

Blurring the lines: A novice approach to riding on water

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Abstract

Through ethnographic inquiry of the author's novice experiences of riding on water, the study dismisses the use of the preformed category of surfing and instead proposes the novice approach to fieldwork. The article discusses the lines, or categorical thoughts, that researchers draw separating the body from the sea, or surroundings from experiences. Through the discussion of Georges Bataille's famous 'like water in water' and related literature, the author argues how the lines can be blurred. The article further explores the methodological possibility to deepen future academic inquiries by examining so-called non-Western thoughts and perspectives.

Key words

Novice approaches, ethnography, Georges Bataille, surfing, non-Western thought

Introduction

Fukui, Nabae Beach. Japan sea in the mid of winter. Dark grey sky above. Water is equally dark and heavy looking. Traffic increases. Many buses. I can see the logo of Kansai Electric Power on its side. There are some nuclear power plants around here. A group of people in black wet suits float on the sea, not noticing gazes from the buses. It is as if no one cares about the nuclear power plant nearby. Or maybe they do, and that's why they are here. I don't know. They just look like a flock of blackbirds floating in a pond. But the pond is waving rigorously. A chunk of a wave comes up high enough to swallow those people and retreats towards the beach. Like a small blink of an eye on the far horizon of the sea. Soon though it is not a mere blink. It is howling and about to swallow me whole.

From a distance, the scene might look odd. But now, I am one of the blackbirds. The others seem to be waiting for a wave with the right shape, enough power, and the right timing. The cove is wide, but most of the people are hovering within a limited area. They are sitting on their board, legs wrapping the sides, gazing towards the horizon. Suddenly, they change direction towards the shore,

lay on their boards stomach-down, start paddling with their arms, then, pushed by the wave, stand up and move with the water as it swells up high. I can see over the wave; a black wet suit is dancing on the water. But here I am putting in so much effort just to float. My body is getting heavy. (Author, field notes, February 7, 2018)

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Expectations

This article is an experimental attempt. First of all, I attempt to refrain from categorizing the activity I engage with in the field, as well as throughout this article, with surfing. While *surfing* is the name commonly used to refer to the activity, and I casually used it as well, when calling out to let my partner know where I was off to before leaving my house, if in this article I were to specify the object of study as surfing, it would be much more straightforward for the readers to engage with it. Based on the commonly shared category, readers could expect that this article discusses a fieldwork-based, participative observation-oriented approach to surfing, involving stories within the community of surfers to illuminate how identity is shared (see Evers, 2006; Wheaton, 2013; Olive, 2016; Usher, 2017; Uekusa, 2019). Readers might also assume that human nature relations and surfing (Warren & Gibson, 2017; Evers, 2019 ; lisahunter & Stoodley, 2021) will be used to argue ecological issues, as the beginning of this article mentions a nuclear power plant operated nearby the beach¹. In contrast, by avoiding the commonly shared category of surfing as a rigid object, this article starts off by seeking the bodily experiences of riding water foregrounding my very limited performance and knowledge.

Dominated by unknowns

Dark, dull clouds surround the sky. Water looks like melted lead today, splashes on the tip of my board, changing continually. Board between my thighs shakes intensely. Maybe I look like I am drowning? I don't care about other people's thoughts now. Upper body tries hard to keep my body on the water. Waves are coming and passing with bigger waves in between. Looking offshore, I wait for them.

Seeing some bigger waves passing by, I start rotating my legs, which way exactly I do not know, just the way I want to face. Nose of the board heads to the beach. Body, from lower stomach to thighs is finally contacting the board. Looking back over my right shoulder, a wave approaches just behind me. Paddling. Can I make it? My brief thought disappears soon after the board, or my body, is pushed and lifted by water. Get on now. Board is lifted further up. My body is still on the board. Missed it. Wave I just missed goes by, breaking violently. Next wave? Looking back, I see it is just behind me. Paddle. Hard. Paddle. Board is lifted. Tail is lifted too much. Nose starts dropping down. What

¹Although this article does not dive into any discussion about nuclear power plants, this topic should not be taken lightly or overlooked. I cannot put more emphasis on the tragedy that occurred at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, and that the devastation has far from ceased. The conditions and pollution, both material and social, are pictured from the perspective of bluespace by Evers (2019).

do I do? My body is under water and keeps summersaulting. I do not want to get hit by the fin. Cover my face with my forearms. Make my body small. I keep rotating, like a gymnast. I feel as if I am in a washing machine. Gradually my body is released from the water. My face comes up. (Author, field notes, November 8, 2018)

Maybe I was thinking of something more casual and easier, that all I needed to do was go to the beach and simply, *ride on the water*. I then realized that to do so, I had to find the place to go, in the right season, have the proper equipment, get to the right spot within the place, find waves, and make riding happen. I had never thought of the Japan Sea not having “ideal” waves to get on in the summertime. I thought I was familiar enough with this sea having spent my childhood within a 15-minute biking distance from it, to know that it has some waves all year round. It turns out that I did not know that the best waves for riding on actually occur in the winter, not summer and that it is possible to ride on waves in some rivers and lakes, and even in a wave-generating pool, such as the one considered a candidate for the venue of surfing competitions in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

This was my reality, not only could I not ride on water easily, but I did not even know how to find which waves to approach, with efficiency, or know how to protect my body in the water after being swallowed by waves. I was not sure what types of behaviours were required among the group of people in the water, nor of the adequate phrases shared within the “culture”, or if there were such things. Unlike Stranger (1999, p. 266), who used 30 years of experience to get into a community and conduct participant observation with “fellow surfers”, I had not immersed myself enough yet. If surfers’ bodies go through an “ongoing and dynamic biological, sociological, and psychological process of adaptations” (Evers, 2006, p. 234), my body had not gone through any noticeable adaptations yet. In short, I was inexperienced, a novice.

This article differs from articles in general that would follow the typical steps: Define the object to study, find a question to answer, choose appropriate methods, collect the data, analyse data and produce understandings which would ultimately be on the object defined in the beginning, or maybe prior to conducting the study. My inexperience confronted me with a challenge at the very first step – defining the object to study. Based on this starting point, I might have needed to wait until I could talk and discuss about the activity I was engaging in, from an insider perspective. But how is the inside grasped, methodologically, and would I be getting in? I wondered, how do researchers come to grasp the outline of what they focused on? Even experienced, embodied scholars on surfing – weren’t they novices, at some point?

While the insider/outsider, ethnographic immersion, is experienced by nearly all the researchers, the process of immersion is not necessarily examined in the literature. Yet the beginning phase is crucial for the outcome of research and can be a decisive factor in what the researcher ought to see and not to. Adapting the classification of surfing could mask and limit the potential understanding of my attempts in the field, enclosing the forthcoming discussion within the circle of ‘studying about surfing’ even prior to proceeding with the ethnographic inquiry.

Novice approach

Here, this article focuses on a different scope using an experimental approach where the pre-given categorization is cast aside, and instead, the exact outline of the activity is something not yet fully grasped. Riding on water, a vague and more open-ended, practical action, is what this article engages, depending on a bird's eye view which allows us to see the lines which divide, surfing and not, prior to constructing and conducting research.

This paper calls it the *novice approach*---foregrounding the researcher's experiences as a novice, putting emphasis on that yet to be known, understood, or articulated. A novice approach naturally guides this article to obtain an unconventional format. It is based on the fieldnotes jotted down on paper or typed – all those events, findings, and observations which were in principle, random and unsorted. I tried to record experiences and findings, but most of them turned out to depict what I do not really know, or cannot do, almost a record of questions rather than answers.

The style and format of this article adapt an ethnographic approach. To inquire “what is going on here?” (Wolcott, 2008, p. 69) in the field, first and foremost, the researcher must go there, inevitably producing “(f)irst-person ethnographies” (Gibson & Atkinson, 2018, p. 447), which foreground the human condition, including the researcher's own not thoroughly knowing what to inquire. This work is a process of developing a research question on particular social and cultural processes and experiences from the field.

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A month or so prior to the fieldnotes taken above, I was visiting Chichijima Island of the Ogaswara Islands for a separate research project. After I sat down on a patio chair and started sipping a cup of locally grown coffee during the recruitment of interviewees, a shirtless man wearing only shorts came in. Observing his casual communication with the café workers, I could tell he was a local. We ended up exchanging some words. He introduced himself as Nori, an owner of a local surf shop. In his 60s, he told me he was not so young anymore, but he appeared energetic. His weathered, tanned skin spoke to me more than his own words.

After expressing an interest in surfing, Nori invited me to the beach. I borrowed a longboard from him, and two other surfers joined us. We walked through a bush heading to a small, kind of hidden cove. As we paddled into the mouth of the cove, the others pulled ahead of me in the distance while I tried hard to close the growing gap. They started catching waves which would then bring them towards the beach, looking so smooth, elegant and somewhat athletic. They came back right away for another wave and then took off again on the waves. I attempted many times, and eventually, somehow, I found myself standing up on the board. The waves pushed my board, hard, and carried me. It was not a long time. I should say it was a brief moment. However, I felt the brief moment hanging around me, my body, for quite a long time, and the feeling of

excitement, prolonged. Even after getting back to the shivering winter of Kyoto where I was surrounded by a sea of academic papers and books, my body was longing for that feeling on the water.

The experience from Chichijima Island started swallowing me, predicting that “(t)he physical culture has become real in my life” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 67). I ended up buying a used board from a surf shop in Kyoto, which Nori had introduced me to. The length was between a long board and a short board. The board, shaped by the father of the shop owner, attracted me with its curvy form. I was told that to go into the sea in winter in Kyoto, it was necessary to wear a full-length, thick suit. An order was made for this, as a better fit would protect from the frigid temperatures better. The price made me uneasy, but the owner started sizing my body, explaining: “People around Kyoto tend to go to the Japan sea in winter. There are some that don’t want to go to the sea in wintertime. It’s really cold.” The comment reminded me of brand-new surf boards showcased at thrift stores. I wanted to go to the sea right away and get on a wave again. The past sensory of flowing on the water and the expectation to experience it again in the future pushed me. The owner further commented: “Those who start surfing in the winter tend to continue surfing”. If so, then, I wanted to keep going to the sea with the help of some tools and equipment. Socks, gloves, and a hood were all necessary accessories that were made from the same material as the wetsuit. Then, a leash, a leg rope and board together; wax for winter to apply on the top of the board so that the body would not slip off while paddling; a board cover; and a big bucket to stand in when washing off the saltwater and to transport the wet wetsuit home. The owner moved to a desktop computer in his shop and started scrolling through a satellite map of the Japan Sea around Kyoto, he said “Umm, maybe Nabae Beach would be good for you. It would take over an hour by car. Some people drive over five hours, one way, even for a day trip.” He then checked the parking spots and showed me an application on his smartphone, which tracked live surfing conditions at a given location. It showed how many people were in the sea, which skill level the conditions were best suited for, the type of geographic feature (sand or reef), wave conditions, including estimated wave sizes, and the weather including wind directions.

Later, I found myself checking the application when I had time. My daily routines shifted to early mornings. I started checking the night sky for the moon. I knew theoretically that the size of waves was connected with the cycle of tides, but I did not imagine I would care about it in a practical way. Finally, one early morning, I managed to clear my schedule, load all my gear and drive to the sea.

Moving water - waves

Car door opens only when I forcefully pull the handle. Windy. Looking down to the cove from the parking lot located in a small park facing the sea. Three people are in the water; two on the far side, and one in the middle of the cove. Previous times, most people were on the near side, but no one is there today. From here, the waves seem not so bad.

I need to hold the board tightly, otherwise, it will be blown away. Getting down the stairs quickly, taking extra care not to trip over any stones caught in my flip flops. Waves are broken by a rock near the pathway leading me to the beach.

Put my flip flops under a rock then stretch my body. Forcing myself to stay in this moment a little longer since I am so eager to jump into the water right away.

From here, the waves around the people are not necessarily good. Two people nearby missed catching waves. The near side is having more clean-looking waves. No one is there. The shape is so different from what I saw earlier today streamed on my smart phone. I get into the water and wait. Unlike my estimation though, good waves are not coming. I can see other people are catching waves. Not me. Should I wait a bit more off shore? Paddling out I still I keep missing waves. Now they are breaking closer to the beach. After looking at a wave I missed, I notice a bigger wave just behind me about to break. Swallowed by a wave again. (Author, field notes, March 30, 2018)

When you, the reader, imagined riding on water, perhaps a variety of different activities in different environments were conjured. Perhaps a rafting boat on a river, or jet skis on a lake. In my case, riding on the water was on the sea, where water was salty, often not so clear, and most importantly, came and went towards the shoreline with a rhythm – waves.

The difficulty I faced was finding the right micro-location for waves to ride on. I could not help but realize that the waves were different from one another. I recalled my memory of struggling to draw a picture of the sea in my childhood – while a shoreline appeared clear from a distance, onsite it became so dynamic and vague. There were no two waves alike, and the spot where good-looking waves came from never seemed stable, either. Maybe that was why other people moved around in the water to find the right spot, and often a particular spot in the sea was crowded.

I was informed by the Kyoto shop owner about localism on beaches and was advised to avoid jumping into such crowded areas: “Better start practising with smaller waves, where people are not bothered by you, and you are not bothered by them”. I followed his advice. But how would I be able to find a spot to wait for good waves? Seeking better waves became so critical to me. Especially given that my time to spend on the beach was so limited, and I was thirsty for improvement at this physical challenge. Finding better waves nearly equalled the quality of time I would be able to have.

What were waves, then? When it looked like there were no waves, it did not mean that waves disappeared from the ocean. Waves were there, always. It was a matter of degree. Waves that enabled my attempts of riding on water kept changing shape, emerging from the many intersecting elements and conditions. Weather conditions in the far ocean. Air pressure. Winds. Temperature of the deep sea. Season. Positions of tetrapods in the water. Geology beneath the water. Waves were almost presenting the shape of change or vagueness. My attempt at riding on water was like finding a good balance. But how?

It was me that needed to adjust to the waves, and find them, anyways. What I could rely on was my estimation, which was based on my experience. Even if I did not have rich experiences in dealing with waves, I had to manage in the way that I could. A small bump in the distance came to rise near the shore. Where did it break, when and how? I struggled with finding the spot and timing – space and time emerged here almost intertwined. Elias’s (1998) remarks bode

well here – That the concept of time is not universal. Finding the right spot also meant finding the right timing.

Unlike those beautiful tube waves that professional surfers ride on in popular videos, the waves I tended to see were small, random, untidy, narrow, and not clear-cut like I may have expected. When I found waves breaking in a particular spot, I would move there. But then, the waves that were breaking there did not appear the same, similar to how humans look different from the back and from the front. I questioned why my attempt of riding on water did not go well. Was this because of the wave conditions? Or the location? Or my paddling speed or timing? Maybe because of my board size? Was I too heavy for this? Questions continued unfurling. I kept recalling those videos of pro surfers. What I needed to do was adjustment-transfer those two-dimensional images into three-dimensional reality.

However, the waves that approached the shore in the field felt like live creatures on the move. Why was there a spot where the waves went up high, suddenly? Maybe there was some object under the sea? While waiting, I was constantly moving among the waves, and trying to situate myself by aiming the tip of my board towards the construction vehicle parked behind the beach. I kept adjusting my location and body positions. I found it was not realistic to relate waves and myself as two isolated subjects. In the water, everything appeared to be in the middle of movement and change. Despite all the randomness and unknowns, I was floating on the water and attempting to ride on it. All the while, I was adjusting to the unexpected, such as a sudden downpour and clash of thunder.

Inner flow - lactic acid

I think I have been paddling for a while, but I did not get to a wave. Looking behind me is the shore. The very beach I departed from is right there close by. I look at my watch. Ten minutes. Ten minutes? Disappointment strikes through me. I have not gone forward at all. There is a guy paddling on my left side. He is going forward. I feel my arms are heavy. Should I rest? But if I stop here, probably I will be carried back to the shore by the water. Okay, I see, this is the “current”. I should have counted how many times I paddled. My arms must have become iron or something. Lactic acid. Knowing this scientific description does not help. Wave comes. Paddle, and stop. I cannot keep paddling. Maybe time to rest. My eyes spot a plastic disposable bottle of some drink with faded lettering in a foreign language (how far did it travel?). I lie down on the board on my stomach. I know there is no one out here that rests like this, but I do not think I can balance well otherwise. Other people sit up while holding the board with their legs wrapped around it. Dull pain in my right shoulder. Ugh, it still hurts. Maybe time to leave. (Author, field notes, August 6, 2018)

Material factors within and outside of my body suddenly emerged as critical factors in the waves. In my daily life, I usually do not think of lactic acid. Nor of the final trajectory of a discarded plastic bottle. My body was facing material limits; lung capacity, the increased buoyancy from my wet suit, and the salty sea water burning the deep inside of my nose. My body emerged as a part of the environment I was already within. The environment also appeared as an extension of me, then.

My heavy arms and shoulders after paddling were caused by the exertion of paddling itself, and also by the chosen paddling course and the condition of the waves. Also, the lactic acid built up in my muscles ceased my paddling. At the same time, it led me to try saving energy by reducing excess moves, as otherwise I felt I would not have any power left for the coming waves. Awareness of those limitations of my body made me think of myself as encompassed within my body and my body within nature, which was beyond my control.

At least through my body attempting to ride on water, I encountered my muscles and nerves entangled with the environment. There, what continued to be internal only to myself? Was it my brain, which controls motor systems, the internal? But I found my fears were boosted when I was swallowed by the dark, deep and cold water. Water gushed into my body through my mouth which was supposed to be controlled by my autonomic nerves. I was drinking the water or I was forced to do so, or perhaps the sea was drinking me up. In the water, I could not be convinced of the idea that the human body has an exclusive controlling tower internal to us, responsible for handling our actions and senses.

Flow experience?

An hour and a half since I jumped into the water today. Maybe time to go back now. Waves are getting small. I want to stay a bit more though. I may not be able to come to the sea for a while, and most importantly, I have ridden on water several times today. Looking offshore, sitting down on the board floating on water. Good one is coming. A person twenty meters from me also seems locked in on the wave. I rotate my legs and change direction of my board. I put my upper body on the board, well balanced this time. I feel smaller waves running through underneath. Look back. Paddle hard. Tail of the board starts to be peeled up by the wave. Head goes down. Lift upper body by stiffening my arms. Tunnel? My eye sight is narrow. Board skates on the wave. Standing up. Board keeps skating. Under my feet a bumpy, soft feeling. Wave flips the board. My feet try to stay connected to the board as long as they can. I fall into the water. I reel my cord underwater. Now back to the water, to ride on water again. (Author, field notes March, 25, 2019)

Was it a *flow experience* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975)? The concept is handy, and maybe too handy to capture and explain the experience outside of psychological motives. Meanwhile, the concept might make the line between internal and external overly thick. Whatever the sensorial feeling described, it could not take place solely within my own body, though. It was entangled with the waves, board, my legs, lactic acid, and countless matters that surrounded me near and far. Asking whether the moment was a flow experience or not, for instance, defines the way as researchers we objectivize our experiences in a specific manner. The approach draws lines separating the moment of flow and the moments of not flow. Was it a flow experience? I am not sure. However, since I noticed changes, it was a different moment than others before it – for the first time I just kept going forward, without any effort to stay balanced. It was brief, and yet long, something that felt like a paradox between external clock time and internal time.

The moment I had perhaps longed for before getting into the water that day had come to an end. The ending was somewhat dramatic. No matter how elegant I may have been while riding on water, I would be swallowed up. Diving into the water head or feet first, quietly or loudly,

the quest of riding on water ends or/and restarts. This reminded me that riding on the water was not the default setting of our everyday lives. The experiences on the water needed to end, so that we could ride again. Riding on water was depending on non-riding on water (such as in everyday life). The passing moment was enabled by other moments to come.

Discussion

Along with the attempts of riding on water, things around me started to appear differently related than before. I started to imagine the height of the waves while looking at the moon. I thought about the shape of waves when I felt the mountain breeze around my house. I would recall the speed of waves when I came across a roadside drainage ditch. I would think of trash floating over waves day and night when I found plastic bottles littered on the street. I started to hate them more than before.

The novice approach to riding on water illuminates my realization that the elements surrounding the attempts were not stand-alone. Riding on water emerged “from a myriad of interactions between geomatter and corporeal matter” (Booth, 2020, p. 256). Even further, the boundaries of matter are not so clear. Those elements can be highlighted as something enmeshed with each other, as Evers (2006, p. 232) illustrated, “(t)he waves are part of our bodies, and our bodies are part of them; it is an exchange in which waves wash over me until I do not know where I begin and where the wave ends. My body extends to being part of the complexity of a wave.” In this way, a wave comes to be illuminated as an intersection of human and nature, provoking relational thoughts. For example, Anderson (2012) foregrounded two approaches to understand wave riding experiences of surfers – as an assemblage that connects the surfer and sea, and as a convergence which “suggests that when the component parts of the surfed wave come together, they do not connect straightforwardly; rather, their ontological form blends and blurs from the perspective of the participant” (p. 583).

Here, the conceptual possibility of convergence² might be differently deepened if we consider how the interplay between connection and separation takes place:

With respect to nature only humans are given the capacity to relate and to separate in the peculiar fashion that the one is always the pre-condition for the other [...]. By selecting two things from their undisturbed natural situation in order to call them >separate<, we have already related them to one another in our consciousness, we already have contrasted those two against all that lies between them. (Simmel, translated by Kaerns 1994, pp. 407-408)

The point provoked here is, then, whether the modality of that discussed is related, separated, or blended and blurred from the beginning.

² Anderson posed several questions, including whether convergence could be experienced at other locations, or physical experiences. Atkinson (2009, p. 170), for example, described his field engagement with parkour and traceurs so deep that “(l)ines separating roads, buildings, cultures, selves, and bodies disappeared”. Methodologically speaking, as long as convergence is explained through the human body, it may be constructive to leave the conceptual scope wide.

Water in water

Consider riding on water: Water is already there with us, the riders, in many forms. In blood, surrounding our bodies and evaporated in the air we breathe. In this sense, water foregrounds a spectrum of our being. Water is always there, from inside to outside, allowing for our very existence. It is we, the researchers, who distinguish water as the molecule H₂O, separate the internal and external and then argue the relations and connections afterwards.

Georges Bataille's (1989) comparisons of animal and human worlds provide another channel to face the divisions between separation, connection, and relation. Bataille argued that animals do not distinguish objects from themselves in the way humans do, especially when one animal eats another animal³. While humans impose distinctions on the surrounding environments, animals are rather in the continuity, without transcendence between eater and eaten or relation of subordination. "The lion is not the king of the beasts: in the movement of the waters he is only a higher wave overturning the other, weaker ones" (Bataille, 1989, pp. 18-19). On the contrary, humans lose intimacy towards the world and become alienated. Lascaux's paintings illuminated that the continuum of humans and nature in prehistory was separated today by objectifying what we do and by envisioning the duration of time (Sasso, 1995).

In reality, we are incapable of basing ourselves on unstable coagulations and we must confine to regarding animality from the outside, in the light of an absence of transcendence. Unavoidably, in our eyes, the animal is in the world like water in water. (Bataille, 1989, p. 24)

Water in water, then, characterizes a world without subject and object, achieving the intimate, where transcendence is abolished⁴ (Tomasi, 2007; Brewer, 2012). In a sense, it is a state even without separated entities to be handled as inter-dependent or networked. Water in water is a metaphor that directs us to imagine a tautological state even before dissected entities are interpenetrated⁵.

Fundamentally, an entire human being is simply a being in whom transcendence is abolished, from whom there's no separating anything now. An entire human being is partly a clown, partly God, partly crazy ... and is transparence (Bataille, 2004, p. xxvi).

While returning to animality is often regarded as regression, the opposite is illuminated in Bataille's work – animality is seen as a pathway to experience immanence and challenge the so-called dominant thoughts today from the West (Direk, 2004). Now, Māori proverbs come to mind, "Ko ahau te awa ko te awa ko ahau", translating to "I am the river and the river is me." (Brown & Heaton, 2015, p. 55), or the proverb on the indivisibility of the Whanganui River and the local tribe, "Ko au te Awa, ko te Awa ko au" (Mika & Scheyvens, 2021, p. 3). If there is a dilemma or discomfort to be found with the tautological remark, or an unsettled

³ Bataille also noted that the insights on immediacy or immanence were based on a viewpoint which could be narrow and questionable (Bataille, 1989). Transcendence and immanence are complicated concepts in the realm of philosophy, and Bataille used the terms in a particular way (Brewer, 2012).

⁴ Brewer (2012) noted that the immanence Bataille urged by water in water links to the concept of "oceanic feeling" that Freud (1953, p. 65) brought.

⁵ On Parsons's conceptual approach on interpenetration, Elias (2000) pointed out that in order to see interpenetration, there needed to be separated entities.

feeling to leave the river and I separated as well as connected, it would be stemming from a particular thought scholars might be used to. For example, Brown and Heaton (2015) argued that the words illustrated by the Māori language do not resonate well with the world views depending on Cartesian dualism. Here, linguistic descriptions researchers apply reflect a “mode of thinking” (Mennell & Goudsblom, 1998, p. 38) presupposing water and humans as separate entities.

Blurring the lines

By attempting the novice approach, lines drawn by linguistic descriptions to separate, starting such as surfing and not, internal, and external, subject and object, or even me, my body, and water, come to be re-engaged: The once distinctly drawn lines or “metaphysical presupposition” (Barad, 2003, p. 804) become gradually blurred. Like that of the Māori proverb, what the novice approach elucidates is the vagueness of objects we might otherwise perceive as concrete or the ambiguity of objectification that we almost undoubtedly impose. What so-called “non-Western” thoughts or “indigenous knowledge” can provoke, in this sense, lies in the modality of linguistic descriptions to leave things unseparated, or the boundaries to be blurred⁶.

Let us examine the quote below, for another example. In his book, *The View from Afar*, Lévi-Strauss explained the title is taken from a word in Zeami’s work, who was the pioneer of the Japanese Noh tradition⁷.

To know and understand one’s own culture, it is necessary to regard it from the point of view of another. This can be likened to the Noh actor as described by your great playwright and theorist Zeami: to judge his performance, the actor must learn to see himself as if he were the spectator... *The View from Afar*, was inspired by my reading of Zeami. With the aid of my Japanese studies colleagues, I simply transposed into French the expression *riken no ken*, which Zeami uses to designate the actor’s gaze watching himself as if he were the audience. (Lévi-Strauss, 2013, pp. 30-31)

The original word *riken no ken* is somewhat mysterious – the implication of the phrase can differ depending on context. While Lévi-Strauss took the wisdom of non-Western performing arts as a metaphor for the view of transcendence that obtains an objective perspective from a distant vantage point, I believe the emphasis is not only for the performer of Noh to be able to move away from one’s own viewpoint. What Zeami repeated is, rather, the “penetrating awareness” (Yusa, 1987, p. 334) that included the audiences’ *riken no ken*, or, detached perceptions. In a sense, it is an attempt of conjoining the gap between performer and audience,

⁶ This echoes what Barad (2003) discusses as performativity, “—a materialist, naturalist, and posthumanist elaboration—that allows matter its due as an active participant in the world’s becoming” (p. 803).

⁷ Noh is a form of dance drama developed in Japan, inheriting varieties of drums played at shrines and temples for festivals emerging 800- 900 years ago. Noh is a storytelling performance, with the use of visual appearances and movements, different to Western narrative drama (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.).

rather than solely shifting the perspective freely from one to another in euclidean space⁸. In this way, *riken no ken* weaves a single, theatrical experience through Noh which, “embraces both subjective and objective standpoints, and realizes that, at the immediate moment of aesthetic experience, there is no distance between actor and audience” (Yusa, 1987, p. 341).

It seems the detachment that *ri* (in *riken*) implies was understood in Lévi-Strauss’s work from more of a geometric distancing standpoint⁹. However, detachment can be differently considered as well — detachment from the action of seeing, as seeing (*ken*) in Japanese in this context implies both the action of seeing (noun) as well as the action itself (verb). By detachment from seeing is then, detachment from separating performer/audiences, present/past, live/dead, here/there, subject/object and ultimately, the dualistic framework embedded in scientific approaches. Here, the wisdom in those non-Western thoughts is not only found in knowledge explicitly described, but rather found in the process of *knowing how* tied with the way of using linguistic descriptions.

The implication of the novice approach

The methodological implication of the novice approach is first found in including it in the phase of study where researchers are not yet ready to articulate the research object or its distancing from familiar concepts or categorizations. Here the approach enables us to bring the process of capturing what we are to study as an object, or “object-to-be” (Washiya, 2022, p. 12), differently. Instead of being dependent on lines already drawn that provide premade categories, the novice approach lets us question the lines we tend to follow and blur the lines we might impose on an object-to-be prior to delving into field research. The approach advocates for the lines that typical dualistic views encapsulate bodily experiences into nature/culture, human/non-human, subject/object and so on to be blurred. To this point, the novice approach intersects with the system of world views and values of non-Western or indigenous thoughts in a more tangible and practical manner. Further still, the novice approach proposes we face that which we do not know well, cannot explain well, or that which appears tautological, ambivalent, and illogical by our descriptive approach, and re-engage with our descriptive approaches and thoughts to the degree that “openings” (Glesne, 1997, p. 218) are created and become different understandings¹⁰.

Haraway (2016, p. 35) notes that “(i)t matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations”. Similarly, the novice approach emphasizes moving away from linguistic descriptions, particularly at the outset of the research, which in turn would affect our thoughts, knowledges, and their relations.

⁸ Here, Yusa (1987) saw the underlying influence of Zen, or Zhuangzi’s thoughts of the equality of things that vanish the boundaries researchers tend to depend on.

⁹ In considering “exteriority within”, Barad 2003, p. 825) discusses changing topology as an alternate approaches to geometric understandings.

¹⁰ Haraway (2016, p. 61) questioned, “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” This paper too, questions the academic boundaries we tend to embed and seek to go beyond. This paper shares a common interest with other studies, such as more-than human works (Evers, 2019; lisahunter & Stoodley, 2021) .

This paper closes with David Hulme's (1936) metaphor of the *eye in the mud*. In suggesting the novice approach through the experiences of riding on water, this manuscript referred to avoiding the bird's eye view that oversees objects categorized already from the external, distanced point of view. In referring to the bird's eye view, Hulme (1936) states that what we tend to see are not "things as they are, but only sees certain fixed types" (Hulme, 1936, p. 159). Alternatively, Hulme proposes, "the eye is in the mud, the eye *is* mud." (p. 239). Hulme's metaphor of the eye is not only grounded, as opposed to the bird eye view, which obtains a distanced perspective, but it even blurs the line dividing eyes and mud.

Although the academic terrain of the novice approach can cultivate new understandings, it is yet to be concretely described here. It may advocate the use of metaphors or unarticulated forms of writing, or even sketches that tend not to be considered legitimate academic products currently. In this way, we would encounter an object-to-be; before nuanced, clear-cut articulations and understandings come forth.

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