

# Place-making Beyond Humans: Environmental Photography with Dots

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ABSTRACT

Thinking with the environmental photography collection on her Instagram account, the author of this visual essay focuses on a conceptual exploration of dots and their agential capacity. From COVID-19-shot blood drops, egg cells, and black fly bites to human irises as devices unlocking phones – all images are unique re-presentations of a posthuman, non-anthropocentric fabric, constantly shaping and reshaping territory. Dots prompt the question: Who contributes to this place besides humans? The author concludes with a discussion on how, in times of climate change, the conceptual insights of the blog can be applied in environmental art education through her place-responsive practice.

## Background

The Instagram blog *@dotsdotting* was born in June 2018 in response to Erin Manning's (2009) book *Relationscapes* and her discussion of dot paintings related to the Dreaming activity of Aboriginal artists in Australia. The Dreaming for Aboriginal Australians is "all-encompassing, all-pervasive force" (Bell, 2022, p. 12), a story of creation and the Law that weaves the interconnectivity of all human and nonhuman beings across space-time. The metaphysical reality of Dreaming, as discussed by Manning (2009), plays a crucial role in the genesis of artworks, and is told by artists "as a life-giving story that intensifies contact between lineage, land, movement" (p. 161).

In particular, Dorothy Napangardi's artwork *Mina Mina* (2005), as well as other works of contemporary Aboriginal artists presented in that book, truly moved me as the painted dots on the canvas seemed alive. *Mina Mina* tells a story of salt lines from salt pans in the traditional lands of the Warlpiri people in the Tanami Desert. The painting "directs our bodies not toward the representation of *Mina Mina* but toward its liveliness" (Manning, 2009, p. 155). The liveliness of dots is immanent to the painting and vibrates, creating a force-field, which can be sensed as if from physical touch. Manning refers here to the power of dots' meanings for the artist and how the surplus from dot-artist relations is subsequently perceived by the viewer. *Mina Mina* served as an inspiration for me to collect/photograph the liveliness of the moving dots of the place I dwell in.

Dots are among the symbols and patterns frequently employed in Aboriginal art, although opinions differ on why it is the dot symbol that came to populate the works of artists. Where dotting largely "was borrowed from traditional body painting and mosaics made in the ground" (Jorgensen, 2023, p. 10), dots

in themselves manifest either "locations across Country" (Martin, 2013 p. 69), elements, ancestral beings, or significant events (Bradfield, 2024) as well as sand (its grains) upon which the earliest art was created. However, and as Manning (2009) argues, the dotted representations "extend beyond their coordinates in a Euclidean space-time" (p. 181). Instead, the dots in the painting have speed in relation to each other, the artist, and the viewer. Being the "dots in the making" (p. 187), they are "not the representation of a story but the act of the telling itself" (p. 161).

Crucially, while the Dreaming practice is deeply rooted in sacred traditions and rituals that honor unique personal bonds with the land, it's important to note that my photographic portrayal of dots is not an attempt to mimic this practice. Rather, this blog embodies my research interests and serves as a channel for engaging with the active agency of dots through various theories (that I will discuss later) as I gradually become more acquainted with my new surroundings (having relocated from Russia to Finland in 2012). In this respect, I reckon that painting-dancing-living the Dreaming qualitatively differs from photographing the dots in many ways, which this paper will not be able to cover entirely.

Yet, what unites these artistic practices is an ability to engage with dots, their emerging meanings in 'the act of the telling' either through a painting or a photograph. The *@dotsdotting* blog, first and foremost, makes me learn from the dots and spots of our mutual residence (Northern Finland) about *place-making*. Place-making here pertains to the process of co-thinking and co-creating a territory, its material and virtual trajectories in-between human and more-than-human entities (Vladimirova, 2023). Specifically, I observe and think with dots in relation to an environment undergoing significant change due to global warming. Hence, *dotsdotting* photographic blog has been serving me as a creative

platform for exploring the place-making processes amidst environmental upheavals and beyond.

## @dotsdotting

In the description of the *@dotsdotting* profile I wrote: "This blog is about dots and spots of the unstable territory ...Deconstructing an idea of a dot<sup>oooo</sup>●.°Dots are moving." Being influenced by Manning's book and the aspirations of my PhD research at that time, which heavily relied on the philosophies of posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019) and new materialism (Alaimo, 2010; Barad, 2007), my initial aim was to demonstrate *what or who else contributes to the liveliness/mutability of a territory apart from human beings*. I began collecting images of dots and spots that I share the territory with. Primarily, all photos were taken in Northern Finland, occasionally complemented by images from Russian Siberia. Additionally, this blog has had a few collaborators, one of whom is my colleague and co-writer, Dr. Sarah Crinall from Australia, who has been sending me her dotting territories of life from time to time.

At the outset of this photographic practice, I was driven by the motivation to show the diversity of dots, their various forms and how they are changeable. The philosophy of posthumanism determined my aim to shift the focus away from humans as the central actors in place-making and explore the multitude of agents present in the environment. For example, I would photograph water droplets on snow (Figure 1), considering water as an element in flux, which affects the droplet's state and its freezing in a moment to come. On other occasions, I would capture the spots on an apple, the pattern of dots on a pillowcase, lichen circles on a stone, or my own polka-dot dress.

Through these photographs, I aspired to deconstruct the common

understanding of a dot as a self-contained symbol with fixed, definite borders and a rigid structure. Thereafter, I discovered that dots are more complex, fluid, and agential or having the capacity to spark actions, be affected by and affect change across *cultural-natural* contexts. For instance, water droplets, as part of the natural context, are simultaneously intertwined with cultural practices like water management. As such, these droplets play a role in the annual snow melting process and contribute to the risk of urban flooding, thereby impacting the moods, social dynamics, and economic life of human citizens.

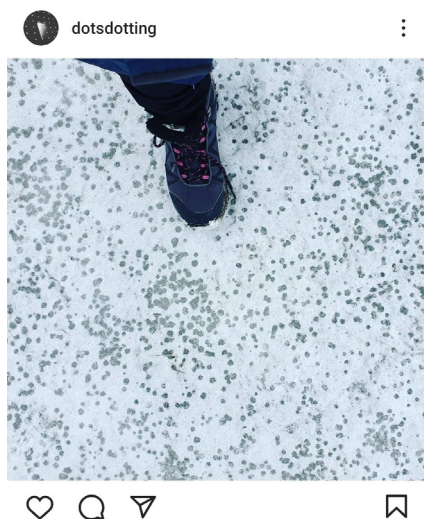


Figure 1. Water droplets dotting on snow.

Around the same time, drawing inspiration from indigenous scholarship (Guttorm, 2021; Joks, Østmo, & Law, 2020) that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and the mutual responsibilities that arise from these relationships, I began to reframe my understanding of dots within the context of *trans-corporeality* (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2016). I strived to demonstrate that dots of the blog are always already emerging from the relations of humans and more-than-humans. Trans-corporeality, as articulated by Stacy Alaimo (2010), means the intra-affectivity and porosity of bodies in a world made of relations and flows of materials and affects, whereby the physical

bodies are constantly influenced by and influencing their surroundings, whether through chemical interactions, environmental factors, or social relations.

These various processes of permeability by, for instance, chemicals, toxins, air, microplastic, nuclear particles and “the agencies of environments” (Alaimo, 2016, p. 112) happen to blur boundaries between human and nonhuman entities. It means that the agency is rather distributed and not confined to individual subjects but emerges from assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), or material-discursive groupings of relations producing new realities with every assemblage. Yet, as Alaimo (2016) puts it, “humans are not gravity” (p. 156), critiquing a misleading idea that humans are an abstract force (Chakrabarty, 2010) within those assemblages. Following this critique, the “subject” (either a dot or a human being) in this paper is seen as “immersed and contingent rather than disembodied” (Alaimo, 2016, p. 157). This suggests that dots and humans move and act, but how they act depends a lot on the unpredictable relations (of matter and socio-political forces) they materialize from.

Therefore, a dot in the @dotsdotting blog is not viewed as an isolated representation of a thing outside of a human being. Instead, it is regarded as part of an ongoing relational process and a trans-corporeal movement taking form. I am interested in exploring the various kinds of relations dots are part of, especially when it comes to place-making and complex relations that determine environmental health, as well as the present and future of multispecies communities. Thus, I started noticing how various organic/inorganic dots move, change, and explicate the co-creation of territory by the multiple entanglements of humans and more-than-humans in our situated milieu.

For instance, in the image below (Figure 2), I tend to see not just fish

scales on a stone after a fish was being cleaned, but I potentially see what Joks and colleagues (2020) call “places-times-tasks” (*meahcit* in Northern Sámi language). It is a human-fish relation that emerges in a particular place and at a particular time but is devoid of any fixation with that place or time as they are “shifting according to season and weather” (Joks et al, 2020, p. 308). Simultaneously, I hesitate to use the terms of the Sámi peoples in my daily life for fear of cultural appropriation and the misuse of traditional ideas in a place where there is a chance that certain unsustainable practices may have been used while catching and cleaning that fish. Yet, the scaling silver dots still signify a web of relations, involving a sea, a human, a fish, a knife, potentially an eating practice, and a human ‘becoming fish and becoming sea’, absorbing fatty acids, vitamins, and minerals with a risk of absorbing mercury and PCBs.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2. Silver dots scaling.

In these emerging entanglements, the dots are more than just representations: They are the traces signaling a human-nonhuman encounter. They indicate the emergence of human bodies but otherwise, where human porous bodies are “part of the flux and flow of the anthropocene” (Alaimo, 2016, p. 182) entangling with nonhuman matter. While representation is important, I find it more curious not to interpret dots but to inquire what they do to us and how they harness

their affective potential. This might give us an inkling of hope that we can better orient ourselves in the relational trans-corporeal processes and their dynamics to understand who is doing what, on whose terms, and whether it contributes to social and environmental justice. One example of such a trans-corporeal event is the COVID-19 shot (Figure 3), leaving dotting traces of blood on a bandage. The flow of atoms and molecules of a vaccine encounters the immune response in the body to help the body 'learn' to recognize a pathogen before an infection. The body learns to be otherwise. It is now a new body, a body becoming with a vaccine.



Figure 3. Vaccination dottages.

Another example of a dottage changing and becoming with the unstable territory of life are these beautiful egg cells (Figure 4) retrieved from a human female organism.

I am sharing it upon the consent of the image owner. In this image, the egg cells are not yet frozen but have already undergone the stimulation by hormones to reach the stage of maturity and are prepared for the process of oocyte cryopreservation. This very physical procedure of penetration, invasion, and retrieval, as well as further freezing, is simultaneously emerging together with various biopolitical discourses of reproduction,



Figure 4. Dotting egg cells.

fertility, happiness, safety, efficacy, ethics, emotional risks, privilege, and cost-effectiveness. The dotting dottages of egg cells, meanwhile, are at the center of these material and immaterial flows and intensities, creating a movement of human and nonhuman animals, materials, industries, jobs, tear drops, and more. Here, as in any other image in this visual essay, photography, if augmented with theory, helps exposing “the embeddedness of trans-corporeality, [which] involves grappling with data, information, scientific captures, and political modes of mapping interactions and relations across different scales” (Alaimo, 2016, p. 183).

From a multispecies justice perspective, various nonhuman organisms are not consented and exploited to sustain the assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) industry through the use of animal-derived products in laboratory research and experimentation associated with ART procedures (Jans et al., 2018). For instance, bovine serum albumin (BSA), which is a protein derived from cow blood, is commonly used as a supplement in cell culture media for *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) procedures (Yao & Asayama, 2016). BSA provides essential nutrients and support for the growth and development of embryos during IVF treatments. Similarly, other animal-derived substances such as hormones, growth factors, and culture media components

may also be utilized in ART laboratory protocols.

Conversely, this same industry offers hope and joy to numerous human families and individuals, making researchers (Jans et al., 2018) argue for the necessity of animal research in driving medical progress and the potential benefits of ARTs for those facing infertility and/or specific life circumstances. This example with egg cells demonstrates how seemingly innocent dots can expose unjust or controversial practices in certain industries and illustrates the complexity of life we live together, albeit in very different ways.

I continued my posthuman non-anthropocentric photography with dots while pondering, “What do the dots do?” This contemplation led to a conceptual revelation of the blog related to counter-mapping. Counter-mapping is a form of cartography intertwined with storytelling that challenges dominant worldviews and empowers marginalized voices to unpack the histories of their land in a decolonizing manner (Peluso, 1995). Mindful of this practice, I began to view dots as more-than-human agents of such mapping.

Considering the colonial history prevalent in many parts of the world, counter-mapping practices are predominantly enacted and utilized by Indigenous, Black people, and People of Color (e.g., Johnson & Recollet, 2020). Following Linda Knight’s argument (2023), I acknowledge that I do not aim to speak on behalf of these communities, as I lack a deep understanding of counter-mapping. Nonetheless, I believe the fundamental ideas behind this practice are crucial for achieving social and environmental justice across diverse cultures and places. Theorizing with trans-corporeality, it becomes intriguing to explore how dots exhibit agency while being simultaneously shaped by the unpredictable entanglements of human-non-human matter and the socio-political

forces of the land. In their contingent intentionality, dots and spots can claim territory through mapping by emerging in places where they belong, and vanishing from locations where they were forcibly placed. Can humans notice these transformations?

@dotsdotting illustrates a counter-mapping practice by showcasing the bites of black flies (Figure 5). Appearing in myriad ways in human living space, and on and within our bodies, these dots disrupt the illusion of human ownership, control, and mastery over a place. These bites on my leg were not only itching and uncomfortably irritating, but they were also teaching me something. They marked my body as if mapping, reminding me that I do not live here alone. I happened to circumstantially share some blood despite the annoyance and the potential risk of contracting a disease transmitted through a bite of a female fly, crucial for the development of her eggs. In that sense, *dots in a decolonizing fashion make us humans think of giving more than taking and surrendering more often than dominating*. While recognizing the complexity of this issue, particularly concerning the most vulnerable populations, it is essential to clarify that advocating for surrender does not entail passively accepting vulnerability. Instead, I propose that the world's most privileged groups of people, including myself, start gradually unlearning their desire for more (e.g., comfort, food, stability), while actively engaging in less comfortable, but *response-share-able*<sup>2</sup> co-existence with others.

This thought brings me to the autumn leaves, whose withering starts with (brownish/yellowish) dots, just like the skin of my grandmother is covered with dots and spots of softening (see Figure 6), as if these dottages, in a counter-mapping manner, reclaim vitality. This is not to anthropomorphize the leaf or phytomorphize the grandmother's skin, but rather to hint toward our co-withering, co-relaxing

in the face of the inevitable, which is necessarily a messy, more-than-human doing. Reformulating this into what may be perceived as a contentious question, I ask: Can we learn to question the *sole* ownership of life and surrender to co-withering?



Figure 5. Black fly's dotting bites.

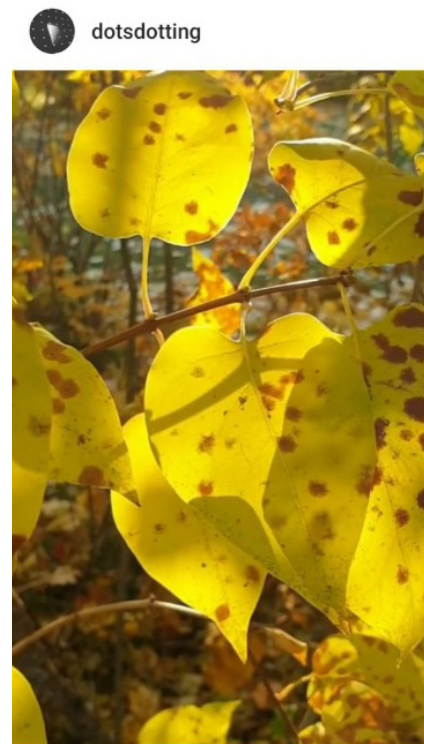


Figure 6a. Can we surrender?

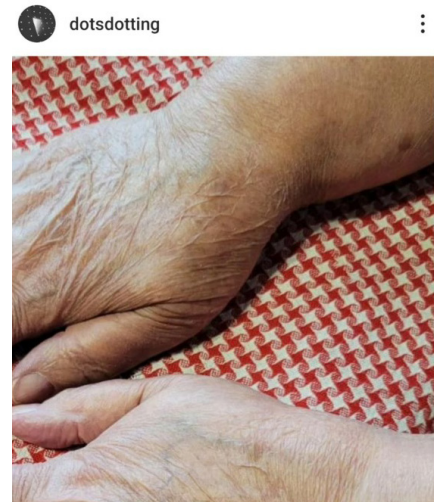


Figure 6b. Can we surrender?

And where life is infinitely coiling us into the living-dying pattern, the dottages of garlic sprouting (Figure 7) have a promise of life in them – not for humans to survive, not for plants to grow, but for the posthuman coexistence of humans and other-than-humans, for life itself to keep on coiling.



Figure 7. Garlic sprouting-dotting.

Unavoidably, when writing this in 2024, I cannot escape thinking about dottages of war: flashpoints, bullet holes, marks on military strategy maps, Morse Code, nuclear particles, and minefields, to mention but a few.

Are they also inevitable coiling of life? Along with dottages of war, I ponder over multiple dots of so-called (un)sustainability. Figure 8 comprises a little collection of such non-innocent dots from the blog: fuel drops on the snowy road, pharmaceutical dottages of drugs, dotted rubbish on green grass, pinned bugs in a museum, spotted iris unlocking the phone (how does biometric authentication undermine sustainability?).

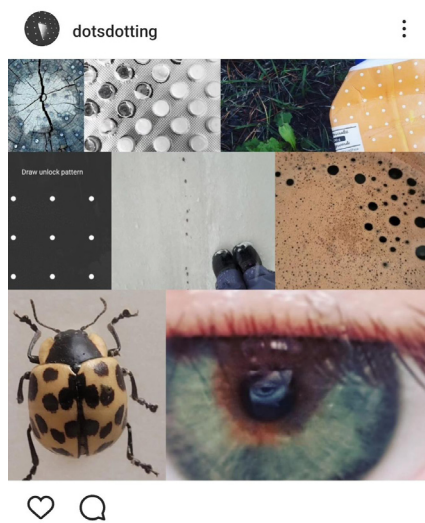


Figure 8. Are all dots innocent?

Even though these dots remind us about an idea of a distributed agency in all the trans-corporeal processes, environmental crises, and their consequences (e.g., dotted rubbish as an agent of pollution) stem from human dominance, fueled by “the enormity of collective human agency” (Alaimo, 2016, p. 80). In such circumstances, climate change looms closer, perpetuating environmental degradation and ensuing social and climate injustices. Racism, discrimination, and greed serve as the drivers of these injustices (Pulido, 2018). Importantly, Alaimo (2016) emphasizes the need to contest human agency, distinguishing culpable groups from those exploited. Encouraging certain groups to relinquish authority and embrace surrender in our posthuman place-making may alter human-human and human-more-than-human dynamics.

## Implications for environmental art education

Upon thinking with photos of the Instagram account *@dotsdotting*, I find it crucial to discuss the conceptual-empirical implications that might be inspired by the visual blog for the field of environmental art education.

In the blog, I theorize with the dots through the philosophies of posthumanism and new materialism and lean on these systems of thought as underlying ethico-onto-epistemologies (Barad, 2007). They aid in “shifting the human figure from a dominating position in the world [with the] political determination to move toward inclusive-of-various-matter, multi-species, discrimination-free futures” (Vladimirova, 2023, p. 25).

As demonstrated through the images and the discussion in this paper, the dots are dotting (scaling, curving, melting, falling, evaporating, coloring, decorating, flowing, burning, spiraling, mapping, descending, building, promising, and more). Importantly, the verb ‘dotting’ hints toward movement, in which dots relationally partake, and this movement always emerges in between more than one (Manning, 2009).

When it comes to place-making, the binding proximity (actual or virtual) of the other, gestures at a collective environmental endeavor, which many human individuals and collectives (e.g., fossil fuel companies, wealthy countries, policy makers) notoriously fail. Through the conceptual exploration of *@dotsdotting* and its various instances of posthuman photography, I aimed to demonstrate a few insights resulting from this creative practice. The first insight is the idea that place-making is necessarily a trans-corporeal multispecies process. Secondly, noticing and attending to dots revealed their agential capacity for counter-mapping the place. Finally, such more-than-human counter-mapping urges certain categories of

humans to reconsider (surrender) their omnivorous, self-centered approach to consumption and domination. Environmental (art) education plays a crucial role in raising awareness of these issues.

With a long tradition of art-based environmental education in Finland (Mantere, 1995), teachers across different levels of education have had an opportunity to develop and enrich place-based pedagogies in various ways (Ylirisku, 2021). However, the educational focus on students’ cognitive development, embodied enjoyment of nature, or social change in communities through art-based approaches remains largely anthropocentric, albeit crucial. Given environmental precarity, there is a persistent need to broaden students’ perceptions, encouraging them to notice their relationality and place-making with more-than-human others.

As an extension to previous place-based pedagogies in Finland (e.g., Hyry-Beihammer, Hiltunen & Estola, 2014), the blog *@dotsdotting* can represent one of the many examples of place-responsive art-based practice, where the place and its multispecies inhabitants are at the center of students’ inquiry and response. The experience of noticing a multitude of dots and photographing them might serve as a form of creative inquiry in the environmental art course syllabus, fostering theoretical observation of the dots’ agency and encouraging an attempt to engage with their materialities. Indeed, the activity of noticing dots could inspire attention to other phenomena in nature across various (educational) contexts. This more-than-human mapping, if incorporated into environmental art education and beyond, could help pave the way for justice for multiple species and the places they inhabit.

## Endnotes

**1** Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are chemical compounds that are highly carcinogenic and have the tendency to accumulate in water, soil and organisms following their usage in industrial and consumer products.

**2** Here, I reformulated the concept of response-ability (Haraway, 2003) to emphasize humans' capacity to respond, and as part of it, share.

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