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16. Beyond Ontological Autonomy: Finding One's Self in Relations

Introduction

We write this chapter based on the premise that nothing exists on its own—whether animate or inanimate, everything and everyone exists within a complex web of relations. Each rock, from a single grain of sand to an entire planet, has its own kind of relational existence or lifecycle. The lifecycle of such things may be imperceptible to the untrained eye and may occur over timespans incomprehensible to the human mind, but they are lifecycles nonetheless (Appadurai, 1986/2010). Interwoven lifecycles here on Earth can carry on *only* because of the exquisite relational context of our world: water responds, transforms, and moves; freezing is followed by thawing; the sun shines; winds blow; pressures build and relax; sediments accumulate; lava erupts; oceans feel the pull of the moon; and tectonic plates slip and slide. Rocks, forests, glaciers, savannahs, jelly fish, people, bacteria, and every other thing or being depends, utterly and existentially, upon their own respective context, their own relations to their own countless others, co-constituting an always dynamic and ephemeral world.

We know from basic physics that matter is neither created nor destroyed, but rather transforms, and nothing transforms on its own without relational influence. There is no ontological autonomy. Identical twins are never truly identical. Two fetuses cannot occupy the same place at the same time. That slight variation of positioning in the womb leads to slight differentials of development and different resultant identities. Life, whether the material life of a rock, or the social life of a person, is always about learning and learning does not occur in a vacuum. We become only *with* our worlds. Our relationships with the countless aspects of our worlds constituting "differences that make a difference" (Bateson 1972/2000, p. 271) are also the

only way we discover who we might be becoming. Self-centred creatures that we are, our infatuation with our *self* begins in earnest from birth. The compulsive search for our identity continues throughout our lives and includes a multitude of sociocultural actions along the way, actions that are shaped by the people we meet, by the objects we interact with, and by the landscapes we inhabit and that in-habit us. But just as we might become desensitized to our landscapes, so too can we be desensitized to the complexities of those sociocultural interactions.

Consider an event that is routine for millions of suburban commuters. I (Peter) take a commuter train to work. At the station, people inevitably position themselves on the platform in anticipation of the arriving train. There is a yellow line that runs along the edge of the platform that passengers are forbidden from crossing at the risk of being struck by the oncoming train. Inevitably, some passengers press their toes up against the edge of the line, jockeying for position. No one knows exactly where the doors will line up on the commuter train. This is different on the metro (subway) where the positioning of the doors is marked on the platform. Many people, however, seem incapable of interpreting the marks in the metro and seem to think that they should stand directly in front of the door and simply step on once the metro stops. This often causes a standoff as people trying to exit are blocked by those trying to get on. Once the commuter train stops, it is like a game of musical chairs: whoever happens to be closest to the door, gets on first and those who stand closest to the yellow line inevitably secure a more advantageous position. There is no favouritism shown to the old, the young, or the disabled, and there is no way of knowing how many seats will be available once inside the train. Nevertheless, a pattern emerges and is reinforced daily through this type of ritualistic enactment. There may be an underlying myth being materialized and enacted, but it often consists of only tacit knowledge and people find it difficult or impossible to explain their own actions in words.

Through this sort of peripheral participation in the social world over countless events like the daily commute described above, we come to form various ontological understandings of how the world works. The narrative knowledges of our organizing myth systems may take form and be learned implicitly through enactments, without any language-based expression whatsoever. These tacit knowledges—of how to get to work, how to treat fellow commuters, and how to secure a seat—do not originate in a brain; rather, they are gleaned from an implicitly learned form of engagement with the world (Malafouris, 2013). These implicit material engagements are, as Malafouris theorizes, a result of a human cognition envisaged as a dynamic interaction of bodies, brains, and materiality. That is, in the view of Malafouris and other material engagement theorists, the social mind is the result of various socio-cultural tools within a given environment—comprised of various brains, bodies, sociocultural frameworks, material artifacts, and physical landscapes—that together form patterns of cultural becoming. Within this theoretical stance, there is neither separation nor ontological hierarchy between thought and matter. This is a relational ontology perspective, in opposition to the dominant Cartesian paradigm. These material engagements are constantly mediated not only through artifacts and landscape configurations, but by other mediational means as well—including languages, economic models, metaphors, signs, and icons that provide form, speed, and direction to both sociocultural and ecological development. That development also includes shared aesthetic sensibilities that are culture specific as well as emotional practices. In short, our social and material environments teach and guide us to learn how to perceive, think, and feel.

Following are three examples of such identity constituting material engagements. These examples provide further insights into our relational engagements with the world and illustrate the identity constituting force of our relations with (or alternatively in the absence of) things.

Example 1: Montreal Community Gardens

Montreal's community gardening program has served residents living in apartment buildings, public housing complexes, and in houses with limited available greenspace. Despite existing as the largest gardening program in Canada, with plots present in nearly every borough on the island including its urban and downtown regions, access to plots has become limited. What has deeply troubled Montreal's community gardening program since the late 2000s can be attributed to a combination of factors, with the two foremost being an ever-increasing demand for plots and an insufficient number of plots available due to garden closures caused by soil contamination (Dewolf, 2008). This particular entanglement of issues—a narrative of scarcity as the natural state (Sahlins, 1972)—proffers not only a complicated view of what lies ahead for community gardens within Montreal in terms of food security through localized food production, but also highlights and perhaps even undergirds the necessity to attend to how garden scarcity precludes possibilities for robust and reconstituted relational engagements with plants.

With every garden closure, there is also the closing of a door (a premature impediment to a budding potentiality, if you will) where plant-person relationships could have been given the ground to flourish. In post-industrial regions and neighborhoods of Little Burgundy, Pointe-St-Charles, and St. Henri—where only six gardens are currently active—limited or complete lack of access to communal and community-run gardens evidences what could be considered a foreclosure of ecological relationality. It is a foreclosure in how we can begin to take part in and take seriously a practice of entering into garden spaces and leading an "engagement with plants as guided by an overriding principle" to love them (Archambault, 2015, p. 245).

Interestingly, this particular discussion of community gardens is plagued by the very issues it has set out to reflect upon: foreclosed access to plots in multiple community gardens and

endless waitlists. As a result of this reality, this study remains in the realm of the experiential-by-proxy, which is to say that gardening through Montreal's community program has only been partially available to me (Kelann) through a personal connection to a gardener and resident of the Little Burgundy Community Garden in the Southwest of the city.

Over the several years I have lived in Montreal I have witnessed, from a position of watching rather than doing, how one avid gardener tends to and cares for her large variety of herbs, vegetables, and fruits. While I have been fortunate to enjoy the harvest of her garden, I am only able to engage with it in the latter stages of harvest and consumption, and very rarely during the process of planting and cultivation—arguably the activities which provide the most acute prospect of relationship-building encounters with plants.

This species of vicarious study has not only fostered an ever-growing desire to be in the garden—entangled amongst sets of always-in-motion biotic and abiotic entities—but it has also formed a thinking that perhaps reconnecting with plants and experiencing gardens can occur in a plethora of ways. Moreover, the need to be in relation with plants and to compose a relationality (or rather, letting relationality compose us) emerges from the fact, to draw on Fuentes and Baynes-Rock (2012), that "at every level, humans are entangled with other species. We become ourselves via biological amalgamations; we are the result of melding bodies and genetic legacies" (p. 10).

As such, community gardens exist not exclusively as sites of planting, food security, and of eventual harvesting, but most profoundly as sites of intense intimacy between plants and people marked by mutuality, support, and by an indelible entanglement of love.

Example 2: Music in Saudi Arabia

The desert landscape in Saudi Arabia is inescapable. Even in the urban sprawl of Riyadh City, the modern capital with a population of 6.5 million people, desert sand creeps into every crevice. When there is a windstorm and the windows are tightly closed, a fine veil of sand covers every surface when the storm abates. I (Rena) find the desert landscapes to be hauntingly beautiful and astounding in their variety. I have explored an ancient sea floor and touched fossilized shells that are 150 million years old. With my Bedouin friend, I have walked barefoot on soft red dunes of sand and, from her, I have learned much about how the Bedouin identity is inseparable from the landscape. I have learned that the city dwellers are also shaped by the deserts and by the concomitant belief systems and practices that they embrace—systems and practices around ways of dress, speaking, food, and culture, including music.

Music has not been a formal topic of study in Saudi schools for as long as anyone can remember. For religious reasons, music is considered by many as something that has no place in public spaces, and schools are most definitely public spaces. But just as the desert is inescapable, so too is the influence of music, and of Western music in particular. It also creeps into cracks and crevices, fuelled by the ubiquitous presence of social media. This is especially true for the children of the most privileged Saudi families. This is the demographic with which I am most familiar as I teach the children of these privileged Saudi families.

Just over a year ago, I was invited to join Misk Schools. The Misk Schools are governed by the Misk Foundation, established by HRH the Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (known as MBS in Western circles). Soon after I arrived, I was tasked with addressing the Advisor to the Crown Prince to request permission to introduce music to the Misk Schools. The request was granted. In collaboration with my colleagues, I have designed and enacted a Saudi-appropriate music curriculum for Misk Schools.

As I write these words, music has been integrated into the daily classroom life for students in the younger grades and is a required subject of study in the middle years. I have also formed a Saudi and expatriate team of educators to work with future teachers at King Saud University, a prominent tertiary educational institution in Riyadh. Without exception, the future teachers and faculty members we have worked with have embraced the ideas we have shared about using music to motivate students, as a form of creative expression, and as a powerful discipline for transdisciplinary explorations involving music, art, language, and mathematics. So too has the music program been enthusiastically welcomed by most parents at Misk. But not all parents are enthusiastic. A tweet on the school's Twitter feed about a classroom music activity is sure to produce both approving comments and vehement objections.

Introducing music to Saudi schools has been a paralyzing privilege. The Saudi leaders who permitted the teaching of music favour a Western music curriculum; the symbolic presence of the piano (which must be hidden at prayer time) was an important part of the initial request. But sourcing Western musical instruments in Riyadh is not a simple matter and, in any case, I was determined to scour the local markets in search of the instruments of the desert peoples—the rababah (stringed instrument), the riqq (drum/tambourine), the tabl (drum)—despite promising the powers that be that pianos and guitars would be featured in music teaching.

In the end, we have both. I teach children's songs from the West, helping students to find their expressive singing voices and to learn to keep the beat. We write songs in Arabic to the Western melodies that the students have heard on YouTube. We adapt English lyrics to the desert environment. We explore mathematical patterns and forms through musical improvisations and compositions. We play ukuleles and we play the rababah. At every opportunity that avails itself, I teach songs about kindness and about caring for the earth, hoping

that these messages also creep into the unconscious and conscious thoughts of these children, as inescapably as the sand of the desert.

Example 3: Contemplating Place and the Construction of Self

As I (Mindy?) began to think about identity construction and relational engagements, Canadian Senator Murray Sinclair's questions about identity and place (namely: Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? Who am I?), that were posed as a part of his role as Chair of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)[1] (2009 to 2015) in Canada, came to mind. I think that these questions surfaced for me because, to the best of my understanding, there is a deep connection between working towards reconciliation with Indigenous people and working towards environmental justice and sustainability with the land, and with the resources we all need to share and take care of. A part of this process is thinking about what it means to "rise from the colonial container" as a non-Indigenous individual exploring the process of what it means to 'become an ally' (Bishop, 2015). Most recently, I have thought about what it means to "rise from the colonial container" and to be in the process of "becoming an ally" alongside Dr. Eun-Ji Kim. Dr. Kim has taught me that: "Decolonization means willingness to see and look back to history behind. Everyone needs to be decolonized. Not only Indigenous peoples. In engaging with decolonizing activity, asking questions such as: Where are the power dynamics? What do I encourage through this activity? (personal communication, as cited in Kim, 2018, p. 66)" are important in order to acknowledge and disrupt colonial ideologies about what it means to be in harmony with the self, others, and non-sentient beings.

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[1] The TRC is intended to be a process that can help guide Canadians through the difficult discovery of the facts behind the residential school system and to lay the foundation for lasting reconciliation across Canada (https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/truth-and-reconciliation-commission?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIn6quo8aJ4gIVjMDICh0pVQHJEAAYASAAEgKrsfD_BwE

Thus, in order to understand how my own identity exists in relation to place, I also have to understand how it exists in relationship to: Indigenous people, the land, and our shared resources, the colonial constructs that have influenced all of these relationships; and what the disruption of the colonial container in relation to becoming an ally might look like in my multiple roles as mother, teacher, partner, friend, artist, researcher etc.

Theoretically, in order to understand this ontological relationality, I lean on Jean-Luc Nancy's ideas about *Being-Singular-Plural* that talk about how we are all in relation *with;* that our being is always in relationship with other people, ideas, communities, relationships, spaces…that being is a verb…an action that at its heart relates to a network of all things (Kim & Carter, in press). *Being-Singular-Plural* resonates with me particularly in my role as a K-University drama and theatre educator because, in this context, I have a deep understanding of what it means to work subjectively and intersubjectively as an actor who is a part of an ensemble, where one needs to work on their own lines, character, and self before putting on a full play with the rest of the cast (Mreiwed, Carter, & Shabtay, 2017).

However, when I consider Senator Sinclair's earlier questions, in order to try and understand my personal connection to place and identity, I feel pain, disconnection, sadness, and fear. I feel alone. I currently live in Beaconsfield, Québec, Canada. I was born in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and, in between, I have lived in the United States (Richmond, Virginia), other parts of Ontario (Thunder Bay, Vermillion Bay, and Kenora), in British Columbia (Vancouver), in Manitoba (Portage La Prairie and Winnipeg), in Nova Scotia (Halifax and Sydney), in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, and in Montreal, Québec. I don't feel like I come from any of these places or that I have a community that would claim me. Naming where I come from is not easy. Almost all of my family still lives in the small towns and villages between Thunder Bay

(Ontario) and Winnipeg (Manitoba) that are not on standard maps of Canada. They are descendants of orphans sent from Europe in the 1800s, Protestant-English Quebecers who left Three Rivers/Trois Rivières during a first wave of expulsion. They are descendants of Scots who have a proud history dating back to the 1100s in Scotland, but who also experienced trauma and its intergenerational effects since arriving in Canada 150 years ago. Since I moved away to go to University over 21 years ago, I have felt increasingly alienated from the places and people where I grew up. When I return home, I don't have a long list of family and friends to visit. Although the places and woods are comforting to me, I feel out of place. This rootlessness is a reminder that there can be painful brokenness in connections. I wonder if you really must have a definitive understanding of where you come from in order to understand who you are and where you are going. Answering this question seems like a privilege for many people, and so I am scared. I am scared that I don't know how to answer these questions, that I'm not asking the right questions or not telling the right stories or so many things, and so I try to let other voices be heard but, in the process, I realize I am silencing my own and this is also not helpful because I do have the ability to help share others' stories and open up new spaces for voices who have been more silenced than my own to be heard.

Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez (2012) introduced three modes of solidarity: relational, transitive, and creative. These three modes of solidarity help me to grapple with my own process of becoming an ally (Bishop, 2015) and to understand how "solidarity is 'always relational'" (p. 51) and acknowledges "being as co-presence" (p. 52). Second, solidarity is transitive. It is about "action that also affects or modifies the one who acts – to solidarize *oneself with*" (p. 54). Solidarity is transitive, permanently seeking the transformation of oneself. Anne Bishop (2015) also mentioned that ally is not an identity but rather a process of becoming. Lastly, solidarity is

creative. It works to "reveal new horizons, against which we might not only imagine, but also produce new ways of being together" (p. 59)" (Kim & Carter, in press). Producing new ways of being together. When I pause to think about the disruption being explored, a new understanding emerges.

I began by trying to answer Senator Sinclair's questions on my own. Yet, when I step back and think about Nancy's ideas of being-singular-plural, in relation to these questions, I realize I have been trying to answer them in a new *container*—in a chapter with others working alongside me and making connections together. My co-authors of this chapter, and my conversations alongside this topic with Dr. Kim remind me that we aren't alone and that, even when we dance on the train platform jockeying for a position, we can choose to take a step back and wait for everyone else to get on…or to avoid the train and walk or bike…or re-consider our destinations altogether before climbing aboard.

Discussion

As these three examples illustrate, the context for sociocultural action or material engagement includes artifacts, landscapes, and memories, among other contextual factors. Beginning with memories, we see through Mindy's example that these are distributed throughout the brains, bodies, and landscapes and always co-constituted relationally. In other words, memories can be traced in relations between brains, bodies, artifacts, cultural tools, or the physical environment. Memories may become evident and available for examination in repositories of past events, whether materialized as language, song, container, organized protest, or as accessible associations of brains (conscious memories). Even so, memories fade and emerge continuously. Cognitively speaking, as Mindy's example illustrates, we continuously re-make the world relationally, including our memories and all the other aspects of our distributed

and dynamic minds – remembering who we are necessarily means to re-member, and perhaps re-order our various relations.

A study by Berkowitz and LePage (1967) illustrates this dynamic relationality well and suggests that, like memories, other objects can also have varying yet profound effects on social actions. In their study on "weapons as aggression-eliciting stimuli" Berkowitz and LePage (1967, p. 202) found that subjects became more aggressive if a gun was placed on a table next to them. A tennis racquet, on the other hand, elicited no such response. What became known as the *weapon effect* is the mirror of the rarely considered *no weapon effect*. In terms of our examples, this study raises the possibility of a garden effect, a no-garden effect, or a music effect and a no music effect and traditions of rootedness or disconnectedness. What makes the Berkowitz and LePage experiment especially relevant to the present discussion is how well it underscores the absence of ontological autonomy of any of these things. The guns (or the musical instruments, or the plants, or the respect, or the commuter trains) exercise a type of distributed agency, but only within the parameters of a relational context. The gun, for example, only activates pre-existing associations and, without those associations, it remains essentially powerless. The way the gun triggers aggression is not unlike the way a body or biome might react to the introduction of an alien species. The fabrics of existence are a complex weave of relations of various parts.

The establishment of a community garden depends on a specific type of conventional wisdom guiding and being informed by institutionalized and emergent sources of power as well as ad hoc actions. An *ecology of mind* (Bateson 1972/2000) perspective provides a more accurate map of this territory than the more common *world-as-machine* metaphor. Do workers really *need* loving relations with plants, or are those relations reserved for and best exercised by a more contemplative, conceptualized-as-cerebral class? Is the development of a rhythmic awareness

and musical acumen consistent with an inherited preconception about what it means to be a specific kind of human being at any given time and place? How can we become skilled at the dance of becoming with *all* the partners in our collectively and always relationally lived lives? Skill, in other words, is not so much about the materialization of a pre-imagined utopia as it is about attention and care for relations as an ongoing and dynamic process fostering a potentially healthy state of good relations.

The importance ascribed to the rhythm of that process, whether measured in corporeal entanglements between plants and peoples or in the timelessness of an indigenous mindscape, or the stochastic yet relentless identity disruptions of past traumas and injustices, is of fundamental importance. Much of the dance between place and identity is embedded in the rhythmic character of morphosis. Who we are, who we might become—these are fundamentally questions about the rhythmic ontology of our relations. These are questions translatable into how we learn to perceive, think, and feel an entire world into existence through a mindful and loving reciprocity with that world.

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