

CONVERSATIONS WITH EACH OTHER: LOVE SONGS TO THE EARTH

Adrian M. Downey & Gonen Sagy

ABSTRACT

Conversation is a complicated, ever-changing, and dynamic space—a space which is foundational to both education and curriculum, broadly conceived. In this article, we continue our ongoing conversation through the notion of writing love songs to the Earth and to each other. Within the conversation, Gonen shares original poetry emergent from his lived experiences, while Adrian attends to Gonen's poetry in prosaic response. In this, the socio-political moment of the Canadian movement toward reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, we view our relationship and our conversations as speaking back to the competitive languages of diasporic space and Indigenous place through an emphasis on our mutual, though diverse, humanity. Far from a conclusive conversation, we offer our mutual and respective engagements with life's curriculum, the world, and with words in the hope that these insights will resonate with other educators.

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Bios

Adrian M. Downey is Mi'kmaq and an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. He has undergraduate degrees from Bishop's University in Music and Education, and a Master of Arts in Education focused in Curriculum Theory. His 2017 master's thesis, "Speaking in Circles: Indigenous Identity and White Privilege," is an arts-informed and Indigenous autobiographical and poetic examination of the intersection between white privilege and Indigenous identity and won both the MSVU Master's Thesis Award and the CACS Cynthia Chambers Master's Thesis Award. His recent scholarly publications have been focused on the role of spiritual thought, Indigenous knowledge, music, and poetry in changing the way we enact and think about curriculum. He currently holds a SSHRC doctoral fellowship for his dissertation which engages critical, posthuman, and Indigenous theory in the curricular context of death education. Adrian.Downey@msvu.ca

Gonen Sagy holds an interdisciplinary PhD on multicultural aspects of environmental education, an MA in environmental studies, and a Bachelor of Education and Philosophy. His doings these days include writing poems about immigration (as one of the outcomes from meeting Adrian), facilitating cross-cultural youth encounters in Ottawa, developing the Caring Hearts program for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Canada's National Capital Region, and supporting the monitoring of the educational work of the Water Resources Action Project which brings together schools from Israel, Palestine, Jordan and the USA around water conservation. Gonen used to direct a peace education program in Israeli Jewish and Palestinian schools in Jerusalem, Nazareth, Lod and in rural areas of Israel. Born and raised Israeli, in 2015 he immigrated with his nuclear family to Canada.

On Love, Entanglement, Space, Place, and Attending

In his address to the 2018 Empowering Sustainability Gathering,¹ a yearly meeting for globally-engaged professionals, activists, and academics working toward sustainability, Debeet Sarangi stated that perhaps the most damning sign of modern society's failure was the loss of our capacity to write love songs to the Earth. An evocative notion meant to inspire a more poetic and appreciative relationship with our natural world, the idea of writing love songs to the Earth resonated deeply within us. It called on each of us to attend to our daily interactions with the Earth and to bear witness to the myriad natural networks in which we find ourselves entangled. Not the least of our entanglements is our relationship—a space where we have found it safe to share our songs and to grow through each other's words. In this article, we continue our ongoing conversation in the spirit of Mr. Sarangi's words—writing love songs to the Earth and attending to each other/the Other through words.

We initially met in a graduate course on critical thinking, where Gonen was the instructor and Adrian a student. Throughout the duration of the course, we engaged in many conversations about peace, education, social justice, sustainability, and reconciliation. After the course finished, we continued our conversations in both published (Downey & Sagy, 2018) and unpublished writing—as well as in person and over the phone. After initially engaging in written conversation over the course of two years, Adrian asked Gonen to respond not in the prosaic manner to which they had become accustomed, but through poetry. Adrian did not know at the time that Gonen's last poems were written just before he was drafted into Israel's mandatory military service at the age of 18. Challenged, but not deterred, Gonen responded with the poems presented in this article. Adrian then responded to each of Gonen's poems prosaically.

Our use of this method of written exchange is informed by the tradition of curriculum theory, where the notions of conversation and dialogue have been taken up in a variety of capacities (Bartlett & Quinn, 2018; Christou & Wearing, 2015; Clarke & Hutchinson, 2018; Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Nazari & Heng Hartse, 2018). Perhaps most notably, William Pinar's (2012) notion of curriculum as complicated conversation creates a generative space in which our current conversation conceptually fits. Here we are interested in curriculum in the broadest possible sense; we are interested in life's curriculum and all that can be learned through living.

We are also both educators. Adrian currently teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in education. Before immigrating to Canada, Gonen directed The Youth Environmental Education Peace Initiative,² which brought together youth and staff from ten Israeli Jewish and Palestinian high schools around sustainability and environmental studies. He also taught graduate and undergraduate courses on socio-ecology and environmental education, and he currently teaches Hebrew at a middle school in Ottawa. As educators we know that the lessons we learn through lived experience—our engagement with life's curriculum—filter into the curriculum-as-planned (Aoki, 2005) whether we ask/expect/want them to or not. Rather than try to untangle ourselves from the curriculum, we embrace our subjectivity and open ourselves and our teaching up to being changed by what we read, write, see, think, feel, and experience (see also Coleman, 2009). Our deepest hope for this article is that our engagement with life's curriculum will resonate with other people, especially educators.

Outside of curriculum (though not too far away), we are informed by contemplative arts-based inquiry (Searle & Fels, 2018; see also Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015), particularly the notion of attending as presented by Carl Leggo and Rita Irwin (2018). Here, we are attending to each other, to the Earth, to the students with whom we work, to our descendants and Ancestors, and to you, the reader. We are doing this through considered and sustained

attention to words—attention rich with careful, thoughtful reflection/reflexivity because we know that words are more than words. We are writing love songs to each other, to the Other (with/in), and to our shared Earth, and in so doing we are both demanding and giving a sacred, loving, careful, meditative attention. Vicki Kelly wrote recently that, “Indigenous knowledge practices are ecological encounters of profound ethical relationality that acknowledge the act of co-creating through living embodiments of Indigenous Poiesis” (Kelly, 2019, p. 17). Yes. We are entangled with one another, and we hold sacred that entanglement; our relationality creates and deepens our aesthetic and holds space for dialogic co-creation to begin. In short, our relationship is methodologically rigorous—a notion informed in equal parts by Indigenous relational ontology, relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), and the broader trend of centering subjectivity in research.

Our relationship also speaks loudly in the current socio-political moment. Through our conversation here we ask and answer many questions, but fundamentally we are concerned with reconciliation—the building of sustainable relationships between Indigenous people and Settlers after 500 years of colonial occupation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). We are keenly aware of the contentious language of diasporic space and Indigenous place and the ways that settler colonialism and global capitalism have pitted those two lived realities against one another (Coleman, 2016). We also maintain an intimate awareness of what some call “the materializing force of language” (Young, 2015, p. 67), or the capacity of words to make it seem that particular bio-political realities are/were inevitable or that they have always been (Young, 2015).

Perhaps because of language’s materializing force and the competitive language ascribed by settler-colonial capitalism to diasporic and Indigenous peoples, solidarity between diasporic and Indigenous communities is not as common as it should be (e.g., Chung, 2012; Sivanewaralingam, Bhatti, & Lam, 2017). We, thus, enter into our relationship, our attending, our writing, and our sharing with a, perhaps counter-cultural, ethos of solidarity between diasporic and Indigenous peoples.

In order to disrupt the conventional language of competitive capitalism and the illusion of liberal individualism, we gesture toward what Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) calls constellations of co-resistance. Fundamentally a way of decentering the role of settler allyship in anti-oppressive resistance, the idea of a constellation of co-resistance evokes real, tangible relationships in the world, through which people from divergent marginal backgrounds work together to disrupt settler colonialism. The metaphorical image of a constellation highlights the brilliance of individuals (with)in communities and shows how each individual star is made brighter through its relationship to another. Within a constellation, there is space and place for everyone to be, to be brilliant, and to work together in resisting settler-colonial heteropatriarchal (see Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013), ableist capitalism—what Penobscot author Sherri Mitchell (2018) might summarize as hierarchical thinking. In constellations, the competitive dichotomies/hierarchies of place and space are displaced in favour of beautifully rhizomatic relationships of resistance. Our attending, then, is an act of linguistic resistance embedded in and emergent from our relational entanglement(s).

Though we can only begin to share the infinite complexity of our individual, mutual, and collective entanglements, we would offer a few words regarding who we are and where we come from. This relational contextualization is aimed at creating transparency in the relationship between us, the authors, and you, the reader. To know our words, you need to know something of us (see also Archibald, 2008; Hart, 2002; Kovach, 2009). We consider this transparency an axiological imperative of writing in an academic context (Wilson, 2008).

I (Adrian) am a Mi'kmaq man who is entangled in a PhD program at the University of New Brunswick. I am originally from Halifax, but my family ties are along the West Coast of Newfoundland and in the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation. From 2013 until 2015, I was a teacher in Eeyou Istchee (James Bay), and I have spent time working with Indigenous groups in international contexts. As a musician, a poet, and a writer, I see myself as an artistic researcher, and I am particularly interested in the relationship(s) between theory, curriculum, the arts, and conversation.

I (Gonen) am an Israeli born and raised Jewish man, a father, and a grandson to survivors who lost all their family members in the Holocaust. My nuclear family and I recently left our extended family in order to immigrate to and settle in Canada. I worked as journalist while completing my BEd, MA in Desert Ecology, and PhD on environmental education in Israel. In addition to the work described above, I currently facilitate multicultural meetings for high school students at *Young Voices Can!*³ to nurture acquaintances and socio-ecological awareness among youth in Ottawa. In 2019, I began collaborating with Chief Richard Zohr of The Bonnechere Algonquin First Nation in Ontario on *Caring Hearts*, a reconciliation program aiming to build bridges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in the National Capital Region and the surrounding area.

Though we come from different backgrounds, we are intimately concerned with the wellbeing of our planet, as well as the humans and more-than-humans that live here. We started our friendship and joint work asking and dwelling within the key question of peace and environmental education: what does it mean to live well in our world (see Orr, 1994)? Since then, our conversations and our lives have taken many twists and turns. Below we present poems emergent from our ongoing conversation and offer attention to each.

Love Songs and Attendings.⁴

I

No words.

Only words, for time beyond words,
listening

II

Miller writes, “the problem with words is that they can never totally convey the meaning of direct experience” (2000, p. 149). When we listen from our hearts, listening is endless. Our ears are gateways to understanding the physical world, but there is so much more alive beyond what we can perceive. Our heart is our gateway to that metaphysical world. When we listen with our heart, completely willing to be changed by what we hear, we give an amazing gift. It is not just the gift of being heard; it is the gift of being accepted in all your complexity, idiosyncrasy, and humanness. You are right nitap⁵, there are no words for the metaphysical. When we speak of matters of the heart, we do not need words—words come from the brain, but the heart speaks directly.

I am seeking, but often blinded by the immediate and what others tell me to want. The media tells us we should buy, the government tells us we should hate, our tradition tells us we should forgive, but what is real in our hearts? For me, the real need I have is for connection. I need others to hear my words and to feel them; I need to hear others and be changed by them.

III

Words are temporal in their sequentiality: they mark the passage of time. How long did it take us to write this (years)? How long to edit (months)? How long to read (hours)? But temporality is internal and subjective. We are all lodged within our own times, and systems inflict violence on us by controlling our temporality (Saul, 2020) and controlling our words (e.g., Coleman, 2016). 5,000 words without references; abstracts no longer than 250 words. Everything has a limit.

We do not need words to know. We need blank pages and days off.

I have taken to teaching through silence. My role as a teacher is not to tell anyone anything. Advice is a violence unless it is asked for, and just because a student sits in a classroom does not mean they've asked. You told me once that if you wait long enough, the questions will come. The only thing I do as a teacher is hold space through whole body listening for others to make movements with(in) themselves. It is the 99-1 rule. I speak 1% of the time, everyone else speaks 99% of the time. When I finally do decide to speak, I try to be the loudest quiet I can be. These are my pedagogies of silence.

IV

Politically Correct⁶

And who by poisoned gathered foods,
 Who by crystal meth,
 Who by homicide?
 Who chose suicide?
Who by overcrowded home,
 Who was kidnapped,
 Who as a sex slave?
 Who by sorrow?

And who shall we say makes profit?

V

All the work presented at the Empowering Sustainability Gathering is aimed at ending suffering in some capacity, but we all have the same starting point: we are trying to understand.

I have begun to consider my own education a curriculum as nocturne (Smits, 2011, 2018). A nocturne, in music, is a loving ode to the darkness of night. As such, it has the ability to show light's presence with(in) darkness. I often force myself to go into the darkness of matters, things that make my heart heavy and move me to tears. I bear witness to the colonization, oppression, and subjugation of my people. I learn all the ways in which global corporations profit from exploitative and extractive economic structures. I see clearly the destructive nature of

the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. I see it all on a macro level—conceptually. I think I understand, but the stories of individual sorrow and trauma continue to shake me.

Daniel Coleman writes, “a book can be sweet *because* it is devastating. And devastation ... can be one of the most important spurs to spiritual growth [emphasis original]” (2009, p. 104). I dwell within the sadness—the darkness—of others and myself, searching for the light within so I might raise it up. Eve Tuck (2009) writes about damage-centered narratives and the idea that the stories we have told through our research are generally about how badly people—particularly Indigenous peoples—have been hurt by colonization, globalization, neoliberalism, and hierarchical thinking (Mitchell, 2018). Tuck proposed that we move beyond these damage-centered narratives toward a storying/re-storying of the resilience and brilliance of Indigenous people. This is, for me, the light in the darkness. We cannot understand resilience without first understanding that which we are resilient toward. My own education, then, has been spent dwelling within the darkness in order to find the light, and to find ways of amplifying the light to disrupt the dark.

VI

You

You understand
when I remember violence and injustice
you can see it too
you know

you too have this dual vision
the regular and the vision of those
who have many dead.

Popular culture says: Talk to me about money. Talk to me about sex. Politic and power!
No time for sadness, no space for pain.
Things that heal if shared.

What if it happens again?
It is happening again right now somewhere on our sweet world.
The regular don't see just.

Popular culture says: Talk to me about money. Talk to me about sex. Politic and power!
No room for sadness, no need to remember pain.
Things heal if shared.

You see the possible futures,
You bring them nearer, you're a brilliant plotter,
out of cells, leaving chains behind,
Liberation!

Popular culture says: Talk to me about money. Talk to me about sex. Politic and power!

No time for sadness, no space for pain.
Things heal if decolonised.

If all that life provided to someone, is the regular, popular vision,
What is the point of that somebody's life?

VII

Life is a journey to understand what it means to walk in the world and how to do that in a good way (Stonechild, 2016). But from time to time, we all get lost.

Krishnamurti (1992), and those who take up his work such as Ashwani Kumar (2013), said that the suffering existent within the modern world is a result of our internal psychological fragmentations. Modern society tells us many things about what we want, need, and should be. It is very loud in what it tells us, and sometimes it is impossible to ignore those voices. But maybe there is something deeper—a true version of ourselves buried under layers of social conditioning. Attempting to silence the conditionings at work within our psychologies and to become more in tune with our self could be the project of education (see Krishnamurti, 1992; Kumar, 2013, 2014; Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019). Instead, I still remember the quadratic formula.

VIII

I have questions

Is modern Western society, as many have written (e.g., Doka, 2015; Durant, 2018; Kortes-Miller, 2014; Ulin, 1977), a death-denying society? Apart from ritual burials and ceremonies to say goodbye to those who have physically departed, is there any room to acknowledge the transcendental deaths that mark both tragedy and profound growth (Leggo, 2017; see also Nellis, 2018)?

Biesta (2006) writes of the transcendental violence inherent to learning, when learning is viewed not in a linear, banking model, but rather as a subjective “coming to presence” or “showing who you are and where you stand” (p. 62). This transcendental violence is not negative—it is a natural, beautiful part of life, but schools try to protect us from it. More and more, school systems want everything standard(ized), impersonal, and safe, but what of the stunning chaos of self-transformation? What of the need to die transcendentially and be reborn? What of the possibilities of change? These seem, to me, like precursors to our talk about healing and reconciliation—both personally and societally.

What we see with the reconciliation movement is how difficult allowing for change can be. On a personal level, we have thousands of psychological structures which resist change; we are mostly creatures of habit and want to know what to expect in our lives, ourselves, and those around us. On a societal level, those structures are codified and enshrined in law, legislature, policy, and institutional memory. These are ‘barriers to change.’ Do these barriers really exist? They are ideas, and until we can allow for the possibility of changing ideas, no matter how deeply enshrined or normalized they may be, how can we ever move forward in healing and reconciliation?

IX

When it's painful

History is written by blood,
I write to you by tears,
visions of smiling futures,
laughter.
Future history will be written by love.

X

A few times in my life, I have heard firsthand the stories of those who survived residential schools. What always strikes me in these moments is the silence. There is simply nothing you can say when someone shares their personal history written in blood and tears.

The biggest learning of my 20s was not to say anything in those silences. When I was younger, I would often try to break the tension with a joke—tastefully, of course—but as I grew older, I began to realize the importance of silence. Silence offers the space to digest what we have heard and internalize the stories so that we never forget.

Silence is the sound of attending. It is the sound of being changed.

I still turn to laughter to guide me out of sorrow, but today I linger in the sadness long enough for my heart to hear and understand what is being shared. Silence is where the heart learns what it means to be human.

Our humanness is hilarious. Do we all remember moments in our lives where we have done embarrassing things and feel that embarrassment anew through our memories? I have come to love those moments because they are reminders of my humanness.

There is darkness and light in all of us and in every moment. To dwell within either too intensely seems fallacious.

XI

I am sorry, your mother is not dead (at the Bureau of Statistics)

Dear Young Madam,
This is to inform you we received your letter.
After looking carefully into your case
we understand that you're in distress,
yet nevertheless,
I am sorry, your mother is not dead.

Because,
We could list dead by toxins, or poisoned foods.

We have piles of bodies from sickness, diseases and/or just too much sexual abuse.
We have dead by homicide, and dead by suicide,
for those who had nothing else to lose,
but dead by sorrow?...
to us it sounds like a poor excuse.

We really would like to help,
it would have been easy if you claimed:
“killed by deadly husband”
or “she died due to being poisoned by lead”,
but as far as our paperwork goes,
I am afraid that for us,
your mother is simply not dead.

Because,
We could list dead by toxins, or poisoned foods.
We have piles of bodies from sickness, diseases and/or just too much sexual abuse.
We have dead by homicide, and dead by suicide,
for those who had nothing else to lose,
but dead by sorrow?...
to us it sounds like a poor excuse.

Dead by sorrow?...
I am sorry for your mother’s absence of death.
Young madam, you are welcome to contact us once more,
with a new letter as soon as tomorrow.

Because?
Because...

Because,
We could list dead by toxins, or poisoned foods.
We have piles of bodies from sickness, diseases and/or just too much sexual abuse.
We have dead by homicide, and dead by suicide,
for those who had nothing else to lose,
but dead by sorrow?...
to us it sounds like a poor excuse.

I am sorry,
I really am.
Your mother is not deceased,
I wish you could just let your mom go in peace.

XII

It is impossible to capture the complexity of someone's internal landscape in paperwork. The structures that we have created and that have been created for us, both internally and externally, control our perception of reality. So does language for that matter (e.g., Coleman, 2016; Young, 2015).

A death by sorrow, to me, feels like a failure to allow healing and growth; it feels like a bureaucratic refusal of change within the self. Change produces energy, and without acknowledgement and direction of that energy, our system can become overloaded. Our internal landscape becomes chaotic and unpredictable. Think of an over-charged battery. The energy needs to go somewhere.

And yet...

Yet, learning, healing, and sorrow are often seen as disconnected (some exceptions apply: e.g., Leggo, 2017; Nellis, 2009, 2018).

Pope Francis has said that "nothing in this world is indifferent to us" (2015). He was, of course, speaking of our relationship to the natural world, but this can easily be understood in a metaphysical sense as well. Nothing is indifferent to anything else. Healing and learning are two ends of the same spectrum, and we daily rove back and forth between the two.

Death by sorrow. Death by failure to learn. Death by lack of growth and adaptation. Death by inability to heal the traumas of the past. Death by willful ignorance. Our deaths, the small ones we experience every day, can often go unseen, so when we reach those big, sorrowful moments, is it any wonder that we can become so overwhelmed? The failure to recognize our metaphysical and transcendental deaths in turn brings about our physical death.

Nothing is indifferent to anything. Our thoughts and the energy they bring about have profoundly intense effects on the world around us, on our bodies, and on the Land. So, let's find a place for our sorrow to be felt. Let us heal together in laughter and in silence.

XIII

What have you done to us!?

Room for love on the sidewalk

(or How do you weigh this at the Bureau of Statistics?)

On the sidewalk
her body collapses and she cries,
to us and to the sky.

The time was 4:30ish pm...
And the time was neoliberal time.
The place was next to the crossing...
Right by the bus-please-stop.

And the place was the entrance to the Rideau shopping centre,
A place in downtown Ottawa.
The people were of all origins, young and old and wise in age,
And the people were trained proficient professionals.

Busy people.
They too, have their place on the list of casualties.

It all happened a moment's walk from federal offices.
Do you know this entrance to the shopping centre?
The one on Mackenzie-King bridge?

Tens of people at the green light,
she placed herself next to their way
to or from the business for the night.
Many are young,
brilliant.
The pounding blood at the heart of Ottawa.

Her face shaped by northern wind.
What made her overwhelmed?
loudly questioning,
demanding
again and again,
with kind sad eyes,
her voice (pain):

- "What have you done to us?!
Look at me!
What have you done?!"

Most people stole a quick look,
as fast as a blink.

Observing the crowd, I saw people raising eyes,
glancing at her, watching real life entertainment,
then comes the shame
and they quickly look anyway...
(let them not see that I looked).
Most people.

She owned her cries
on the sidewalk.
Sat, then lay on her back to glance at the blue sky,

then sat to talk to them,
to address the crowd,
in an old broken fashion.

Demanding,
shouting:
- “What have you done to us?!”

Look at me!” she asked.

What have they done?
I was looking at us,
I was looking at them,
and they glanced,
and they blinked,
and they were in a terrible hurry,
to avoid conscience.

and me?
What about me?
Wishing to help,
I made steps toward you
while thinking that as a new immigrant
(which is another version of the good old settler)
I am not sure what to do.
What would you like me to introduce into this moment?
this moment which was momentarily controlled by you.

A young lady
and a younger man
were quicker, more decisive.
With caring looks in their eyes asking:
“how can I help?, would you like me to...?”
and she looked back in their eyes,
quietly reflecting the skies:
“I want them to look!”

Was it silence on the sidewalk?
I wished for the buses to stop,

With my children waiting at home,
children wait alone without any worries.
I went into the shopping centre to buy Ottawa monthly bus pass.
Inside: relaxing music, shiny stores,

and sad salespersons
attending the momentarily controlling customers.

Products are made of flesh,
buyers make the knife.
My family is far far away,
myself and my friends are gone,
where are we taking our children too?

It is all manmade, not an act of the heavens.
Look at what we do, or don't.

Thirty minutes later,
rush hour gone,
less people,
less buses around,
where is she now?
Birds on the trees
singing.

XIV

There is a profound violence in unseeing. In some Indigenous languages, “hello” is translated as “I acknowledge you” or “I acknowledge your presence” (Simpson, 2017). Acknowledging presence is a fundamental act of respect, but we are conditioned to unsee people—primarily those “undesirables” which we experience as a part of a phenomenological netherworld.

In *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006), Slavoj Žižek discusses the bathroom scene of *The Conversation* (1974). In so doing, he states:

In our most elementary experience, when we flush the toilet, excrements simply disappear out of our reality into another space, which we phenomenologically perceive as a kind of a netherworld—another reality, a chaotic, primordial reality. And the ultimate horror, of course, is if the flushing doesn't work, if objects return, if remainders, excremental remainders, return from that dimension. (Žižek, 2006)

This discussion of our perception of the toilet is, to me, a perfect metaphor for the unseeing of people within Western society. The woman you saw was ignored(unseen). Within the perception of those ignoring her, she was a window into both the internal chaos existent within all of us and the external chaos produced as a bi-product of modern, post-industrial life (see also Bauman, 2007). Western society, and many of the people who comprise it, attempt to keep these chaotic netherworlds hidden, and when they are thrust back into our face, we do not want to look at them. We need to unsee it/them, to make it/them gone as quickly as possible. It has become acceptable to “flush” certain people who do not fit within a particular view of the world out of that view, and when we are confronted with them, we do not know what to say or do. Seeing the chaos resultant from our society

mirrors our own internal chaos. We are reminded, forcibly, of our own humanness, awkwardness, and imperfection. And then we turn away.

But we all want to be seen, acknowledged, heard, and understood. We want our chaos to be accepted by others. We want to be able to show “who we are and where we stand” (Biesta, 2006, p. 62), not just recite the quadratic formula or apply it to solve for X.

Society is messy. Learning is messy. I want to embrace that mess—not just unclog the toilet, but honour the presence of what we have flushed away and bask in its complexity. The separation barriers in Jerusalem and Belfast are another sort of gateway, keeping the Other—the chaos of the netherworld—out of sight and out of mind (Bollens, 2018).

XV

Right from wrong

Is everything all right?
If you wanna know,
ask the weakest,
the one with least control.

What is wrong?
If you wanna know,

ask the weakest,
they always know.

XVI

Scott Bollens (2018), who we both heard speak in at University of California Irvine (UCI) in August 2018, offers the following thoughts about unseeing:

To unsee the other
Is a more active disengagement than passively not pay attention

The lens directed at the angle of the other excludes it from view
Rather than the wider horizon and focusing elsewhere

It is structured neglect rather than considered dismissal
Premeditated rather than contemporaneous

Unseeing removes the unbearable burden of guilt, of humiliation, of history
It simplifies and extracts; it keeps the enemy at bay

The gaze of surveillance does not add sight

But rather a military-security layer through which those excluded become suspect

For the superior, unseeing validates dominance
For the subordinate, it demarcates a space of dignity

With lack of sight, we gain urban anonymity and illusion of privacy
lost is the shared enterprise through which we connect with the other (p. 61).

If you want to know the effects of a policy, ask the unseen.

XVII

Time immemorial

Oh, Majestic people
Abundant land
Singularity
Wisdom
Harmony
Peace
Colonialism
Nation building
Urbanization
Bureaucratization
Technocracy
Capitalism
Globalization
Neoliberalism

Oh, residential schools

Loving
Family
Stories
Time
Together
Nature
Fire
Water
Laughter

XVIII

Oh “Canada”—What a twisted mess of ideology that is (Gulliver, 2018; see also Saul & Burkholder, 2019). At the

last Empowering Sustainability Gathering, I was speaking with another Fellow about how I found it odd that our host university didn't have an Elder-in-residence or anyone from the local Indigenous community to welcome us. They looked shocked and told me that I needed to dial back my "progressive Canadian-ness" and respect the reality of the United States. Do Canada or the United States really exist outside of our minds? Does Canadian-ness? I do not generally consider myself a Canadian, but apparently the way I pronounce "about" and "out" gives me away. There is not really a word for the preposition "about" in Mi'kmaw, but if there was, I wonder if when I said it, it would communicate something to other people. Sometimes the fact of language communicates just as much as the content of the language.

XIX

Where we meet

You and I
We talk a lot
we listen more
we silence

we seat
listen to silences

to silence we listen
particularly well

we take care
care
there is a point
meaning to all

healing take time
for now
healing take actions
we act what else is there to do?
we care
care

XX

How many languages do you speak now, nitap? Now that you have been unable to find work despite your PhD in education, published scholarly work, and many years of experience—now that you have been told to learn French so you can get a job. I have heard you speak English, Arabic, Hebrew, and some Spanish. You are being unseen, and I stand by watching with a clenched jaw and a heavy heart. I do not know if it is solace or rage that I

find in the fact that you are not alone, that people are often discounted because of foreign credentials and a perceived (read as: imagined) inability to communicate.

The monoculture of mind (Hensley, 2011)—the mind-numbing sameness of standardization and melting pot inclusion—can be combatted by a radical appreciation for uniqueness. If we take our time and bear witness to the light in another (see also Downey & Rowett, 2020), not only will our society be richer for the experience, so too will our own internal landscapes become lush with diversity. Dwayne Huebner acknowledged this when he called learning standing in the presence of the stranger (1984). It can be terrifying to step outside of what is “normal” professionally and personally (see also Christou in Christou & Wearing, 2015), but it is precisely that discomfort which gives rise to the most profound learning.

You taught me that it is not enough to be critical of particular populations despite the fact that they may have committed terrible atrocities. There is educative potential in dwelling within our own darkness, as it helps illuminate the phenomena which underpin our capacity to unsee the other, but there is also potential in the light of ‘the Other.’ I think of this as being pro people (a category in which I include the more-than-human and the non-human). For me, this means conversing with people with whom I may not agree. This is how I have started to go about reconciliation; conversations, often heated, but never disrespectful.

XXI

Grandfather Abraham

Abraham was a slave from childhood,
knowing carriers of wickedness,
he was taken away at 14 to be a slave,
by people who left no room for tears.

He missed his mother, always like a child.

Abraham was brought up to be a Rabbi,
the wisdom and memory of his nation
were engraved in his young student’s mind and heart,
before the beginning of the holocaust.

He missed his god, always like a Rabbi.

At the end Abraham was forced to walk with others on death marches,
yet worst things were upon Abraham earlier, and after.
For example, he came back home to find
none of his family of ten siblings survived.

He missed his mother, always like a child.
He missed his god, always like a Rabbi.

Can you imagine the hope he had before finding out?
He never knew how their lives were taken,

How he prayed to God of six slaving years?
He never knew how their lives were taken,
maybe surviving is only the lesser worst

He missed his mother, always like a child.
He missed his god, always like a Rabbi.

To his last day,
Abraham was busy with a “rabbinical puzzle”:
Where was yehova?⁸
Maybe surviving is only the lesser worst.

He missed his mother, always like a child.
He missed his god, always like a Rabbi.

XXII

I am not a number - I am a real person

and the list goes on,
by almost every measurable indicator
Canada’s Indigenous people suffer a harsh fate:
dropout of school are almost three times higher,
unemployment rate is 2.1 times more than the national rate,
and the list goes on,
median income is 60% of the national average,
probability of being incarcerated is ten times higher than for a non-indigenous Canadian,
homicide rate is 6.1 higher than the national rate,
infant mortality is 2.3 times higher,
life expectancy is shorter,
and yet
the list goes on

XXIII

We can often become lost in our own darkness. When we become unseen, it is easier to unsee. When we are slighted, hurt, devastated, or destroyed, it can seem impossible to rise again. All I can offer to those lost in the darkness is my own hope. My hope is radical (Lear, 2006). When everything we have come to know and love has stopped existing, with what are we left? Both our Ancestors faced this reality. Generations of Indigenous people have had to redefine what life had the potential to be because their realities were constantly being robbed from them through colonization. Your (Gonen) Ancestors faced the same reality, but in a single lifetime. Everything they had come to know was robbed from them, and they were forced to redefine what life had the potential to be. I draw my hope from these stories. For my Ancestors, I know it was our culture and our spirituality which gave us the capacity to redefine our lives. Nothing is ever static in Mi’kmaw knowledge, and that gives us the capacity to understand the shifting social reality all around us. Yes, sometimes we lose touch with who we are, where we come from, and where we are going, but at the end of the day, there is a blood memory which guides us toward

something bigger. For me, the future is not dark; it simply is, and we can accept it in whatever form it takes. We can dwell within the dark to understand it but move toward the light in order to transcend. Perhaps in this way Abraham, and the rest of us, can find the light he lost. Perhaps in this way systems can start to change.

XXIV

Knowing is being

Can I learn your heroism?
Can I listen to the stories, let the songs fill my soul?

Is there room for me in your dream?
Will we ever be together in spirit?

XXV

Hadot (2002) supposes that Plato and Socrates would have it that no matter what we do, we will never be able to know. Wisdom is the divine marker of a sage, of God. Yet, we should not be complacent in our ignorance. It is the task of the philosopher to simultaneously be aware of one's ignorance and the impossibility of wisdom and to work toward wisdom anyway. This is, for me, the great struggle. We may never know true freedom, true peace, or true love, but that is all the more reason to try. I read Hadot (2002) as a call to embrace our humanness and the imperfections implicit within that, but also to constantly try to move toward the divine. In this struggle, I find peace and a life in which I can continue to work toward liberation and environmental suitability in ways that value the humanity of everyone with whom I work, not just those with whom I agree. I think that we agree here; but even if we do not, that is okay. I still see your light and would never say or do anything to diminish it. That is the way I am trying to walk in this world.

XXVI

Dear Adrian,

Reading your words, witnessing our friendship as it is, and as it changes; reading this time with joy in tears, this time there is quiet serenity by sharing words at last.

Our parents are speaking to each other through us.

Gonen

XXVII

Dear Gonen,

To me, our conversations form constellations of co-resistance (Simpson, 2017), and the implicit relationality of a constellation amplifies the brilliance of each individual star. Wela'lin nitap, for all the ways you make my heart and mind radiate, reverberate, and resonate. Thank you for the spaces you hold so that our Ancestors can speak through us.

Michelle Sylliboy writes that in the Mi'kmaw language, “there is no word for goodbye, in the same way there is no end to learning. *Numultes* is a by-product of this worldview. It represents an ongoing dialogue between two or more people” (Sylliboy, 2019, p. 8). I think the same about our friendship and our conversations. Even when there are silences that last months or years, conversations recur unexpectedly—haunting us, as some would say (Nellis, 2009). These recursions are openings, invitations to relive and renew our conversations and to form new constellations. So today, I say “app numultes,” “see you again,” with an emphasis on the “again” but without expectations as to when.

Adrian

M'sit No'kmaw

כל יחסינו Col Yechasenu

All our relations

ENDNOTES

1. See the following website for more details: <https://empowering-sustainability.weebly.com>
2. The Youth Environmental Education Peace Initiative was initiated under the auspices of The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies.
3. Young Voices Can! is an Ottawa-based charitable organization working to foster open dialogue, mutual understanding and inclusion among young people of different ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds.
4. Unless otherwise indicated, poetic offerings were written by Gonen and prosaic offerings were written by Adrian. Any “I” statements should be interpreted accordingly.
5. My friend.
6. “Politically Correct” was inspired by Leonard Cohen’s “Who By Fire.” Both poems are rooted in וְנִתְּנָה תְּקוּפָה (U’netaneh Tokef), a Jewish ceremonial poem dated to be about 1050 years old. Its name could be translated as “A validation to be conditionally given.” We (Jewish people) recite this poem as part of a ten-day process of reflection that starts immediately at the beginning of our year (around September). The reflection process ends with 24 hours of fasting on the tenth day. Jewish people dedicate these ten days to contemplate all our relations with(in) the world and the people we have been in touch with during the previous year, asking for forgiveness if needed. The poem lists horrifying deaths if God judges someone’s previous year negatively. This poem is written in our praying books, and is accompanied by a legend about its origins.
7. Simpson articulates this in the context of Nishnaabewin: “Aaniin [hello] then can also mean ‘I see your light,’ or ‘I see your essence,’ or ‘I see who you are’ (Simpson, 2017, p. 181). I (Adrian) have also heard similar teachings on recognition from Elders in different communities (see also Downey & Rowett, 2020).
8. It is forbidden for Jewish people to voice the name Yehova/Jehovah יהוה, it is the implicit word related to our nameless god. It is also related to the Hebrew word that mean presence.

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