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## Life Phenomenology and Relational Flow

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**Life Phenomenology and Relational Flow**

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**Abstract**

Michel Henry's radical reversal of world-referenced intentionality provides inspiration for drawing out the substantive features of relational flow analysis. To feel what you see is the overarching methodological cue in the consideration of flow affects. Flow moments are telling cues for discerning how there are not so much instances of temporal flux as there are impressions of vital connection that wax and wane in intensity. The depth of these impressions is the revelation of an all-encompassing hetero-affectivity wherein we are moved by the forces of life to take up in writing exemplary practices of relational flow.

**Key Words:** life, phenomenology, flow, interaction, movement, affectivity

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Michel Serres spoke mockingly of Maurice Merleau-Ponty for being enmeshed in intellectualist language "tragically stripped of any tangible experience." Serres claimed there to be "[l]ots of phenomenology and no sensation – everything via language" (Serres & Latour, 1995, pp. 131-132). He pictured Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenologist of embodiment, tied to his writing desk, looking out the window every so often, only to jot down some fugitive, fleeting hints of the "tangible experience" of ongoing, generative life. Serres (2008) expressed a "naïve wish" for "a return to the things themselves" in wanting "to hear, see, visit, taste, caress, smell; to open myself to the given" (p. 112).

Can phenomenologically-minded researchers take to heart this "naïve wish" and reflect upon life as it is being lived? Can we attend to the sensations of "ongoing, generative life" in the very acts of recalling them? Can we open ourselves "to the given" and once again bring to life the invigorating moments and vital interaction when we feel animated not only by what is happening around us but also by what is happening within and between us? In doing so, the dispositional detachment of reflective, perceptual phenomenology may well give way to greater appreciation of the very manner in which we are moved deeply, resonantly and relationally by the forces of life itself. Making sense of the ongoing stream of life's appearances need not have us detach from what it is we are experiencing right here and now. Instead, we can stay attuned to the feelings and flows of the pulsing moment in the very present activity of describing the meanings of our lived experiences (Smith, 2006; 2007; 2011; 2015). Life as a self-animating force can be evoked in phenomenological explication of what makes living experience what it is for all its residually lived appearances, which is an impressionality of relational flow.

Life and its sensations, and the very sense of being fully alive, speak to an originary affectivity that resists objectification. This felt sense of life's immanence inheres in the very condition of self-awareness and sensitivity to other selves. Life appears manifestly as "animation" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011), "vitality" (Smith & Lloyd, 2006), and as "vital contact" (Smith, 2014) with others. Life brims over with affectivity that at the most moving of times cannot be held within the bodily containers within which we mould and ordinarily hold our feelings and emotions. It is as if we are, at times, beyond ourselves. This manner of feeling and moving beyond ourselves, however, is the very force of life of which we are not only a part but with which we are inherently, vitally animated in living with others.

### Radical Phenomenology

To regard life so affirmatively and to investigate when and how we feel most fully alive calls for a radical shift in how phenomenology is practiced. The previous remarks, in drawing attention to an invisible, vital power intuited amidst worldly appearances and sometimes limited bodily expressions, are prompted by the radical phenomenology of Michel Henry. His scholarship spanning some fifty years from *The Essence of Manifestation* to *Incarnation: A Philosophy of the Flesh* persistently directs attention away from the essentially inert materiality of worldly appearances and toward the immanently-flowing force of life. Henry's reversal of the eidetic reduction of worldly appearances to essential characteristics of intentional consciousness affords evocative

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3 description of the invisible substance (*hyle*) of life that we can feel in essentially  
4 impressional, affective terms (Henry, 2015, p. 88). His work consistently and  
5 unremittingly invokes the life-sensing and life-sustaining “auto-affectivity” in which we  
6 feel all our sufferings and joys and which has radical implications for how the Husserlian  
7 “things themselves” to which phenomenologists are typically drawn can be appreciated in  
8 their very manner of appearing (p. 29). While Henry at times concerned himself with  
9 certain things of the world and their modes of appearing, such as art works and  
10 technological artefacts (e.g. Henry, 2009; 2012), the greater task he took on was to  
11 discern the “radical immanence” of life in an invisible, originary, animating, revitalizing,  
12 “transcendental affectivity” (Henry, 2008, p. 81).  
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16 Michel Henry’s critique of object-oriented phenomenology and his gravitation  
17 toward a seemingly unworldly “pure phenomenality,” especially in his most evidently  
18 theological works (Henry, 2003; 2012a; 2015), belies the fecundity of his  
19 phenomenological program for engaging with the world in a manner that lets its  
20 appearances remain full of life (cf. Seyler 2012; Gély, 2012). His life phenomenology  
21 inspires us, likewise, to engage in inquiry that works beneath objectifications and moves  
22 us to where there is no discernible detachment from the things themselves and where we  
23 enter “an entirely new terrain in which there are no longer any objects” (Henry, 2008, p.  
24 42) as such but only affectivities, resonances, synergies, synchronies and attunements.  
25 Such a phenomenological reversal of intentionality makes the primary mode of sense-  
26 making not the visionary sense privileged in traditional phenomenological scholarship, or  
27 even the kinetic, kinesthetic and affective registers of perceptual consciousness (cf.  
28 Sheets-Johnstone, 2006; 2009; 2011), but the very force of life’s self-generation. With no  
29 objective distance to be taken from that which we otherwise look upon  
30 phenomenologically, there can be “no Outside, no Separation, no Ek-stasis” (Henry,  
31 2008, p. 2) and thus no visible world as such but only a deeply relational flow.  
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35 We will now consider what is implied by this phenomenological reversal of  
36 intentionality in reference to illustrative studies of relational flow. Previously we  
37 concerned ourselves with sensations that are inherently and evidently animating and  
38 revitalizing. Such sensations were characterized in broad brushstrokes as experiences of  
39 “interactive flow” within certain fitness practices (Lloyd & Smith, 2006) in which we feel  
40 fully alive, immersed in the here and now, and bodily engaged and attuned to others.  
41 Henry’s radical phenomenology helps us flesh out this earlier characterization of  
42 relational flow through interactive disciplinary practices such as salsa dancing and  
43 equestrian arts.<sup>1</sup> We make reference to these disciplinary practices in indicating the ways  
44 in which phenomenological scholarship, which like all academic scholarship requires  
45 some measured distance from the topics of study, can remain imbued with sensing,  
46 moving, flowing vitality (cf. Lloyd & Smith, 2015). There are, in effect, *flow affects*, *flow*  
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51 <sup>1</sup> The first author of this paper, with his Andalusian and Lusitano horses, holds multiple Canadian  
52 championships in riding and halter disciplines. He refers to equestrian arts in terms of the liberty  
53 performances in shows such as Cirque du Soleil’s “Cavalia” and as exemplified by artists such as Frédéric  
54 Pignon and Sylvia Zerbini. The second author is a Canadian National Salsa Champion. Comments about  
55 salsa dancing in this paper are based on her competitive experiences and on interviews with the two-time  
56 World Champion salsa dancer, judge, choreographer and coach, Anya Katsevman.  
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3 *moments* and *flow motions* of relating to others of our own kind and to those of a more-  
4 than-human kind that bring us and our phenomenological scholarship back to life.  
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### 6 **Flow Affects**

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9 We aim at “a phenomenology of the invisible” (Henry, 2008, p. 6) in concerning  
10 ourselves, first and foremost, with relational affinities, resonances and synergies. Our  
11 primary mode of sense-making shifts from focused vision to the feeling of seeing where  
12 “seeing is more than itself” insofar as there is “within it a power other than its own” (p.  
13 81). This power of feeling what we see is all the greater for not dissipating itself in  
14 superficial visibility. We can feel what is visible to us, not as an affective accompaniment  
15 to vision, but in the very manner in which we are able to see anything at all. The salsa  
16 dancer says that when she meets her partner’s look “there is an energy communicated  
17 back to me. Sometimes it is met with aversion or a startle, but on more than one occasion,  
18 it opens up a feeling of connection where a true intermingling happens and where our  
19 invisible selves merge” (Lloyd, 2017, p. 68). The equestrian artist, likewise, feels affinity  
20 for the horses. He plays with the dynamics of sending the horses away and then drawing  
21 them back to him. He moves mimetically with them in expressing “the upwellings,  
22 upsurges, rushes, gushes, bursts and flushes, as well as the fadings, ebbings, flattenings  
23 and settlings of [their] synergistic exchange” (Smith, 2017, p. 81). This subjective power  
24 of seeing ourselves affecting, and affected by, one another is premised on a self-  
25 sustaining, self-revelatory capacity to feel the upsurge of life before and, indeed, quite  
26 apart from any forms that can be perceived in the world we commonly inhabit.  
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31 The phenomenological challenge lies in trying to grasp the sensations of our  
32 senses, which are not those of the so-called external senses that allow us to perceive a  
33 visible, aural, tactile world laid out before us, but of the inner senses that enable is to feel  
34 moved and seemingly affected by the world. Yet no sooner do we give ourselves over to  
35 these inner senses than we realize there to be affective wellsprings of our actions and  
36 interactions. Our visible, evidential lives may be dictated from the outside, but life feels  
37 motivated from within. A mood of elation colors the places and times in which find  
38 ourselves. The joy we feel in the company of another appears to fill “the whole world, as  
39 one says figuratively, even though it is not in the world” (Henry, 2008, p. 120). We are  
40 coming close to the generativity of life as an immanent sense of being moved by  
41 intensities of affectivity.  
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45 These positive moods, emotions and feelings remind us that it is good to be alive.  
46 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990; 1997; 2000) casts such pleasures and joys as  
47 characteristic of a flow state in which there is complete integration of action and  
48 awareness. This state occurs when actions become “autotelic” or done just “for the sake  
49 of doing the activity, without experiencing any external rewards” (Csikszentmihalyi,  
50 2000, p. xv). Actions occurring self-fulfillingly in and of themselves can presumably take  
51 on a joyful, pleasurable life of their own. Yet flow defined in this psychological way  
52 carries confounding difficulties that a more radical phenomenology exposes. In  
53 particular, this putative flow state forecloses consideration of the very dynamics of  
54 “autotelic” action felt from one moment to the next.  
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5 Rather than being considered a psychological state, flow is a synonym for the  
6 upsurging, upwelling of life. Expressive, also, of the fluidity of our actions and  
7 interactions with others, the substance (*hyle*) of flow is the essentially impressional  
8 “flesh” (Henry, 2015, pp. 119-125). Approaching flow from an exterior point of view,  
9 which is to say, as actions and interactions that appear to make possible moments of  
10 melding with another in feelings of joy or bliss, we seem always just to be touching on  
11 the deep impressional “flesh” of flowing connection. But when we feel for what we are  
12 seeing, we can begin to appreciate how life itself seeps, gushes, rushes, bursts and flushes  
13 ecstatically in activations of vivacity that are also synergies of hetero-affectation. Such  
14 “vitality affects,” as Daniel Stern termed these activations, are more aptly cast as effects  
15 of the inherent connectivity of life forms felt in waxing and waning flows of relational  
16 resonance (cf. Stern, 1993; 2002; 2004; 2010).  
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19 The integration of action and awareness can be felt ongoingly when interacting  
20 with others in practiced movements. The salsa dancer says “you feel things, yet it is  
21 important not to call these sensations happiness or sadness. Just feel the physicality and  
22 the range of what is possible” (Anya Katsevman interview). The dancer speaks of her  
23 practice as “like a meditation.” When she is dancing there is no self-conscious thought.  
24 She doesn’t just go with the flow. She is always aware of what is happening. But she is  
25 open to receiving what the interaction with her partner offers. Salsa dancing becomes “a  
26 practice that not only animates my very being as it is happening, it also carries a positive,  
27 residual affect that ripples out into everything that I do” (Lloyd, 2017, p. 60).  
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### 31 **Flow Moments**

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33 The immediate affects and effects of what we do with others constitute not so much  
34 present moment awareness as the atemporal impressions of deeply relational life where  
35 “no living being, no particle of life, can embrace itself anywhere other than where life  
36 embraces itself in living, arriving in itself, endlessly becoming and never coming  
37 undone” (Henry, 2015, p. 63). Henry bracketed the temporal dimensions of an  
38 anticipatory future emerging as a present moment that immediately recedes into a  
39 memorable past, that otherwise is “a matter of substituting the form of the flow for the  
40 flow itself and its evanescent content” (p. 75). He posited, in other words, that the  
41 “ecstatic form of flow” is not to be confused with its “impressional content” (p. 110) such  
42 that every moment of intense feeling for others can be an upwelling, upsurging, bursting  
43 out and “gushing forth in itself” (p. 61). “[E]ach moment is a new beginning” says the  
44 salsa dancer (Lloyd, 2015, p. 33). What appears as the present, living moment within the  
45 ecstatic valencies of heightened expectancy and lingering joy is actually a swelling of the  
46 auto-affectivity of life forces that gives us the impression of a sustained “now” (p. 53). A  
47 psychological rendition would have us think that time stands still, or that there is a some  
48 sense of timelessness to the present moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; 1997; 2000),  
49 whereas the “now” that is felt so impressionally is a self-generative flow seemingly  
50 outside of time yet subject, inevitably, to the ebb and flow of pathic affiliation with  
51 others.  
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3 Henry (2008) shows in *Material Phenomenology* how it is possible not so much to  
4 step outside ourselves and become something other, but to turn one's own "suffering into  
5 an enjoyment, into the self-enjoyment of one's own essence" (p. 39). In his sustained  
6 critique of Husserl's transcendental eidetic reduction, Henry exposes "the phenomenality  
7 in which thought moves, that it presupposes, and to which it is confided" (p. 81) as not  
8 simply the "auto-affectivity" of a singular life but as a "pathos-with" other lives (pp. 101-  
9 134). The "quiddity" or essence of another being is distilled momentarily from the  
10 liquidity, fluidity and flow of the impressions of being with others right here and now.  
11 Our "experience of the other," Henry asserts, "is a desire seeking out some sort of  
12 response or nonresponse, an emotion before the reciprocity of this desire" (pp. 103-104).  
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16 The experiences we have of another person, let alone another animate being, in  
17 moments of close affinity are felt immediately in urges, surges, draws and pulls prior to  
18 any temporal sliding away into coalescing emotions. It is in this kinetic, kinaesthetic,  
19 affective harmonization of what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2014) termed "moving in  
20 concert with others" that we can live the moment, right here and now, with no essential  
21 separation between us. Such "pathos-with" another (Henry, 2008, p. 104) is felt by the  
22 equestrian artist in the shifting energy dynamics of playing with horses "at liberty."  
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25 Sometimes the energy is brought up to stimulate the horse; other times the person  
26 must bring the horse's energy down to a level where the horse can stay in  
27 connection with the slower, less agile person. And there are moments, durations  
28 even, when the reciprocated movements of human and horse create a sense of flow  
29 and "true communication occurs" (Smith, 2014a, p. 46).  
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32 There is an overpowering sense of "bringing up life" in oneself, and in another in "these  
33 moment-to-moment modulations of movement responsiveness" (Smith, 2017a). This  
34 phrase, "bringing up life," points us back to what Michel Henry (2008, 2015) referred to  
35 as the "auto-affectivity of life" which is the immanent, self-revelatory affectivity of what  
36 is, in the same moment, and with similar intensity of feeling, an essential "hetero-  
37 affectivity."  
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## 40 **Flow Motions**

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42 An earlier methodology focused on "motion-sensitive" and "motion-sensing  
43 phenomenology" (Lloyd & Smith, 2006; 2015) proposed that we research life sensations  
44 from within the very movements of life itself. In doing so, we shifted the registration of  
45 life from perceptual receptivity to kinaesthetic awareness. Movement impressionality  
46 shifts the registration deeper still to "subjective movement [that is] immanent to each of  
47 the senses, because it is the very being of the body" (Henry, 1975, p. 83). In other words,  
48 while it is generally recognized that 'I move' can be a feeling of agency formative of any  
49 'I can' expressions, even prior to any claim to subjectivity there is "primal animation and  
50 its spontaneously experienced existential reality" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, pp. 249-250).  
51 The 'I' that moves things, moves others, and is defined by its own capacities for self-  
52 movement is primordially a certain range of effort qualities and intensities. It is a "unity  
53 of powers" that constitutes "the 'I can' of our original corporeity" (Henry, 2015, p. 150).  
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3 Flow motions are visibly the effects and invisibly the affects of “effort [that] is not an  
4 external obstacle but the Basis of Life” (Henry, 2009, p. 44). Evident resistance falls on  
5 the waning, ebbing side of life activation (Henry, 2015, p. 150) whereas moving together  
6 with others, mimetically, synchronously in concert, brings a redoubling of our efforts.  
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9 The salsa dancer claims: “There are no conscious thoughts of what movements to  
10 do at any given time...no recollection of what was just done or how it was done. She just  
11 does it.” (Lloyd, 2017, p. 63). There remains, however, “a correct form” comprised of “a  
12 neutral, anatomical alignment of the spine where there is a stacking of the joints.” The  
13 posture is tipped “forward over the toes which affords a push into a partner” (Anya  
14 Katsevman interview). There is “a forward lean” to the salsa walk.  
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17 One has only to observe a professional salsa dancer for less than a minute to see the  
18 rippling sway of motility than stems from the propulsion of feet and travels up  
19 through hips and torso. Bones palpably disappear and the rigidity of a confined  
20 existence dissipates....the salsa walk carries a distinct sense of life, of vitality—it is  
21 the physical manifestation of an elemental flow (Lloyd, 2015, p. 34)  
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24 The salsa dancer leans into her partner from movements originating in her torso and  
25 hips. Similarly, the equestrian artist inclines toward the horses in an upright posture and  
26 through refined gestural cues. The bodily posture is expanded in order to fill the  
27 interactional space and match the horses’ motional energy or, alternatively, contracted to  
28 allow space for the horses to draw closer to the movement patterns at hand. Frédéric  
29 Pignon says:  
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32 The only way to deal with a horse’s energy when you are on foot is with your own  
33 energy, at the appropriate level to control that of the horse – and each horse when  
34 there is more than one. I must be able to expand and contract the amount of energy  
35 that I put out....I seem to grow taller and broader when I am increasing the level.  
36 Conversely I shrink when I need to put out less. (Pignon and Delgado, 2009, p.  
37 103).  
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40 By practicing certain kinds of life, practices that in fact bracket the ‘I cans’  
41 formulated in the Cartesian shadows and which carry all the baggage of “operative  
42 intentionality” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), one is literally immersed in life’s relational flow.  
43 For Henry, this practice is ascetic and Christian, however we can still be moved by this  
44 suggestion of a “contemplative self” (Rivera, 2015) that is in communion with others in  
45 the daily inter-actions of life, from seemingly looking out on life events to the evidently  
46 participatory actions of salsa dancing and equestrian arts. Auto-affection can unfold in  
47 the heteronomous, heterogeneous, hetero-affectivity of literally and figuratively moving  
48 with others. Salsa dancing can become a practice of “feeling my seeing” in the “flow of  
49 living moments” and in “boundless connection” with “a living, breathing partner” (Lloyd,  
50 2015; 2017). The relational flow of equestrian arts can become, likewise, much more than  
51 a “partnered practice based on postural, positional, gestural and expressive  
52 communication” (Smith, 2017b) and afford an openness to the animations of life which  
53 potentially draw up our relations to animal others, and relations with all kinds of others,  
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3 into “pathic community” (Lingis, 1994).  
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6 How might this practical orientation to relational flow recognize the phenomenality  
7 of movement before fixating on any specific movement phenomena? Conversely, can we  
8 shift our thinking from construing our capacities to move in physically active ways to  
9 approaching our powers to write, form, and feel our way towards experiencing relational  
10 flow even while seated at our writing desks? The answers lie, it seems, in literally *taking*  
11 *up* disciplinary practices of relational flow within the textual practice of phenomenology.  
12 Distinctions between phenomenological writing and the very practices being written  
13 about are thus blurred. We can write not just about the practices of equestrian arts (Smith,  
14 2011; 2014a; 2015; 2016) and salsa dancing (Lloyd, 2015; 2017), but in them, with them,  
15 and through them in order to come into vital contact with life forces that enjoin us with  
16 others (Smith, 2014b; 2017a; Smith and LaRoche, 2019 in press). We can be moved in  
17 writing by life forces that are magnified in the interactions we have with others and that  
18 are much greater than the resistances and writers’ blocks that might otherwise bring life  
19 to a standstill.  
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## 22 **Conclusion**

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25 We began this phenomenological contemplation with Michel Serres’ caricature of  
26 of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s “incarnated subjectivity” and access to the “flesh of the  
27 world” (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1962; 1968). A similar scene comes to mind for the  
28 philosopher in whose shadow phenomenologists continue to toil. René Descartes also  
29 looked at life through a study window. In his “second meditation” Descartes mused on  
30 what he could hold to be real. But instead of seeing the parade of life with which he could  
31 feel at least some affinity, Descartes viewed it instead with his indubitable “ego cogito”  
32 as comprised of so much “automata” (Anscombe and Geach, 1954, p. 73). It is the  
33 Cartesian specter of the phenomenologist writing at a distance from the very things of  
34 interest that continues to create suspicion of life-affirming, life-sustaining  
35 phenomenological scholarship that is not necessarily fixated on evidently visible life  
36 expressions. Yet even sitting at one’s desk and writing about the world seen through a  
37 study window can lend itself to over-powering impressions of life. We can, like the salsa  
38 dancer, lean into life and, like the equestrian artist, hold life in the very expressivity of  
39 our posture. Accordingly, phenomenological methodology need not assume any  
40 separation from the feelings, moments and motions of relational flow. In fact, we may  
41 learn from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Henry (2008) how, even sitting still, we  
42 can bring up life by feeling our seeing, living within the moment, all the while being  
43 moved by and with others of our own kind and of an other-than-human kind. Relational  
44 flow remains an invocative phenomenological intensity of feeling within even the most  
45 apparently distanced writing postures.  
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