

Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

IDIOMS OF AN ECOLOGICAL SELF

By

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ABSTRACT

I propose that ecological identity is conscious and embodied awareness of the self as a biotic constituent of a greater sentient system. This essay will use critical theory *interspersed with autobiographical reflection in italicized text* to illustrate how cultivating an ecological identity can be instrumental in redirecting individual and societal worldviews toward more sustainable living practices. I will also briefly explain how a Western worldview has contributed to our disconnection from nature and our natural selves, and how ecopsychology offers resolution toward developing ecological identity. I will then explain my own process for cultivating idioms of an ecological self from within a multidisciplinary art practice.

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Idioms of an Ecological Self

“I felt my life with both my hands” -- Emily Dickinson

Introduction: My Story, in Part

Fragments of the natural world were a wondrous frontier where I grew up. In the suburbs of Montreal, pockets of nature drew me in. Remnant meadows between subdivisions flooded seasonally with muddy puddles that miraculously filled with tadpoles in the spring. Ethereal blue chicory flowers lined roadsides in late summer, and milkweed pods, whose velvet casings split wide open in the fall, released battalions of silk-topped seeds into the wind. I was enamoured with all the wildness I could find, as many children are. I still remember how animated the world was to me then.

Two experiences in my life have called me back to my original sense of an animate world: the first happened in a pottery shop in Tokyo in 1992. The second was on a month-long kayaking expedition on the west coast of Vancouver Island ten years later. In both the pottery shop and on the kayaking trip, I experienced an internal ontological rupture my own culture might characterize as a psychological break with reality.

I went to Tokyo to teach English for a year after having left graduate school in Hispanic Studies. On one of my first days off, I wandered into an upscale hyper-modern district in Tokyo. Down an alley way was a small storefront with stone steps and a wood framed building. It was a pottery shop entirely out of keeping with the surrounding city. Having never been drawn to ceramics in Canada, I hesitated to explore, but the shop was so anachronistic I was compelled to go in. The shop owner, who was also a potter, was keen to practice his English and invited me to sit in the tatami mat showroom, which I did. From behind closed glass doors, he removed a small, unglazed brown teacup and passed it

to me deferentially. “National Treasure,” he said, meaning the maker carried that designation.

To say the cup felt alive is not a relatable or even believable phenomenon to describe in a Western cultural context, and yet, this is what I felt. The cup was sentient and I felt a transmission: the history of the art, the geological nature of the material, and the maker's presence. This was such an epiphanous experience that I set out within the week to find a pottery teacher. My plan to stay one year in Japan grew into a four-year exploration.

In my fourth year away, I had to make the decision to whether to stay in Japan and live life as an expat, or return to Canada and live in my own culture. I chose to return home and made plans to go to art school to formally study ceramics. Upon returning to Canada I discovered the nature of ceramics did not translate from Japanese to Canadian culture. As I will explain further on, the animistic nature of Shintoism lives on in Japan; that aliveness of the art form is not commonly found in Canada. These sharply contrasting ontologies were a living demonstration of how profoundly day-to-day perception can differ between worldviews.

Ten years later, I had moved to Vancouver to begin a ceramics practice on my own and to marry the man I had left before going to Japan. We shared a mutual love of the water and learned the skills to kayak in the ocean wilderness. On our most adventurous trip to date, we spent one month travelling by kayak from Winter Harbour in Quatsino, heading south to Tofino in some of the most exposed and isolated coastline of Vancouver Island. I brought no reading material or journal to write in; I wanted an unmediated experience of living in wilderness. After three weeks in the rolling expanse of the Pacific ocean shoreline, I felt a shift: my senses became sharper and more acute; the quality and volume of sound had become nuanced and layered; colours were more saturated; my feet detected vibrations in the sand from waves in a way that was more articulate; the air tasted of the smells of dry forest floor and low tide. By the fourth week, I felt my mind and whole body had become spacious in the sense of being fused seamlessly within my environment.

This journey, together with the ontological shift I experienced in Japan, led me to this paper's inquiry into how Western culture has developed, from my perspective, such a comparatively flattened perception of wilderness and of life – internally, externally, and throughout all the uncharted territory in between.

Defining Ecological Identity

In current psychological theory, my experience of a sentient teacup and the disappearing delineation of my body from my environment might qualify as delusional (American Psychological Association) and indicative of unstable mental health. Yet both of these experiences are entirely valid and normal in other non-Western human ways of being (Durkheim) in the world. For example, traditional Japanese craft is deeply rooted in traditional animistic Shinto beliefs in which all of life is “thickly populated with spirits ... and there are no inanimate entities” (Clammer 9); where pottery is “born” not made (Yanagi and Leach). Similarly, my experience in the wilderness has been echoed by Western philosophers such as David Abram (*The Spell*), John O'Donohue, Gary Snyder, and others in spiritual seeking within the natural world. Epiphanous moments that transcend normalized life experiences in the West are, in part, how I see ecological identity emerging: one must fall into experiential relationship with nature in a *felt-sense* (Gendlin) of wonder.

Ecological identity is one that I will liken to *dialogical self theory* (Hermans) wherein the static notion of the self yields to a process of dynamic reflexive self-formation involving a multivoiced self (Hametner 24). Cultivating an ecological identity (Meijers, Lengelle, and Kopnina) is this, with the additional ontological depth perspective of the self, extending into and including a full biotic spectrum of flora and of fauna, and as David Abram has characterized it--more-than-human (*Becoming*) selves as it does in traditional societies (Berkes; Colorado; Peat). *Feeling* ourselves in a relational flow of embodied and emergent processing (Siegel), as part of the biotic spectrum of nature, means finding embodied awareness in everyday living as an integral part of a greater sentient system (Kahn, Ruckert,

and Hasbach; White).

In the West, developing an ecological identity is one of the central issues of our time in the West because understanding the climate crisis requires a shift in the values and morals governing our conduct and relationships within the natural world. As psychologist James Hillman has said, we need to shift the *object of our desire* in order to reintegrate our individual identities with the greater biotic world.

Our Ecological Demise

From this mountain ridge, as far as the horizon reaches, not a tree stands. Nothing has escaped sawyers and diggers and angry red machines. Raking and scraping. Clear cutting. But after a season of rest, recovering in the stillness, fireweed grows. Tall. Swaying in elegant defiance: We will never leave.

Western scholars such as (Gallagher, Ingold (*Perception*), and Lakoff and Johnson) have begun a dialogical process of exploring an interdisciplinary embodied worldview that speaks to the concept of ecological identity through advances in scientific theory informed by traditional knowledge, neurobiology, and emerging embodied linguistic theory. Understanding multiple embodied worldviews and cultural diversity is “akin to [understanding] biodiversity as the raw material for evolutionary adaptive responses” (Berkes 97). Our modern Western worldview has developed over millennia and requires unpacking beyond the scope of this essay, but a brief summary will suit the purposes here.

Lynn White, a scholar of medieval history, put forward a resonating theory of our disembodied ontology wherein he claims that our climate woes have less to do with science and technology as such and more to do with a fundamental human-nature relationship entrenched in the Christian era that positions humanity as “superior to nature, and contemptuous of it” (5). White attributes our ecological crisis to philosophical and scientific formative developments within the Christian West such as Cartesian philosophy. Descartes “divorces the activity of the mind from that of the body in the world”

(Ingold, Perception 165). Lakoff and Johnson explain that Descartes' philosophy ruptured what may have remained of the human-nature relationship:

“Three elements of Cartesian philosophy have had a profound effect on the character of much contemporary philosophical thinking... first, that being able to think constitutes our essence; second, that the mind is disembodied; and third, therefore, that the essence of human beings, that which makes us human has nothing to do with our bodies. They have affected not only phenomenology, but also a good deal of Anglo-American philosophy of mind. But their influence is not limited merely to philosophy. They have also made their way into other academic disciplines, into our educational system, and into popular culture as well ... These beliefs, in the popular imagination, have led to the dissociation of reason from emotion and thus to the downplaying of emotional and aesthetic life in our culture.” (400).

Following the Enlightenment era was the Industrial Revolution, after which we saw the hegemonic effects of scientific reductionism. Without understanding mind-body connectedness, or how the lack thereof has affected us, we can scarcely appreciate the greater schematic connections within our environment. We have constructed dysfunctional social systems with religion, industry, reductionist science, a punitive justice system, colonialism, and capitalism with no inherent vision of sustainability. We have not – until now – been faced with the consequences of those systems on a global scale.

*Oceans surge from shore to shore. South. East. My low tide fills
your stormy bay. Your hurricane froth carries a single orange stone,
unique among all the stones on the beach. A traveller for eternity
between you and me and everyone who has ever been.*

When philosopher Arne Naess first coined the term “deep ecology” in the early 1970s, he was

referring to the depth of our dysfunctional worldview as it affects the environment. Naess opened the door to a discussion for our era: deep ecology involves re-envisioning the pillars of Western philosophy in a way that will move society in general to a more sustainable worldview. What made us the way we are in the world? Over the course of millennia we left a state of balance (Colorado; Peat) within a natural system for a state of encultured subservience wherein we began to view nature as an externality. We socialized ourselves away from innate and experiential knowing, agency, and feeling (Damasio; Johnson; Levine).

Ecopsychology and Re-embodiment

Many scientists and environmentalists are now vindicated for their prescient research warning us to change our ways. Theodore Roszak, an early scholar of the ecological crisis, wrote in 1972 that the counterculture movement rejected mainstream dogma, which in many ways was a precursor to the values shift we are now seeing globally. Counterculture proponents eschewed the dominant industrial culture and organized religion. (Here I am referring to those who actively engaged in counterculture philosophy in contrast with those who were tourists in a hippie lifestyle.) True counterculture proponents were interdisciplinary architects of the environmental movement from many walks of life. They were, in a sense, conscientious objectors to the conditioning effects of linear, mechanistic, and reductionist socializing who began the difficult work of ontologically remodeling the *habitus*, the “constructions and evaluations of the social world” (Hametner 26). At the base of counterculture remodelling was the concept of an ecological unconscious at the core of the psyche (Roszak) in active reconstruction of the *habitus* from the margins of mainstream social acceptance. Excavating the ecological unconscious from generations of maladaptive socializing is multi-generational work (Fisher; Maté 2008; Woodman and Dickson). In the same way other rigidified social norms such as sexism, racism, homophobia, colonial and xenophobic worldviews have undergone similar shifts in perspective in Western culture, there is no reason to think an ecological worldview could not be similarly espoused

over time. But – as argued here – this ecological identity must be fostered through a visceral and growing bodily awareness that we are an embodied part of nature.

*The ocean's lungs rise and fall in rhythmic swell, a gentle rolling lifts
and glides my boat over cresting peaks then deep into darkened troughs,
benevolent, with all the might of a god, this ocean lets us meet – you, whale,
and me – in a smoothing close to shore where you surfaced within reach,
your grey dinner plate-sized eye looking deep into mine, I wish I'd touched
you.*

Ecopsychologists, clinical psychologists (Kahn, Ruckert and Hasbach) and researchers (Abram, *The Spell*; Louv; Selhub and Logan) have published a broad body of work showing a marked world-wide increase in anxiety and depression which they attribute to living in technological societies dissociated from the natural world. Chellis Glendinning is an ecopsychologist with a clinical practice who characterizes modern human-nature disconnection as “the original trauma” (66). She proposes that the “hallmark of the traumatic response is dissociation: a process by which we split our consciousness, repress whole arenas of experience, and shut down our full perception of the world” (53). Glendinning claims this dissociative ecological trauma results from generations of dependency on human cultural constructs that are inherently at odds with the natural world: “a linear perspective, the scientific-technological paradigm, and the mechanistic worldview” (54). Other researchers acknowledge the combined effects of having lost connection with place, but also of a deeply felt existential social crisis that is at once ecological and philosophical (Albrecht). Meaninglessness in work, loneliness in society, a punitive justice system (Foucault), an educational system unsuited to innate human creativity (Robinson), the fragmentation of family, and mental health and addictions issues have all become persistent themes (Maté) in industrial societies around the world.

Many of us have broken with disembodied notions of ourselves and no longer accept the anthropocentric encultured perception of the world as inanimate and separate from ourselves. With this in mind, how do we recover from this “original trauma”? How does ecotherapy work for us? Patricia

Hasbach defines it as a therapy that draws on human-nature relationships and learning from Indigenous cultures without romanticizing traditional worldviews. She cautions against the naturalistic fallacy in moral philosophy (312) reminding us that Indigenous cultures have also succumbed to unsustainable practices citing Easter Island and the Chaco Canyon (319) as examples of total depletion of a natural environment by traditional peoples. Ecopsychology entreats us to look at integrating aspects of ontologies and epistemologies through culturally contextualized investigations. How do worldviews differ among different peoples? This calls for a reflexive, honest, mindful look at ourselves and perceived “others”.

Ecopsychologists maintain a fundamental underpinning of environmental degradation and the environmentally dissociated or disembodied self is the delineation of an interior self from an externalized natural world (Fisher) where the “world can only be 'nature' for a being that does not inhabit it” (Ingold, *Perception* 40). This being the case, perhaps we can learn from peoples who experience no such ontological constructs as humans separate from nature.

Your heart beats in my footsteps. A quickened pace flying from tree to tree. From your eyes I saw myself stop, feel a weathered blackberry still tethered to August, wonder at the first peek of green on still black stems. When, I wonder, will the thrushes arrive, to sing the salmon berries into ripeness? Did your throaty trill bring the first green?

Western scientists working in ethnological fields have presented ontological and epistemological worldviews hitherto irreconcilable with Western perspectives. New field work and research in the past 30 years or less has revealed fundamentally distinct psycho-physiological states in the spectrum of human experience; ontologies so greatly divergent from our own that a kind of inter-cultural bridging is required to effectively translate them (Berkes; Colorado; Smith). For example, linguistic anthropologists who have worked with oral cultures tell us that “words” in some cultures are *events* as opposed to records, and that it may be more accurate to define “worldview” as *world-event*; or that thought and action are one and the same (Smith 432). Elements of weather such as wind or

thunder are “domains of agency and materiality” (Ingold, *Perception* 73) in some societies.

Perception and affect are socialized and encultured training (Brennan; Classen; Jilek) in which social constructs support ontological structures axiomatic to our understanding of the world and our relationships within it. Take for example how dreams hold some psychological importance for Westerners, but how dreaming itself is perceived only as a mind-based phenomenon. In contrast, for the Chipewyan culture of northern Canada, dreaming is an inherent part of the real world as opposed to an internal process. Hunters will enter sleep to gain the learning they need to assure a successful hunt (Smith 414). For the Koyukon shaman of northwestern Canada, dreams are a place where animal spirits can be kept in “spirit houses” to bring an abundance of those animals to hunters (Nelson 205). And of course, the *dream-time* concept of Australian traditional peoples is the spiritual domain and dimension suffusing all phenomena (Wilkins, qtd. in Berkes). In Japan, pots, tapestries, and metal works are infused with the spirits of their makers and all the makers who have ever contributed to the art (Yanagi and Leach).

In the Western understanding of mind-body, the process of integrating dream-time with waking-time may feel like a descent akin to madness (Jilek), but integrating the perceived *external* with a culturally enclosed *internal* may be a starting point, at least in the waking hours of our own empathetic imaginations. Feeling what others feel is the beginning of cultural awareness (Ingold, *Perception* xxvii). An embodied feeling of culture can grow into an ethno-physiological self-awareness (Bennet and Castiglioni 261) wherein one is able to imagine, experience, and perhaps identify with the ethos of another culture without romanticizing or subjectively interpreting that culture. What is at play here is dialogical resonance with alternate worldviews with a broader ecological identity than the one we currently have in the West. In order to develop ecological idioms in the West, our values must broaden in order to *feel* the importance of sustainability, beyond being a cleaner or less polluting culture. Exploring the wondrous complexity of human and more-than-human (Abram, *Becoming*) experience

beyond our own allows us to *feel* and understand that we are in fact a part of a greater living system, and how that system is also us.

Over and under my submerged hand, you swam in spawning ecstasy. A herring jumping like a puppy. Dashing from stone to shore and in between my fingers. Iridescent diamond flashes of a skin so joyous that it almost didn't contain you. Springtime means the same thing to all of us.

Defining My Practice as Ecological Seeking

Ecological identity, as constructed from within an art practice means: the experience of nature is the framework from which I draw meaning. It affects my political choices, who my friends are, where I live and how I live my life. Nature is not an externality – I am an expression of nature. My use of the word ecological entails a mind-body-nature congruence. The idioms of an ecological self within a Western context are constructed within my own cultural history, language, philosophy, and art without appropriating those of another culture. I am not a Japanese national with Shinto roots, nor am I First Nations, thus my inquiry is about creating ecological depth, coherence, and equanimity for myself within contemporary Canadian culture as a Euro-Canadian where I live on the Pacific Coast. My studio practice is a blend of ceramics, photography, attending the experience of nature, and reflexive writing.

I learned to pot in Japan. This is where I experienced what I previously characterized as a transcendent moment when I held that Japanese ceramic cup. In that moment I experienced something so unfamiliar to me then, and now, that it feels untrue. An understanding seemed to physically transmit through my hands. The experience of a single cup changed the course of my life: I did not return to graduate studies in Vancouver when my teaching contract was up. I stayed in Japan, living in relative poverty, with no family and few friends, working as an English Instructor only enough to maintain my foreign worker status, which, in my fourth year, was eight hours a week. Over the course of four years I found teachers, absorbed understanding, felt the animistic craft process, and learned about the transmission of affect (Brennan; Smith) as it pertains to culture, ceramics and all other craft media.

When I returned to Canada, it was as though a colour had vanished from the spectrum. Elements of human knowing evaporated. This experience of culture shock (which I had never experienced in Japan) was one of contrasting dimensionality: a palpable phenomenological contrast between Japanese and Canadian aesthetics in the traditional sense, but also in an ethereal sense outside of any cultural explanation I could comprehend at that time. I now know that cultures construct themselves from within agreed-upon interpretations of reality (Ingold, *Perception* 389). In Japan, the historical, encultured, ecological unconscious still walks the streets in the traditional arts, and I was able to meet her in person in the form of a cup. The “sentient” cup was a “boundary experience” of “felt dilemma” that constituted a turning point in my Western identity (Meijers, Lengelle, Kipnina 7).

Charcoal grey and indigo, a modest room of profound offerings. The potter sat across from me, on new tatami mat, still green, smelling of freshly cut hay. A cup passed to my hands. Bare, rough, flecked with inclusions of quartz, of time, history, geology and wind. All of Japan opened in that cup, in my two hands, humming an eternal field.

When I found my way into ceramics in Canada, it became very much a solitary path. My experience in Japan has no parallel here, so I have created a blended studio practice that comes close to emulating what I experienced there: it involves bringing ecological *felt-sense* (Gendlin 33) into my practice in a multifaceted way. My practice is a therapeutic praxis in the ecopsychological model.

Though I make primarily utilitarian objects, my work is philosophically informed. The Greek terms *poiesis* and *praxis* will allow me to express what I do in depth. These words are particularly suited for ecological ideologies in craft-based art-making. *Poiesis*, is a verb meaning “to know by making”, but it also involves concepts of “leading into being---unveiling--intentionality, the locus of an expressive temper of soul” (Whitehead n.p.). *Praxis*, as a complementary concept applicable in art-making, is that of “knowing through engagement in making” or practicing with theoretical intention in dialogical process within the maker (Levine 32). *Poiesis* and *praxis*: my work is informed by ecological inquiry without which the work would not exist.

DNA, a biotic encoding, has unraveled a narrative of Greece, Africa, and the Middle East living in my veins, blood and bones. The taste of bergamot and the scent of rosemary oil run through my hands fresh from the garden – it's not for nothing that these resonate, making me feel both joyous and sorrowful in one braided breath.

Two words that encompass the ecological inquiry in my work are 'aesthetic' and 'anaesthetic'. This contrasting lexical set covers the broader scope of my studio practice. 'Aesthetic' in my use of the word here, refers to the emotional and physiological experience of beauty in its subjective forms in the Kantian sense (Levine 40) as well as in the original Greek sense of the word meaning 'that perceived with the senses' (OED). *Anaesthetic*, in contrast, is generally known to us in the word “anesthesia”, a substance used to create insensitivity to pain, from the Greek *anaisthēsia*, 'meaning without sensation' (OED). Conscious and sentient reflecting is how we understand, repeat, and deepen the ecological ethos in which art objects are made and the way art-making is conducted (Sewall 266). As I consciously participate in each element of my practice – in each sense experience – the praxis broadens my aesthetic perception. As the aesthetic experience grows, my ecological identity intensifies.

Each aspect of my practice generates a different perspective of the same phenomenon in an overall synaesthetic sense blending: ceramics is a tactile craft in both its making and in its utility; it corresponds to the haptic sense of touch, or feeling and learning with one's hands. Photography helps me develop observational acuity by looking closely at the macro aspects of biotic structures as well as at living systems in the ocean environment where I live. By creating purposeful engagement with nature, I create a meaningful reason (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*) to maintain the creative exercise, which is to undo the anesthetizing effects of an anthropocentric heritage. This means I can break the cycle of anxiety and depression, which I attribute to irreconcilable differences with the culture in which I was raised. In the dynamism of a living environment, I expand into place and become where I am. The combined elements of my practice aestheticize an ecological ethos, and the more closely I observe the behavioural changes I want to make (in reducing feelings of anxiety or depression), the more likely

those behaviours are to change (Watson and Tharp).

I become consciously aware of this process through reflexive writing wherein emotional aspects of the praxis are metabolized from emotion into feeling into conscious knowing (Damasio, *Feeling* 88) and finally into written articulation. The most effective writing technique I have found for this metabolizing process is Linda Trichter-Metcalf and Simon's method of Proprioceptive writing. This is a focused and reflexive method wherein one attends to proprioceptive, or bodily orientation feeling together with thought wherein the writer is as objective, attentive, impartial, and mindful as possible (Bolton 10). Trichter-Metcalf and Simon, with this methodology, suggest closely following what Gendlin calls *felt-sense*, a process of listening to internal body cues while writing in order to respond to the subject matter as it is written. Proprioceptive writing calls for us to stop writing when a word or phrase “feels” like it is significant and then write “What do I mean by” [the word or phrase that initiated the response]”. Writing out the response allows *poiesis* in that one has an opportunity to face what unexpectedly emerges in a transformational way (Bleakley; Bolton; Levine).

Beauty is the antidote for despair. In all the simple corners of any given day, a crafted cup, some knitted socks, a woven blanket pulled over my body at night: Beauty in the crafted object fills daily actions with the hands and hearts of others with enough beauty to withstand despair. What do I mean by "despair"?: The grief of a loss in progress.

Writing can bring felt-sense into cognition (Bucci; MacCurdy; White) by stirring emotions that connect to trauma (Van der Kolk 239), even if the trauma is not a conscious one. Recent studies have shown that inter-generational trauma is physically and psychically housed in our bodies in ways that may surface in generations removed from the primary trauma such as First Nations survivors of colonialism and residential schools; survivors of the Holocaust, war, and other catastrophes; and other victims of individual trauma. Epigenetic theory posits that environmental events experienced by one person may leave behavioural effects on subsequent generations (Maté). For example, an individual

experience of WWII may manifest in the descendants of that individual in the form of anxiety, depression, compromised emotional resilience, or even physical illness (Dispenza 77; Van Der Kolk 152).

In my own history, my father is the last military man in a direct line of 400 years of recorded French-Canadian history in Quebec. My mother is the second generation descended from a Greco-Italian family who experienced the most devastating earthquake and tsunami in recent European history in Reggio Calabria in 1908. Most of my family struggled with anger issues, anxiety, and depressive episodes. This is a not an unusual dynamic for a Euro-Canadian family with deep roots in all of the cultural traditions leading to this ecological crisis. Families and societies perpetuate their own circular patterns passing trauma down from one generation to the next in the form of anxiety, depression, addictions and other behaviour disorders (Levine; Maté).

Standing on a bridge on an imaginary hill, I watched the wall of water surge and grow over the skyline of Montreal. Black water frothed between the buildings, the entire city pounded into metal and glass fragments – a repeating dream from childhood, beginning at 8-years-old and continuing in to adulthood.

Understanding the dynamic of inherited trauma, I used reflexive writing and poetry in a project three years ago that helped shift the burden of that inheritance, which ultimately laid the groundwork for greater resilience and ecological equanimity. Poetry is particularly suited to processing trauma, especially when the language is concrete and sense-based (Bucci 118). The visceral effects of metaphors and poetic and vivid language are explained in embodied language theory (Lakoff and Johnson 583) which posits that the body and mind co-evolve with perceptual experiences mediated by language, and that gesture and language occupy the same neural pathways (Gallagher 118). This is to say that language both informs and is embodied within our minds and physical bodies through a biophysical mapping of somatosensory imagery (Damasio *Feeling*, 318). Poetry writing allows the

interoceptive processes of visceral-somatic and cognitive sensing (Cameron 276) to “lift” intuitive feelings from the gut to conscious awareness in emotions. Porges's polyvagal theory describes this phenomenon wherein the autonomic responses in the body that process primary emotions - anger, fear, panic, sadness, surprise, interest, happiness (ecstasy), and disgust” (47) - emerge in bodily expression of emotion and gesture; sadness, for example will be seen in facial expressions and, perhaps, tears or weeping. Before knowing about the *word-as-event* perception of First Nations, as Smith describes it, this felt embodied language process did not resonate with me. But, thinking in the context of oral traditions, it does.

Poetry is arguably a genre best spoken and heard, which makes it a living and animated word-as-event writing closer to the sensing, feeling body than prose usually is. I write poetry as part of my studio practice to relinquish maladaptive felt-states and to cultivate an enduring feeling of well-being. Writing expressively about painful emotions and the events that accompany them, as well as writing optimistically, has proven emotional and physical benefits (Burton and King; Pennebaker and Evans) In the interest of opening myself to ecological equanimity, I choose to write about wonder. Wonderment in the idioms of ecological equanimity is not limited to any particular arena of experience: I write about felt-states in my practice, in nature, in social contexts, as well as of urban memories of my earlier life.

In the cathartic exercise mentioned earlier, I wrote reflexively about a memory of peak wonderment from my life where I gained access into the Roman Coliseum at dawn in 1980. I then wrote a narrative about the experience, and finally wrote a poem about the memory using Lengelle's model of Transformation Through Writing. My subjective experience of this process is that while I experienced positive reminiscence in the first two iterations of the process, the poem was the most deeply resonant. Repeating this process with several other memories produced similar results.

*I am gold, alone, at dawn, in the earliest August sun
shining in blazing approval at my arrival.*

In the centre of time, I stand breathless.

*Many have walked here, on prehistoric rock
made of the shells of beings, long out of the ocean.*

Time upon time upon time.

Inhaling, into the soles of my feet

*I breathe in ages, anguish, massacre. but also births and markets,
and life that is of the everyday, long past the fall of Nero.*

*I am gold, alone, at dawn, wandering in the spirit world of
women, children, and men, giraffes, and elephants*

who have stood where I am.

Breathing lives through the soles of my feet,

here,

I stand in the centre of time.

The feeling state experienced when writing this poem was one best characterized by Csikszentmihalyi as “flow”, which he describes as an “optimal experience” when “the information that keeps coming into awareness is congruent with goals, psychic energy flows effortlessly”(Flow 39). Flow state may best match the concept of an ecological self when all life activities coalesce to sustain reasonable periods of “flow” to the extent where we can summon resilience into the everyday. And, as this story exemplifies, we do not have to be in deep wilderness to experience ecological equanimity.

Ceramics, photography, time in nature, and writing are the matrix of my ecological striving. Each component links to the other in a blended, multifaceted, sense-based practice of identity seeking. Photography has come to play a more important role in recent times because I have noticed the still and meditative quality of looking with intention and then focusing very close-up on an aspect of the natural

world that captures my attention. Macro photography allows a feeling state to develop that is second only to poetry: the more closely I look at nature, the more I want to write to metabolize that felt-state. It is a circular contribution. I would not do the work if it were not also inherently expressive and meaningful to me. If my work were not a type of pilgrimage (Whyte), I would choose to make my living in a different way.

Cup to your lips from my hands, warm words drawn over your tongue, drink down the heat to your throat. Cup to your lips from my hands, a brew of nettle and rose, drink down the field to your throat, feel the sun on your face, and the ocean open the sky.

Concluding Thoughts

Re-embodiment of the natural world is individual work. No one can impart or confer ecological identity onto another. And ecotherapy is not the exclusive domain of trained professional; we can do this ourselves within our own feeling bodies and minds. We learn to feel by embracing our own liminal experiences of the natural world and by attending to the opening worldviews within our own cultural structures: scientists are now loosening the rigidity of their reductionist views with research like that of Simard at the University of British Columbia whose findings show an inter-connectivity and communications system within the root systems of trees; anthropologists like Tim Ingold, Fikret Berkes, and David Smith now openly testify to transcendent experiences within Indigenous cultural contexts; and philosophers like David Abram (*Becoming*) can write about shape shifting with a shaman without certain derision. Our worldview is opening and broadening. Indigenous scholars such as Colorado, Kovach, and Peat are now able to tell their stories from both Indigenous and Western academic perspectives bridging paradigms. We can hear each other asking to have our experiences validated and understood.

As individuals, or let me say, as an individual, I believe I have a responsibility to explore towards the farthest edges of what it means to be embodied and ecological. After multiple “boundary

experiences”, only two of which I revisited here, I know that we are, as human beings, each of us is a body-mind-nature “continually developing process of events” (Johnson 279). And I know that historical repression, suppression and disdain for the body-nature being in our Western history has been destructive both individually and globally. With this understanding, technology has also contributed to our lives in myriad meaningful ways, but we need to develop technological societies in ways that are compatible with natural systems. Without sustainable practices in everything we do, we risk our lives as a species.

We do not need social permission to explore our ecological selves within technological societies; it is no longer “heretical” to consider ourselves ecological beings. The idioms of ecological identity are built from within: observing and being in nature as much as possible builds the internal relationship with natural phenomena while interacting with others with compatible values reinforces a social ecological ethos. Where professional services may be needed is initiating the identity processes by isolating core limitations within our own personal wounding (Kahn, Ruckert, and Hasbach; Van Der Kolk), but ultimately seeking and finding ecological equanimity is ours to do, *feel*, and make a way of life.

Consciously cultivating the idioms of an ecological self from within an anthropocentric society is the work of a lifetime and well into the lifetimes of our descendants, in the same way that my generation continues actively banishing racism, sexism, homophobia and so many other maladaptive social norms. It is a question of deeply felt introspection and an honest assessment of values as individuals: we can regenerate innate balance with dedicated collective social commitment. And in homage to the early counterculture whom I so admired as a youth, I will conclude these thoughts with an imperative from Joni Mitchell, the much loved Canadian, who enjoins us to “get ourselves back to the garden.”

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