

Dwelling-telling Diversity: Initial key to an ecological worldview

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Abstract

In considering ecology, comparatively little attention has been turned to the mode of thinking that may lead to uncovering new ideas or to the ecological nature of the philosophical underpinnings requisite for such a project. Our work examines what would constitute an ecological mode for teaching and learning through one particular lens, that of the state of being of attentive receptivity, as reported in interviews with several Temi-Augami Anishinaabe elders of the middle Ontario region in Canada. A consideration of this state of being suggests that learning, especially ecologically learning, might be considered as ontological shift; one such shift might entail an ecological positioning consistent with the principles (keys) inherent in successful ecological systems. In so doing, this work touches upon several principles inherent in successful ("sustainable," "resilient") ecosystems and posits that any learning, but especially ecologically oriented learning, will have the best chance of success if it makes use of these.

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being in touch¹

being in touch is

waking up in the morning

[looks, points]

and you walk out

walk down to the beach there

look around

I don't know

I look

I look out there

and I say

"good morning"

I'm talking to people that have been here

gone

ones that are still coming yet

what they going to bring?

[do you mean the people, like the beings on the planet?]

yeah and the people that have been through here

and you try to get in touch...

try to get in touch with them there

--Michael Paul, a Temi-Augami Anishinaabe elder, being interviewed for *Daki Menan* (Land of ours), Author, 2004.

Metaphorization and Literalism

[Author 1 writes:] My first response in encountering a statement such as this one—before noticing it *as* a response—was to regard it as metaphor. By this I mean that I supposed Michael Paul could not have been speaking about what actually happened—he had to be using consciously chosen symbols that would make sense to me as representations. One of these symbols was of “people who have gone before.” You can hear me in the tapes questioning this. I ask, do you mean people, like ‘beings’? His politeness required that he acknowledge my interpretation, but he meant people. He meant, in particular, his ancestors, who really were here, right now. Later in the interview, Michael speaks of bending down and touching the ground, a very literal kind of “being in touch.” If these were the only examples of what I mistook to be metaphor, the matter might easily be overlooked. But I have come to think that what is at the heart of this is competing and quite different ontologies. That metaphors are mistaken is a symptom of an underlying issue, rather than the issue itself.

At a certain time during the filming of *Daki Menan* I began to question my own readiness to make metaphor of the experience of others. I began, instead, to regard the actual literal words of these Temi-Augami Anishinaabe elders as an accurate representation of what they thought, and especially the way they thought about how the world worked. (I am leaving aside for the time being that all language can be construed as necessarily metaphorical—that words by their nature *stand for* things².) But if this move to literalism were justified, I had to acknowledge that what I thought to be the parameters of being would change. This paper is about that change as mediated through what I call *attentive receptivity*, another state of being than that which is enacted in the projects we refer to as modern western culture (Modwestcult).

[Both authors write:] This paper is also about a larger project, which has at its heart the articulation of an ecological world view. While the value of an ecological world view is sometimes voiced, (Capra 1988; Jackson 1994; Berry 1987) and steps have been taken to articulate what an ecologically based value system might look like (Naess 2005; Capra 1988; Sessions 1985) little work has been done to theorize the underlying ecological principles that constitute such a world view, and less work still has been done in considering how it could be enacted within educative practice. Our larger program within which this paper falls will be to forge the keys that unlock this world view. One of these is diversity. For the purposes of this paper, our project is to examine attentive receptivity as an example of ontological diversity

Attentive receptivity is the descriptive name³ we give to a state of being we think is different from the one normally occupied by human enactors of being in Modwestcult.⁴ The mode of being that is inherent in Modwestcult consists of mobility without penalty; of perceived isolation or independence from the ecological processes that keep us alive; of historically unprecedentedly intensive use of non-renewables to satisfy wants more than needs; of generally fragmented human relations reduced to short term interactions,

normally for instrumental purposes; of competitiveness; of the culture of the individual; of the culture of the exclusively human; and of the hubristic conception of linear human progression to a position of superiority over what has gone before in human and ecosystem history (Capra 1988; Naess 2005).

We are not speaking about Modwestcult as simply theoretically equivalent to something like late capitalist enterprises such as those found in Western Europe and North America, though in practice it tends to correspond with aspects of these. Nor do we mean by this term simply the various expressions of global capitalism (Gorz 1980). We are speaking about a way of interacting with place that transcends cultural and economic descriptions, and amongst the powerful idea creators has become the almost the only language in the language of being. We are not referring to culture, to gender, to race, to ethnicity, or to religious or spiritual practices, or to anything recognized within scheduled castes of difference⁵. Nor are we referring to states of mind that might appear to be in contradiction to the disturbing enactment of our ecologically profligate existence.

Most of us simply cannot comprehend, because we cannot live, anything beyond our own way of being in the world.⁶ For the most part, we have only known our own way of being, and for those rare few who do see other possibilities, ours is usually regarded as the most “successful” (by which we mean most likely to dominate other ways of being). Other ways of being appear to us to be impoverished, certainly, but more damningly, moribund. We are what appears to work, and what appears to us to not work is not only distasteful, but pitiable.

Adopting a longer view, we think exactly the opposite is true. A noteworthy characteristic and one we find to be most noticeably different between the being of Modwestcult and that expressed by Michael Paul is, as Modwestcultists would understand it, our relationship to the world that we think of as outside of ourselves.

And this is precisely the point of crossover. For Michael Paul sometimes very literally be’s (enacts being) in conjunction with the world-not-human in such a way that the human-non-human world divide is bridged. Even when members of Modwestcult do their best to do the bridging, the divide is still preserved, at least as a conceptual one. This is because any attempt at bridging is contained within lives that tends to be utterly opposed to such a bridging. So, if we give Michael the respect he is owed by literally, rather than metaphorically, interpreting his words, then the conclusion we think necessary is that it is a different kind of world/self being that exists in this moment of—forgive us—interface. A literal interpretation permits nascence of a world view that is absolutely counter to the belief system we grew up with.

In another passage, Michael Paul says:

you wake up

and you have no game plan

and you just go out

maybe you want to paddle

down the lake today

or go up the river

go down the river

but no matter how you feel

it's you

this land is telling you

what to do

[Author 1 writes:] In this passage, I understand Michael Paul to perceive himself, his surroundings, the place he calls home, to be part of a very complex identity that is composed of, as far as I comprehend it, at least two aspects of the same thing, which to me would usually appear to be distinct. These are what we would conventionally see as the human body as it is delineated from the world outside it at the surface of the skin, and the world that is ultimately responsible for that body's survival—i.e., the world that contains its being.⁷

In this view of human/place being, and the view that Michael Paul expresses, the two separate and distinct beings become aspects of the same thing. I think livelihood labour of the kind that directly and unintermediatedly enhances the well-being of the self-place whole is the main vehicle through which the state of being that Michael Paul seems to be expressing is achieved. I call this state of being attentive receptivity.⁸

Central to this notion is that understanding and conceptualization, much as they are considered by those of us occupying the state of being characterizing *homo mobilis* to be under human guidance and aegis, are actually place-human co-creations⁹. So when Michael Paul says, "It's you / This place is telling you / what to do," he means this precisely, and not as metaphor. So let me assume for the time being that Michael means what he says, in as literal a way as is capable of being transmitted to the way of being that I occupy.

In this version of the self, self and place co-create both living and ideation. The ideational aspect I will call *meander knowing*. Meander knowing is an epistemological condition, akin to Noddings and Shore's "intuitive" (1984), that is representative of the underlying ontology of *attentive receptivity*. This way of knowing is characterized by a reduced willing of knowing, a receptivity to what the "other" (in this case the natural world) brings, and a lateral breadth of awareness and an attunement to the unexpected and rationally unexplained intuitive mode of knowing. The living part mentioned but not described earlier is *attentive receptivity*. In attentive receptivity, the well-being of what had been conceived of as a separate self is balanced with the well-being of what had been conceived of as the separately existing ecosystem both by doing and by not doing, through the medium of livelihood labour.

By *not doing* I mean not engaging in ways of living that are inherently destructive of an ecosystem—which¹⁰ is the larger home of the self. Thus, attentive receptivity entails being, non-self-destructively. In the category of self-destructively being I include virtually every conceivable aspect of living in Modwestcult as described earlier: high consumption, a tendency to conceive of being as an individual project, lack of concern for any but those which are of instrumental value to us, including people, and so on.

By *doing*¹¹ I mean engaging in inherently ecologically balancing activities that both consider and enact the welfare of the aspect of the self-place whole that is the general ecology at each turn, to the capacity and limit of the self-place whole that is the person doing the enacting. As the previous sentence will attest, these ideas are difficult to express in the language we have. I hope you will forgive me, compromising accuracy for simplicity, if I sometimes lapse into more conventional expressions that derive from Modwestcult's separations of self and place.

Following these patterns of utterances, then, for most people, *doing* would entail living in direct interaction with place such that one's own living and the well-being of the place inhabited are considered and enacted in a life praxis that ensures the continued well-being of the self-place whole.

It's you

The listening quality that Michael refers to, listening to the voice of the more-than-human world, is one of the characteristics of *meander knowing*. Michael says: "This place is telling you / (a person) what to do." This would mean that Michael Paul's position is not one of *determiner, controller, director, will-expresser*. Instead, he is in the position of receiving, hearing, listening (or being an enlightened interpreter if you accept Thoreau and Emerson) - but to what? And of what? To the "place," which I take to be representative of the local world. And to its immensely deep and wide capacity for something like the loving co-creation of meaning that is rooted in the co-habited territory between personal and placial interest.

This place is also part of the self, but clearly not the part that determines, directs, controls or wills. It cannot be identical to what Michael Paul refers to as "you" because in the statement given, it is trying to communicate with this "you". Assuming for the moment that identical things do not need to listen to themselves to interpret meaning, Michael is listening not to a god outside, nor to will, inside, but to something like *the expression of non-human though interdependent being-within-an-ecosystem* to determine what will be his expression of being, today. In this kind of listening, human-directed will is temporarily or perhaps usually relinquished to the will of the ecosystem.

And yet to describe it in this way lays emphasis upon two separatenesses communicating with each other. This doesn't feel quite right. The problem I am faced with is interpreting words spoken to me – a person known to the speaker to be from Modwestcult – as necessarily interpretations of what might be a quite different experience.

For interpreting this interpretation, I turn to Martin Heidegger. In Heidegger's concept of the *Dasein*, the "there-being," the being-that-is-in-the-world, Heidegger inextricably links the quality of thereness with being. That is, the ontological entity (the being that is saddled with the project of and capable of reflecting on its own being)—the human being—always is, in a context. In a representative later work, *Building dwelling thinking* (1977), *dwelling* articulates a kind of being that may occur when the world in which *Dasein* is, is not regarded merely instrumentally. In this concept of dwelling, the person-place presides over either the person or the non-human world, taken individually. In Michael Paul's world view, the place is *telling*; the place is actively involved in this relationship. It is not a passive reflection of what we in Modwestcult would like to think of the active agency of the person. It is not giving subtle signals, not warbling in incongruous birdsong. It is telling. In another passage Michael Paul says, "If you know how to listen, you can hear all this," (Author, 2006). Clearly, the onus is on the human participant to learn how to hear the place.

Many questions arise. How is it that Michael knows he is hearing what the place is telling him to do, and not, for example, just making it up? How is it that he knows he is not being deceived? And if we are to take seriously this self-place being, what would it be for this kind of entity to make something up? Or to deceive?

For now, let me interpret listening to place as a skill, say, *akin* to the non-linear way of thinking involved in learning to read poetry, that is culturally learned and passed on. I take it that having been raised in a way such that place-as-externally-manifested-self was listened to as a matter of course contributes probably in part to the particular moment of employment of the skill itself, but undoubtedly to the probably more widely distributed *capacity* for this skill amongst those Aboriginal people who still live in alliance, rather than competition, with place. Perhaps more significantly, I take it that it might be something that I, from the outside, have to accept at face value, for the time being, believing that the view of the world encompassed by Modwestcult might just be lacking and that the way to become un-lacking is not to intellectually question, because that way by definition prevents the kind of understanding that is primarily a lived one. The way to test these ideas will be to live them, and then to speak.

In describing it thus, I want to ensure that I do not leave the impression that *meander knowing* is a merely a cultural practice. It is the expression of an underlying ontology, *attentive receptivity*, that must be enacted before the epistemic condition obtains.

Presented; presencing; present

Amongst the elders I have worked with in the Temagami area, the state of being that I describe does not appear to be strange or unusual. Take, for example, how Alex Mathias speaks of hunting for moose or partridge.

well I believe
like again
the partridge is presented
to me to us because
if I wasn't meant to get a partridge
I wouldn't even have seen it

In this view of things, the *interests* of the partridge and person intersect. I think this view will be seen as strange to many people from Modwestcult, precisely because our view of the world tends to see animals as inherently competing for scarce resources, inherently interested in their own survival as an independent being. It is a perspective compatible with the world view underlying our dominant economic system.

[Both authors write] But the word “presented” is used. Alex Mathias, like many elders we have spoken with in conversations like this one, uses language very precisely. In speaking to us who are unversed in the Anishinaabe language, he uses the English word “presented,” we think for good reason. “Presented,” in this context, does not require a specific presenter. It could be, as some would have it, “the Maker.” It could also be understood as just the way things work out. Certainly it is suggestive of a kind of dance or theatre. Both of these performances are presented.

We think it is more likely that the presenter, the presented and the presented-to are somehow linked in this narration. The verb lends itself to this. It is curiously neutral, or perhaps more accurately, bi-valent. It lies between what did the presenting and what does the perception of presentation. In either case, a crucial and difficult step for those of us in modern western culture to take is to begin to see in this narrative the interests of the person operating in this paradigm who lives, and the animal that dies, and everything else that is an apparent by-stander as linked, with something like a shared interest. Or perhaps, there are no interests at all that are not also intertwined with the broader interest of the ecosystem.

One way of viewing shared interests or lack thereof is the narrative that may unfold around the event. In other words, in telling the story of events-in-the-world in more ways and from more perspectives than are normally considered in Modwestcult, all participants have a part. We leave the investigation of this idea of narrative as perspectival collector, and especially the co-incident aspects of culture and meta-narrative, as viewed through Aboriginal legends, for a future project.

While we acknowledge the precision of Alex's use of “presented,” we would like to push this concept a little by introducing another commentator. Martin Buber also uses the root of the same word in a discussion about dialogue: to make yourself *present* to the other. (Buber, 1970) We want to play with the notion of *presented* becoming *present*. If the sentence were instead, “I believe the partridge is present to me,” there becomes room both for the intention of the partridge in fulfilling its part in the narrative, but also for the

sense that it makes itself present to a person who is also present. Both participants that we might notice in this story, as well as the environment around the story itself, would in some sense give over their control, or relinquish will, or listen to what is not the known self but what is part of the self. Making myself open to relationality I am present and invite the presence of the other. In this sense, the partridge or moose becoming present to Alex makes them available as food in the co-creation of self-place being.

However, from the perspective common to Modwestcult of the competition of species for shared resources, valuing life as we know it in an often superficial and practical reckoning, the killing of an animal may seem a senseless tale. More likely, it could be said, it is a pernicious one, a justification for brutal slaughter that has much baser motivation—greed, blood lust, or a taste for ecologically “expensive” protein, albeit less expensive than the animal protein “produced” in Modwestcult..

[Author one writes] Once I helped Alex with his trapline, and I recall the day vividly. Later, I asked Alex to teach me how to skin an animal. I admit that the image of the flesh-cradled eyes of the already skinned beaver still stare back at me. And yet, I have also to admit that I do not know if they stare with condemnation, with sadness, with horror, with pain, with simple absence, or with love, or with admonition that I not waste its life. All of these are possible, as is the idea that I tell these stories in order to justify what Wade Davis calls the central contradiction of hunting-gathering cultures; that we who live must kill what we most love to survive (Davis, personal communication, 2003). Modern western culture has massively expanded the ecological breadth and depth of the human footprint, but it has also successfully hidden this from even the most thoughtful observer. We do more damage, but we do it away from the watchful, flesh-cradled eyes, which tell us, again and again if we remain open to looking, that the beaver has died as a direct result of our actions, and that what goes with being killer carries with it a responsibility to acknowledge the broader notion of the whole self that includes the once living beaver and the world that all must inhabit.

Killing the Self

[Both authors write] If the beaver were a part of ourselves, in this wider conception of self, and if killing the beaver thus signifies a killing of part of the self, a question that occurs to us is, do we ever kill a part of ourselves that a greater part, perhaps a truer or more wholesome part, may survive? Of course the answer is, that self-reflective people who want to live well, *must* do this all the time. Certainly we change through acknowledging, building over, actively choosing to no longer be who we once were—though perhaps, were we to view this from a purely existential perspective, the part of ourselves we wish to change would never be quite killed. We give up habits that were part of who we were before we now are. We dispose of practices we think to be destructive or unwholesome. We jettison possessions that limit us. We even do harsh things to people we love in the interests of their project of growing, and as part of our project of thoughtfully loving, because loving them entails honesty, always, and the capacity for fierce directness, sometimes. And of course, such practices can be misguidedly extended so that the practice of killing part of ourselves is not a necessary harshness, but cruelty, without purpose or wholesomeness.

We think, literally again, of the extended notion of self. Do we also kill a small oil and fur-rich animal that is part of a wider notion of ourselves in order that a greater part of ourselves may continue to be? Is it possible that roughly this question could be asked so that it does not appear in form or actually express a utilitarian motivation? We doubt that accurate answers to these questions can be enacted by one who is not living directly and immediately in conjunction with place such that the integrated interests of person and place intertwine. By *directly and immediately*, here, we mean that the actions that correspond to one's continued existence are met without intermediation of, for example, an economic system that first abstracts one's labour into cash.

Taking Selves to School

We have tried to show thus far that there are different kinds of selves than Modwestcult acknowledges or conceives. The kind we address here is an ecologically integrated one. If it is the case that there really are discernibly different *kinds of selves*, differentiable by not merely culture (which we see as both a representation of, and to a much more limited extent, shaper of underlying ontology), nor language, (again, which we take to be reciprocally related by mostly the embodiment of an ontology), nor race, gender, religious or other beliefs; in other words, if there really are deeply different ways of being in the world, then it behooves us as educators to pay attention to this, rather than to the merely scheduled castes of difference, in designing educative practice.

Let us consider the notion of self-reflection. A very simple idea, or seemingly so. Teacher candidates are required to engage in it endlessly where we teach. We, as teacher educators, take for granted that we know what is entailed in this process. A teacher candidate theorizes what would be a good way to teach this subject or that module. They attempt it. They re-theorize and reflect on their experience. They think about who they are, and what they bring to the process. This is mostly a noble enterprise, containing the seeds of so much that is good in praxis.

But what if the *self*, in *self-reflection*, is operating differently? Start with the notion that this kind of self cannot separate, even as an imaginative exercise, the context in which it teaches from the part of the self that appears to be teaching. At least speculate that this cannot be done with the same certainty as the teacher candidate who conceives of her teaching in accordance with the underlying principles of individuation of Modwestcult. For this other kind of self, such convenient separability does not exist. Or perhaps the self is one so integrated with a distant ecosystem that the sterile and removed classroom cannot possibly contain it. What is left of the self for it to reflect on?

Perhaps this self has learned its utter interconnectedness with respect to a greater ecological whole. For it to separate its human aspect, and to have this reflect, would be an act not congruent with its position. Or perhaps this self understands and continuously enacts its interdependence with all living forms, including students, making “reflection” meaningless. We are trying to imagine what is reflected in a mirror that is as variegated as the experiences of all the participants simultaneously becoming self-conscious before it. This is not to suggest that the exercise of self reflection would be impossible for one who is ontologically different. We would like to claim, however, that it would be a different kind of event.

We would also like to suggest that if this very simple example holds, and it is one that is at the most basic levels of the education of prospective teachers, then we have a pedagogical problem, and not merely an ontological distinction. The problem is certainly present in respect to the education of Aboriginal teachers and students, and this goes part way to explaining why it might be that so many of both have troubles with the system of learning Modwestcult so glibly believes inclusive. But it is also a problem for the kinds of learners who inhabit our schools and are not so visibly and culturally distinct: People who really do inhabit the world differently ought to be troubled by being forced into the ontological position presupposed by Modwestcult; for this is a position that diminishes, localizes, alienates and individualizes their humanity.

A Final Note: Forging keys to an ecological world view

In the end we would claim that the consideration of diversity to be truly ecological in nature requires a shift in current educational practice to allow for ontological difference. Diversity as an ecological key is not an exact duplicate of diversity as a current educational goal and this paper is a piece of a much larger discussion with regard to what might be considered keys to an ecological world view, of which diversity is one, and the implications for education. The much smaller goal of this paper was to offer one possibility of a different ontology, that of *attentive receptivity*, on the understanding that the presence of one must necessarily cause

us to re-consider the question of diversity in education and beyond and under the presumption that one in no way is a complete demarcation of that which might exist.

Notes

- 1 I began to transcribe the words of Anishinaabe elders in poetic form in writing my dissertation. Partly this was to honour the pauses in phrasing that I found to be much more pronounced than in English. Partly this was to remember the distinction Wade Davis made between the poetry of the shaman yielding to the prose of the priest (2003, personal communication). My words appear throughout the transcriptions in square brackets.
- 2 Ricoeur (1974); Donald (2001); Ong (1991)
- 3 Descriptive names like attentive receptivity are conveniences when encountering something for the first time. An early Ojibway word for coffee went something like *Neebish-ah-beteski-bodeeg-getchi-bosaagamig*, a description of the flavour, colour, aroma, temperature of this culturally novel drink.
- 4 Modern western culture. We prefer the neologism, because it expresses in abbreviation a restless cultishness. We use both of these terms interchangeably in this text. Modwestcult is normally inhabited by *homo mobilis*, who best expresses the mode of being described herein.
- 5 For an exploration of this term and others such as *homo mobilis*, see Beeman, 2006.
- 6 Edward T. Hall's (1973) work in culture has some resonance here. The idea is that one only discovers one's own culture, or perhaps that one has a culture, through comparative means. One has to bump up against another to see that one has a culture, and to understand the difference. We are suggesting a similar ontological process.
- 7 See Author (2003). Dolgo conceives of this close interconnection with place as literally being responsible for the well being and continued existence of his family.
- 8 By livelihood labour I mean the kind of work that forms a closed loop of ecological interdependence (Author 2006) and through which a sense of place (Casey 1993) is generated.
- 9 E.g. Durrell, 1971; Thoreau, 1992; Leopold, 2001.
- 10 See Naess (2005).
- 11 Heidegger's *dwelling* probably comes closest. The project of finding an adequate term forms another project.

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