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A Flag for Our Time: In Correspondence with van der Kamp

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1 *A flag for our time*: In correspondence with van der Kamp

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10 Philosopher Erin Manning opens her wonderful book, *The Minor Gesture* [1], in a unique way: by
11 recounting the review process of her very text. The reviewers, she shares, took the time to think-with
12 the text, in a gesture akin to joining the very process of writing. Manning refers to this gesture as
13 affirmation without credit, and suggests it carries her text beyond where she thought it could go at its
14 point of inception. The passage below captures this with far more eloquence than what I ever could
15 here:

16 “A minor gesture that activates the collectivity at the heart of thought effects change. It affects
17 not only what the text can become: it alters to the core what thinking can do. It gives value to the
18 processual uncertainty of thought as yet unformed, and gives that thought the space to develop
19 collectively.” [1, (p. x)]

20 Upon revisiting Manning’s book, stumbling into this excerpt once again, it struck me that it rather
21 beautifully reflects the sentiments from a reviewer of our recent paper, *On a Corresponsive Sport*
22 *Science* [2]. Rather than critiquing this work from a position of authority, the reviewer joined with its
23 ethos, crafting a thoughtful commentary (see [3]). For this kind and affirmative gesture, I thank the
24 reviewer by name: John van der Kamp. Not only did your comment think-with our text, but in joining
25 the grain of its unfolding, it leveraged an opening. Following Manning [1, (p. x)], this now takes our
26 writing to a limit where it is “in contact with the tremulousness of thinking in the act”. This is my
27 attempt to join with the opening you leveraged, following where it leads as best I can.

28 Indeed, there were many interesting threads cast out in your comment. But there was one that jagged
29 my attention more so than others. This related to your very last thread: the wider implications of such
30 work in a time that calls for transformation in how humans relate with the environment and sustain
31 the chair du monde. As a sport scientist in-becoming, the ecological crisis is something I am not
32 trained, nor encouraged, to think about. Yet, target article notwithstanding, it has wormed its way
33 into some of our works (e.g., [4]). I like to think this is my way of responding to Hannah Arendt’s [5]
34 plea that at some point, we must decide whether we care enough about the world to assume

35 responsibility for it. Though, I must admit that accompanying this subtle activism is a nagging
36 discomfort, perhaps even a self-inflicted criticism: *what can a 'trained sport scientist' bring to a*
37 *discussion about the ecological crisis? Who would listen? And why would they even want to?* It was
38 liberating to read, not only of your activism in joining a scientist rebellion and participating in civil
39 disobedience (very inspiring, I might add), but of your deep discomfort as a human movement scientist
40 in-becoming voicing concerns about such a crisis. As you mention, we are not authoritatively
41 knowledgeable about (and/or of) this topic, yet here we both are, implicating ourselves in its
42 unfolding. Where, then, does this leave us?

43 For a few years now, I have been visiting (and revisiting) the many (many) works of the awe-inspiring
44 anthropologist, Tim Ingold. I can't quite recall when or how I first stumbled into his work; I just know
45 that it continues to shape the way I see things – both as an academic and beyond. (And as a note to
46 the participants of your journal club, rest assured that I too find his works intimidating – as an avid
47 hiker, I often feel as though I have just returned from a strenuous trail following one of his
48 mountainous books). Indeed, there are many things that inspire me about Ingold's work, but perhaps
49 the most relevant to question with which I posed above relates to his “anti-disciplinary
50 interdisciplinarity” [6, (p. 74)]. It is to approach inquiry, not from a disciplinary vantage that looks upon
51 a landscape divided up into “fields of study”, but to look *with* a tangled mesh of ongoing pathways,
52 attending to various “lines of interest” [6, (p. 74)]. This seemingly subtle change in perspective has,
53 for me, been seminal (see [7]). Among other things, it has helped me appreciate *differentiation*, not
54 similarity, as the bind that weaves us together. As mentioned in our target paper [2, (p. 4)], because
55 ‘we’ are different and ever-differentiating, *everyone has something to give*. What this differentiation
56 calls for, however, is our response-ability to the experiences of others.

57 I wonder if the transformation called for in your comment starts ‘here’, with our response-ability to
58 the experiences of others? If so, how could we foster its growth – both in the human movement
59 sciences and beyond? While pondering this, searching for a way through, I found inspiration in the

60 work of phenomenologist-biologist Craig Holdrege. In a wonderful essay titled *Doing Goethean Science*
61 [8], Holdrege proposes an approach to inquiry that flows along *in conversation* with that which sparks
62 our curiosity. Indeed, speaking of inquiry in such conversational terms is neither grand nor particularly
63 novel. In fact, it is a conceit of many academics to speak of philosophy and science in such terms. The
64 difference, however, is that the conversational approach Holdrege advocates for is not the type that
65 regresses into professions of expertise or reverberations that echo in chambers of our own creation.
66 Rather, the conversations Holdrege foregrounds are *vibrant*:

67 “An essential feature of the conversation is that I listen to what nature has to say. Receptive
68 attentiveness allows us to hear and see with fresh ears and eyes. It’s the quality of open interest
69 in what the other has to say. But it would not be a conversation if I only listened. I respond and
70 interject. I am actively giving form to the conversation through my questions, observations and
71 the new concepts I bring in. A vibrant conversation needs the movement between receptive
72 attentiveness and active contributing.” [8, (p. 32)]

73 Does this mean we will always agree? Absolutely not. The point of a vibrant conversation, after all, is
74 not as much assimilation as it is to open ourselves to what another has to say, and perhaps learn to
75 perceive things in ways that correspond with theirs, as they with ours [2, (p. 11)]. Maybe vibrant
76 conversation is good place to start when considering transformative ways in which we relate with the
77 beings and things that surround us? As Ingold affirmatively writes in his exceptional text, *Art and*
78 *Anthropology for a Sustainable World*:

79 “By common consent, the organization of production, distribution, governance, and knowledge
80 that have dominated the modern era have brought the world to the brink of catastrophe. In finding
81 ways to carry on, we need all the help we can get. But no one – no science, no philosophy, no
82 indigenous people – already holds the key to the future if only we could find it. We have to make
83 that future together. And this can only be achieved *through conversation*.” [9, (p. 661, emphasis
84 added)].

85 I find solace in these words. While we do not possess the authoritative knowledge (about and/or of)
86 that would render us experts upon the ecological crisis, they remind me that we have a voice; a voice
87 that can bring insight to the ongoing conversation of how to live more response-ably. And in this
88 conversation, we are not *just* sport and human movement scientists – *we are fellow inhabitants who*
89 *form part of this world in its differential becoming.*

90 In what is quickly becoming an annual trip, my wife and I recently had the privilege of attending the
91 *Dark Mofo*¹ festival in Hobart. Among its many festivities, I was especially keen to attend the
92 installation by John Gerrard, titled *Western Flag* (Figure 1). This installation depicts ‘Lucas Gusher’ –
93 the world’s first major oil find in Spindletop, Texas. As you can see, the land is barren and exhausted,
94 with a flag of black smoke serving as a haunting reminder, not just of the wilful exploitation and
95 depletion of ‘natural resources’ that once covered this former sea floor with an abundance of life, but
96 of the energy taken to return this land to its prior habitation. It is a flag, as Gerrard contends, for our
97 extractive age – representing, not the reception of an offering, but a taking of what is not.

98 *****INSERT FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE*****

99 I bring this flag to our conversation because for me, it stands as a stark reminder that it is high-time
100 we worked toward a more response-able future. As noted in your comment, some may ask for
101 concrete examples as to what this means for those of us in the sport and human movement sciences?
102 Moreover, given our shared metatheoretical ground, you may even ask what this entails for
103 inhabitants of ecological psychology? While I can point toward some inspiring examples (e.g., [10, 11]),
104 my response to these questions is short: I do not know. Though, I wonder if this claim for certainty –
105 for concrete examples – misses the very point of our call for response-ability?

106 To elaborate, answers have a peculiar way of falling out in the midst of vibrant conversation. Those in
107 which we cast out our experiences, vulnerabilities and perhaps even acts of rebellion in ways that can

¹ See <https://darkmofo.net.au/about>

108 be responded to by others – be that in the groups we join, the ways we teach, the research we conduct
109 and the methods we use, or through our very writing as participants inhabiting the same world. The
110 caveat, though, is that such answers are not concrete. Not least in the sense of closing the
111 conversation down. Rather, they are more like paths of travel – lines of interest in an ever-generative
112 meshwork that open up and out, drawing our attention to features that may have otherwise remained
113 hidden, encouraging us to join and follow where they lead. After all, as your comment so wonderfully
114 reflects, the gift of a corresponsive sport science is not its authoritative certainty, but its hopeful
115 promise of carrying the conversation on. To this, I hope to contribute.

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122 **Conflict of interest**

123 I have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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163 **Figure 1.** 'Western Flag' by John Gerrard. Installation at the *Dark Mofo* festival (2023), Hobart,

164 Tasmania. Photo taken by author.