After Embeddedness: Dreaming Democratic Ecologies Through Art

By: Barbara Bickel

edaphology – the study of the influence of soil on organisms

Where the two salmon streams meet
sitting against a large moss covered tree
I move forward into the bend
stepping into the water
water swirls around my feet  [deep breath]

Walking forward down the center of the stream
following the salmon path
walking for a little bit
then I lay
down in the water

Let it stream by me
feeling the stones and roots beneath
now slowly rising up
buoyed and floating along like a raft carried
by the currents down this teeny little creek

My body stops
hovering over a deep hole
I roll over and dive deep into the stream
as it continues underground
I find myself in dark moist rich soil

I am a worm embedded
in the skin of the earth feeling it touch all of my body
moving wormlike I curl up in a still spiral

Bickel: My arts-based inquiry practice in recent years has become one of turning to the land as a place of unceded memory ... which enacts what artist educator Peter London refers to as a sacred dialogic relationship with the natural world.
hibernating soaking in
all the nutrients
surrounding me in this mineral rich soil

Vibrations pulsate my body like the earth is
moving slightly just slightly [ahhhhhhhhh]

I open and uncoil myself
stretching I move back and forth wiggling
moving my body wiggling
moving my body [hmmmm ah]

Purified and fed by the moist soil I move into
the underground stream
my skin fed and quenched by nutrients seeping
into my internal organs
inhaling through all of my pores [hmm hmm hmm hmm]

Moving back up up to the upper stream
advancing upstream wiggling my way
squiggling my way up the stream
its not hard work my movements propel me
gentle ripples of water glide along my skin

Back at the fork
of the two streams I stand up
extend my gaze into the forest [deep breaths]
walk up the small embankment
return to the moss covered tree I join myself

Sitting here held
by the tree
roots below branches above
grateful grateful grateful

- Trance poem, January 26, 2015
In the winter of 2015, I was engaged in an arts-based (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Irwin & de Cossen, 2004)) inquiry within the context of an artist residency that utilized a practice of socially-engaged art. Socially-engaged art is art that can be identified by its reliance on engagement with others for its very existence (Helguera, 2011). As an artist, researcher and teacher, I interact relationally with humans and other-than-human beings through my arts-based and socially-engaged practices grounded in connective aesthetics and matrixial dialogic processes. Matrixial theory is the outcome of the interweaving of the artistic and psychoanalytical workings of Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) that develops an understanding of connective aesthetics through art that holds a social purpose of connection through difference, empathy and compassionate reconciliation, while challenging our current hegemonic social imaginaries (Fisher & Bickel, 2016, p. 77-78).

While holding the social healing and reconciliation intention of a matrixially-based arts-based inquiry, I was creatively engaged with a local gallery, and a co-housing community and the land it is housed upon as a temporary resident artist. During the residency, I was in daily contact with members of the community individually, as a group, and with their land. The land is part of the unceded traditional territory of the K’ómoks

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1 The residency took place on Vancouver Island in Courtenay, British Columbia, Canada. Engagement with the community took place at both the Comox Valley Art Gallery, under the curatorship of Angela Sommerset, and within the Creekside Co-Housing Community where I was an artist living in their guest room.
First Nation peoples. In 1792 Captain George Vancouver made contact with the K’ómoks people at Tsakwaluten on Vancouver Island. European colonization of the land and its people ensued. At the time of my residency the Canadian government was completing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission process that has begun to acknowledge the tragic stories of oppression enforced upon the first peoples of Canada by the Canadian government. The report begins with grave words,

> For over a century, the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada (TRC, 2015, p. 332).

As a daughter of European immigrants, I was born into, imprinted myself upon and live in colonized territory that holds the tragic ancestral memories and histories of its First Nations peoples and the land. My arts-based inquiry practice in recent years has become one of turning to the land as a place of unceded memory and ancestral remembering. Touching into the earth as an art practice has been an act of life restoration, re-attunement and re-balancing as I find myself living far from my ‘homeplace’ the past eight years. The act of

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2 To read more about the first peoples of K’ómoks go to [http://maps.fphlcc.ca/komoks](http://maps.fphlcc.ca/komoks)
colonization systematically displaced First Nations peoples from the land of their ancestors, their blood families and extended communities in the Canadian government’s attempt to assimilate them to the colonizers way of life, eliminating their sovereignty in the process. In contrast, my migration movements have been undertaken with freedom of choice, and still a lived feeling of dissonance, of being far from the land of my youth, resides in me. The destructive actions inflicted on the First Nations peoples of Canada are impossible for me to fully know and require social recognition and healing for which the commission is a long overdue initial step by the Canadian government. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission recognizes the role of the arts in assisting healing and reconciliation but contains little vision of how to engage the arts for this purpose (Garneau, 2016). As a descendent of colonizers my arts-based turn to the land is a small act of reconciliation with all beings, human and non-human, who have had prior and current residency with it.

To begin the inquiry, I introduced myself to the land my temporary artist residency was housed upon by entering into a co-relationship with a specific location in the woods with a small creek running through it. I spent quiet listening time at the base of a large moss covered tree next to the creek every day. The inquiry and story that ensued touched into the geobiography of the past and current community and transformed into a geobiography of a non-human being, in this instance an earthworm, and the interconnected healing relationship between the earth, worm and human. Indigenous (Anishinabekwe) scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) whose scholarship involves the intertwining of story, science and spirit teaches that healing stories allow us to “imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other (p. x)”. Similar to indigenous teachers, artist educator Peter London (2003), through his writing and teaching, encourages a sacred dialogic relationship with the natural world, describing nature as “intelligent, articulate, imbued with spirit, [and] that it is not only we who are observing Nature but that Nature, in its own way, is observing us, knows that we are here, and, again, in its own way of speaking, is speaking to us” (p. 231). He reminds us that as humans,

Not only must we constantly be in contact with the Earth, but we are offspring of earth…. Of all forms that the elements come in, the elemental stuff that we are most like is the element of Earth. It is the stuff of our own bodies that, combined with Fire and Water and Air, forms and constantly re-forms our body, the vessel that contains our souls for the while we are on this earth.” (pp. 201-201)

3 In the late 60s my family became a foster family for Child and Family Services, a branch of the Canadian government, as part of the assimilationist strategy in the 60s. Through enforced fostering and adoption practices the Canadian government took indigenous children from their families of origin and adopted them out to white families. For a period of 4 years in Ontario my Christian family took in babies and toddlers who were awaiting adoption. I do not know the story of Mary Ann, the indigenous toddler who lived in our home for a short while but have come to realize that my family may inadvertently been part of what has been called the 60s Scoop in Canada and in Australia the Stolen Generations (Wilson, 2008).
As a matrixial located artist, I entered an embodied aesthetic exploration of “edaphology,” which is the scientific term for the study of soil and its impact on organisms. Approaching edaphology through a matrixial lens rather than a scientific lens allowed me to enter a reciprocal “good medicine” relationship with the land and its inhabitants. To assist my entry into a matrixial edaphology as part of the arts-based methodology, I worked with a practice of awake-dreaming while on the land through the use of trance and altered states. This practice has roots in, among others, Modernist surrealist art (eg. Dali, Kahlo, Oppenheim) and automatism, and Indigenous peoples (eg. Four Arrows). According to integral dream scholars, Bogzaran & Delauriers (2012), dreams serve as a reflective mirror of our alienation and offer the possibility of remembrance and recovery of our interconnectedness with human and more than human worlds. They further present,

Dreams [as] fragments that can and should be connected to larger wholes.... Exploration of this collective level may bring awareness to our past.... our present (... current cultural and ecological embeddedness), and our future. (p. 137)

Employing the language of dream through an arts-based inquiry invites a “curriculum of improvisation” (Aoki, 2005/1990, p. 369). William Pinar wrote, “Whatever language we employ, we “become” the language” (Pinar, 2012, p. 35). I spoke my awake dream out loud as I experienced it and recorded it. I later transcribed my spoken utterances and reconfigured the words into poetic writing that spurred scientific research into aspects of the experience. Working with the language of dream I “became” the dream, and entered a form of embodied ecological democracy that precludes inherited or classified identities. An ecological democracy is signaling, what is presently named the Anthropocene, its namesake humans, to enter into a respectful and humble relationship with the earth and its non-human inhabitants. Transformative education scholar, Edmund O’Sullivan (1999) frames this as the shift in biological periods from the Cenozoic to the Ecozoic and calls for a transformative Ecozoic vision in education and beyond for the 21st Century. The current earth system, according to scientists, is heading toward mass extermination (Davis and Turpin, 2015, p. 10) and the all-life honouring practice of an ecological democracy, which includes deep listening to and with the earth holds the potentiality of staving off the extermination. Indigenous elders teach us to be in relationship with the earth with the understanding that we are to treat it with respect and care for at least the next seven generations. The silencing and dismissal of these significant teachings can be actively resisted through dreaming democratic ecologies through arts-based inquiry.

Over the period of 4 weeks in the month of January, I spent time in quiet solitude with the creek, trees, moss, stones and creatures. Listening with and soaking in the moisture of the winter coastal rainforest, I experienced a deep peace. I felt completely and utterly accepted and nourished by the forest. This was a place for me to come with my struggles and
wounded self as well as with receptive openness. It became a respectful interchange of aliveness, of life held in matrixial borderspaces; where I experienced being observed as much, if not more than, being observant. With the assistance of the video camera I would at times choose to focus my gaze on certain areas and aspects of the life surrounding me. Allowing the camera to gather sounds and moving images of my embedded experience, I entered into a collaborative creative exchange. Shifting into the language of art, I improvised a sacred aesthetic study with this natural place, located in the environment of the human community I was temporarily living with. The resulting eight minute video, entitled Embedded, reveals a combination of the aesthetic findings and teachings offered to me.

This paper is a small invocation to the practice of an ecologically democratic dream and arts-based inquiry process. Through reflection on the combination of these methodologies, embedded teachings and learnings have emerged. The matrixial gaze, in contrast to the phallic gaze, invites us into a compassionate and engaged responsive co-encounter of seeing, listening and feeling. With a matrixial interconnected gaze we can potentially recognize that which requires attention, uncovering what has been repressed to engage restorative and healing processes. As an artist who has kept at a distance any study within the domain of the sciences, I found myself drawn into its realm, returning it to an integrated relationship with art and spirit through this inquiry. Consequently I was moved into an understanding of science in a newly configured ecological form. What I would now call a matrixial edaphology.

Physical healing practices, personally, and possibly for the land and its inhabitants, emerged through my transmutation from human to worm to human. Having a felt experience of the relationship between the earth and the worm and its restorative capabilities brought a surprising awareness to myself and to the community I was working with. The moving image video was screened in the co-housing community and at the local art gallery. For many that attended the screening, what was reflected back to them, was recognized as their own nearby creek as this creek runs through the city; but seen anew and magnified through a matrixial aesthetic and lens. They shared how this creek, a salmon spawning stream, has been drastically altered by human interference, chemically changed, and more so that year, due to the global warming effects manifesting in a winter draught of the rain-forested island. Heightened community awareness of our interconnectedness as humans with the earth and non-human creatures emerged. Through re-storying and submerging my human self within the ecology of creek, it became more apparent how human interference, which causes fragility in the ecological balance, could be informed and impacted by human matrixial arts-based co-inquiry with the earth and its non-human inhabitants.

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The moving image video linked below is an invitation to aesthetically experience the lived co-inquiry through the combination of vocal sound, moving images, and improvised poetry, based on the awake-dream offered to me at the creek-side. The spoken word in the video is an “involuntary poem” derived and written from transcripts of the waking-dream/trance state. Through involuntary poems and a matrixial gaze we can enter what geologist Henry Hess names “geopoetry,” which allows us to “gain the gift of de-familiarization, becoming other to ourselves, [as] one expression of the ever-evolving planet” (McKay, 2013, p, 53). We can thus begin to explore humbly and respectfully our cultural and ecological embedded relationship with the earth and all its inhabitants, human and non-human; re-dreaming and re-storying reciprocal relations, and thus potentially co-nourishing ourselves and the earth for future generations to come.

https://vimeo.com/129812329

Similar to dreams, author and playwright Bert States (1988) describes “involuntary poetry” as something that may “arise in our individual consciousness but they do not belong to us they unfold of their own accord (cited in Bogzaran & Delauriers, 2012, p. 66).
References


