

Quanimacy

by
Claire Cunningham

with
Julia Watts Belser

Quanimacy* was created as a binaural sound work by disabled artist and choreographer Claire Cunningham, as an intimate reflection on their relationship with their crutches, the queering of their body and the concept of queer animacy. A conversation between Claire and the crutches, and featuring the voice and theories of Prof. Julia Watts Belser, scholar, rabbi, and activist for disability, LGBTQ, and gender justice who writes about the concept of queer animacy, their words are supported by the musical arrangements of composer Matthias Herrmann and dramaturgical care of Luke Pell.

This document is a transcript of words spoken by Claire Cunningham and Julia Watts Belser throughout the piece, with the design indicating the voice the words come from, and referencing the location of sound.

*Quanimacy - a term coined through processes with dramaturg Luke Pell after Julia Watts Belser's theories on queer animacy, now adopted by Claire for their bespoke dance technique which has evolved in relation to these ideas, and is an embodiment of the meetings of many minds, bodies and knowledge shared over years of collaboration and attending.

Key:

text by Claire Cunningham

*reference to
Irish saying*

words of
Julia Watts
Belser

sound on left

sound balanced

sound on right

Quanimacy

you're not always on my right

you're not always on my left

*you are the place
on which I rest
on the days
when my back is sore*

I remember
as a kid being
absolutely clear that
I lived in a world
that was alive.

Quadruped.
Plural.
Our body.
3 of us on four points.
Meat and rubber.
Feet and ferrule.
And always in control.

Crutches in tender clutches.
Cuffs that wrap arms in tiny hugs.

But closeness brings precarity.
There's no balance in a line of legs.

This relationship needs space.

That is where we find stability.



It was probably kindergarten, first grade, something like that, and we had done a science unit about things that were alive, and things that weren't alive. I had this very vivid moment of visceral outrage, when someone tried to tell me that rocks weren't alive. That stones were inanimate. That they were dead. That there was nothing alive in them. So, I remember thinking that this was absolutely counter to my own lived experience.

Shoulders

And ferrules

Hands

Ankles

Hinges

Head

Knees

Cuffs

Handles

Hips

Shins

Spine

I was primed in many ways when I became a wheelchair user. I was primed to also feel the liveness of my wheels. Cause I'd been feeling liveness in places where other people told me liveness was not to be had. This sensibility is something that is, at root, a part of how I know my own difference from the way a lot of people are in the world. Certainly, my own difference from white European American dominant culture. Which has often thought about the world as something that is other, and distant, and dead.

Shafts

Spring

Shafts

Shins

Spine

Spring

Holes

Fingers

I was just remembering,
when were up in, that café
in Aberdeen d'you remember that?

and I was sitting on the chair
and you were both lying underneath the chair, like

guard

dogs!

And I'd just read this article
"Vital Wheels"
by Julia Watts Belser. And d'you remember
that I started crying?

Which...well, you're used to seeing it,
but you know that I

don't usually do in public, do I?

and

and it just clicked.

I just want to name
and call out that I recognize
now, through conversations with
indigenous peoples, with peoples
of colour, with peoples whose cultural
traditions hold very different set of animacy
relations, that that sense that marked me out
as queer in my own white European American
culture.... well, it's very culturally specific, this
idea that certain things are... that stones are
dead. That they're not alive. That's just not
something that every culture believes,
but certainly, in the culture in
which I was raised, that was
a truism.



Hinges

Shafts

Shins

The
other piece of this
for me is that I think of my
wheelchair, not as an "it", but as
a "she", and that's a movement that is
associated with an ascription of animacy.
A seeing, a granting of her personhood. A
recognition that she is not a thing, an it but
another ...presence? A friend? A companion?
A partner in the work of moving in the world?
Now... not an equal partner! I am in fact directing
this enterprise. Mostly. Usually. Unless she gets
away from me, in which case it's not always
under my control. But that recognition,
that shift from it to her. That's the
granting of animacy, of liveness,
of that recognition of the
relationship.

and you're not he

But you're not she

and...

I don't know what I am in the middle.

Like,

You are not always on my right

and you're not always on my left

We don't really
do these binaries really do we?

And I realise actually that you're both quite
responsible for that.

Because, like, I remember

I don't know if this was
before we met,
but I remember watching
Fatima Whitbread in the Olympics.

I thought she was *amazing*, and everybody always talked about her
as being extraordinary.
cos she was so strong, and physically looked really strong.
And while people were so, sort of admiring of her,
they would ridicule her so
much. I remember this really vividly as a kid.
That the media and all the other kids in school,
would just slag her off because she
"looked like a man"

Is what she was always accused of.

And then with us,
the longer... the longer we were together,
the stronger
I got.

and my shoulders
Like my arms
and my back
got stronger and stronger.

feminine
And I hated it
Because I didn't know
how I could be
with that,
Because I thought that's what
...I had to be.
That's what I was trying to be.

And yet I needed you.

more and more
And every day would add
strength and
And the further away I got
from what I thought
I was supposed to be.
more muscle.

Theorist

Mel Chen talks about
the way that cultures ascribe
animacy. That sense of liveliness.
Who's really alive and vital and visceral?
Who's important? What's the hierarchy of
that? In ways that often replicate the hierarchies
that we give along human/inhuman lines. Human/
non-human is maybe a better way to say that, human/
nonhuman. Also, these hierarchies are tied into the
ways we think about race, about class, about gender.
So that certain kinds of people are higher up on
the animacy hierarchy. So for me, queer animacy
is about being deliberately out of step with
those hierarchies. And I think that part of the
queerness of it is also recognizing and
revelling in the political significance
of saying those hierarchies
are garbage.



flex

spin

push

twist

lean

hold

shoulders

and ferrules

prop

feed

pivot

click

hold

hold

hold
head

knees

and we took our time

listening

hands

cuffs

ankles

listening

handles

skin to skin

hips

hinges

shafts

shins

shins

shins

I remember having

this

moment

where

I really
chose
to think of you
as bodies.

not people

but bodies

And that that
meant

I couldn't


let

you fall

and we took our time
listening

so I would always catch you





before you fell

I had
at one point
a very scrappy, three
wheeled scooter who would
just chug over anything, and my
current electric scooter is much
more prissy. It's partly because of
the way her undercarriage is built.
When she hits a rock and she's
just like "Ahh! I just....I don't
even... I can't even deal
with this!"

When people pick you up... so, like when

we're
y'know in a cafe or
something like that and
we've become, we're separated,

the chair maybe you're under

or you're in the corner leaning against the wall nonchalantly.
(As you tend to do)

Sometimes when I don't realize it,
people *pick* you up,
and bring you to me.
And I get it. Like

I get
that they mean well, but
oh God, it's just it's such a strange sensation.
It makes my stomach sort of tighten and....

It's just wrong.
And, AND
they *lift* you off the ground.

Now
we
don't
do that do we?

You know, it's just like,
there's something...

if your feet,
your ferrules
if they if they
come off the ground
it's like

the life just goes out of you.

Their
non-humanness
is also a freedom. My
wheelchair will never consider
me a burden. There's something
extraordinarily reassuring about that.
Because they're not human I'm freed up from
all of those things that are in the background
of all of my human relationships, even with
people I so deeply, deeply trust. So, I think that
also feels really important. There is a quality
of thingness to them. But to only think about
them as thing misses this huge dimension
of our relationship, and that's, I think,
the piece that feels so private
and so queer.

Quadruped.
Plural.
Our body.
3 of us on four points.
Meat and rubber.
Feet and ferrule.
Crutches in tender clutches



you're not always on my right

head

shoulders

and ferrules

hands

ankles

hinges

shins
spine

Pretty
much the one
constant with bodies is that
they change. It's just the business
of having a body. You know, I feel that I
rolled my way quite unexpectedly into the
space of being an athletic manual wheelchair
user, which I never expected. I never thought
about myself as a person who had athleticism.
And I do now. But I think I do now conscious of
the fact that this is a fleeting moment actually,
over a life, and really trying to commit
myself to savouring it, but also holding
it lightly enough to imagine, to start
to imagine, what will the next
iterations look like?

knees

cuffs

handles

hips

shafts

spring

and we took our time
so I would always catch you

and we took our time

listening

what happens
when I can't
catch you anymore?

*you are the place
on which I rest
on the days when
my soul is sore*

when the strength
is gone?

what
happens

hinges
push

hips
hold

Spine
Lean

shafts
click

hold

hold

hold

hold

I
think, because
there's a particular
quality of presence and joy
and relationship and being
with my wheels in a certain way,
that very few people in my life
understand from the inside, it's
only those people who know
to mourn that with me...
when it is no
more.

you're not always on my left



you're not always on my right

you're not always on my left

shoulders

head

knees

and ferrules.

Written by Claire Cunningham
Featuring interview extracts from Prof. Julia Watts Belser, Sept. 2020
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Images by Claire Cunningham and Prof. Julia Watts Belser

Quanimacy also exists as an audio work with music by Matthias Herrmann.

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THE PLACE

Claire Cunningham

Claire Cunningham is a performer and creator of multi-disciplinary performance based in Glasgow, Scotland. A recent Factory Artist with Tanzhaus NRW Düsseldorf, Germany she is also an Affiliate Artist with The Place, London. One of the UK's most acclaimed and internationally renowned disabled artists, Cunningham's work is often rooted in the study and use/misuse of her crutches and the exploration of the potential of her own specific physicality with a conscious rejection of traditional dance techniques (developed for non-disabled bodies). This runs alongside a deep interest in the lived experience of disability and its implications not only as a choreographer but also in terms of societal notions of knowledge, value, connection and interdependence.

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Julia Watts Belser

Julia Watts Belser is a rabbi, scholar, activist, and spiritual teacher. She is a professor of Jewish Studies at Georgetown University and core faculty in Georgetown's Disability Studies program, where she brings Jewish texts into conversation with queer, disability, and feminist ethics. Her most recent scholarly book is *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction: Gender, Sex, and Disability in the Ruins of Jerusalem*. A passionate advocate for disability and gender justice, she co-authored the *Health Handbook for Women with Disabilities*, developed in collaboration with disability activists from 42 countries, to help challenge the root causes of poverty, gender violence, and disability discrimination. She currently directs a project on disability, climate change, and environmental justice – and when she's not teaching or writing, she's a passionate wheelchair hiker.

Vital Wheels: Disability, Relationality, and the Queer Animacy of Vibrant Things, Julia Watts Belser, 2015

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/hypa.12217>

Mel Chen

Mel Y. Chen is Associate Professor of Gender & Women's Studies at U.C. Berkeley and Director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Culture. Mel is also an affiliate of the Center for Race and Gender, the Institute for Cognitive and Behavioral Science, the Center for Science, Technology, Medicine, and Society, and the Haas Disability Studies and LGBTQ Citizenship Research Clusters. Publications: *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Duke University Press, Perverse Modernities series). 2012.

Pádraig Ó Tuama

Mo sheasamh ort, lá na choice tinne p44

Readings from the book of exile, Canterbury Press 2012.

Fatima Whitbread

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatima_Whitbread

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