In the Japanese wastelands, these practices helped me stay grounded, find coexistence, and a sense of belonging, as well as create a headspace for creative thinking. Finding *Satoyama* means being open to collaborations with the more-than-human world in a landscape you chose to engage with and learn from—through tensions and other experiences—to generate the care and knowledge needed for eco-citizenship.

With this article, I wish to explain how my forest bathing practice, which began halfway through my doctoral journey in Japan, influenced other environmental science research (and my understanding of Japan and *Satoyama*), artistic projects, and my mental health (partly result of trying to cope with institutionalised knowledge trajectories and protocols) all at the same time. Place-based research can benefit not only from targeted scientific outputs and/or societal impacts, but also from self-care.

However, like VanderMeer's Area X, *Satoyama* can be a space and time where the self can completely disappear. Forest bathing practitioners and any scholars using forest bathing to immerse themselves and others in landscapes have to be aware of consequences and if the

practice is also about finding a balance between preserving individual identities and a complete immersion. In my training, my mentors told me that as a guide I should stay with one foot in *Satoyama*, with the other foot in the tamed world. When I am walking and forest bathing alone, I try to be aware of the tamed world and the borders.

On the other hand, a whole discourse and body of research about medical benefits of forest bathing is emerging; policy makers, practitioners and researchers are looking for the right dosages or exposures, about finding methods and numbers for controlling what enters and exits the body's border. I studied this literature and helped other practitioners with research in Belgium for two years in a row to understand quick 'nature fixes'¹⁵, but we realised (again) after our ongoing analyses and long reflections that forest bathing is more than controlling these so-called borders between body and *Satoyama*.

I would like to encourage future research into such practices, not just as medical or self-care practices, but also as performance for intellectual/cognitive shifts (creative practices of knowledge) and making environmental ethical/caring ethics-informed designs and landscape interventions. More research and evidence (e.g. through collaborative autoethnography or collecting more human and landscape biographies) are needed to demonstrate how this method can integrate into tools for caring place-based transdisciplinary research such as landscape architecture, anthropology, and geography.

I found *Satoyama* in these two intertwined cypress trees next to the Nakasendo tree. For a moment I was also a cypress tree, immersed by the landscape, becoming the landscape. What I experienced there and then, is (Ecological)self-care.

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¹⁵ Ironically, the book *The nature fix: Why nature makes us happier, healthier, and more creative* by Florence Williams is often on the list of forest bathing practitioners and guides in western countries.

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