Digging at the Root of the Tree: Conceptualizing Relational Ecological Identity

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Abstract

The following is based on a qualitative study conducted with two not-for-profit organizations based in Hamilton, Ontario: A Rocha and Good Shepherd Centres. Guided by grounded theory and participatory action research (PAR) methodologies, my research examined Operation Wild, A Rocha's environmental education (EE) program for adults with disabilities. In this article, I draw on participant voices from that research to respond to and extend Mitchell Thomashow's (1996) work on ecological identity by suggesting that his conceptualization of the ecological self is theorized as a solely individualistic, anthropocentric concept. With guidance from literature by Indigenous and disability studies scholars, I outline a theory of relational ecological identity, which encourages the interdependent, intergenerational, and interactive components of ecological identity-building. The concept is explored by foregrounding the stories and perspectives that emerged from Operation Wild's participants.

Resumé

Cet article découle d'une étude qualitative menée avec la collaboration des organismes sans but lucratif A Rocha et Good Shepherd Centres de Hamilton, en Ontario. Guidée par la théorie ancrée et la recherche-action participative, cette étude portait sur Operation Wild, un programme d'éducation à l'environnement d'A Rocha destiné aux adultes ayant un handicap. Dans le cadre de cet article, l'auteur utilise le témoignage des participants à la recherche pour répondre aux travaux de Mitchell Thomashow (1996) sur l'identité écologique – et porter plus loin sa réflexion – en avançant que son concept du soi écologique est strictement anthropocentrique et individualiste. En s'inspirant des écrits de spécialistes en études autochtones et en études sur la condition des personnes handicapées, l'auteur présente une théorie de l'identité écologique relationnelle qui privilégie les composantes interdépendantes, intergénérationnelles et interactives de la construction de l'identité écologique. Le concept est exploré en mettant de l'avant les récits et points de vue des participants à Operation Wild.

Keywords: ecological identity, environmental education, participatory action research, Indigenous knowledges, disability

Mots-clés : identité écologique, éducation à l'environnement, recherche-action participative, savoir autochtone, handicap

Introduction

Marine biologist and author, Carl Safina, refers to the popular Western mode of engaging with the natural environment as "Discovery Channel mentality" (Safina, 2012, p. 163). Unless it is fast, exciting, and exotic, nature is of little interest to the modern observer. In fact, there is little observation even going on. The leader of my local Hawkwatch (for the uninitiated, see Hawkwatch International, 2018) recently said to me, "There are two types of people in the world: those who can see the bird in the tree, and those who can't." He was speaking figuratively about climate change and the ecological crisis, but there also happened to be a Red-tailed Hawk sitting directly above us. Passersby streamed by us, oblivious to this beautiful bird of prey. Those who did stop raised their phones to the sky, snapped a photo, and kept moving. How do we exist in relationship with this local raptor? By watching the BBC's *Planet Earth*? Through a voyeuristic cell phone video? Or by attending, observing, and waiting for the communion of human and nonhuman beings?

After a year spent documenting the early stages of Operation Wild—an environmental education (EE) program for adults with disabilities that was developed by A Rocha, a faith-based environmental not-for-profit—I have come to understand the roots of contemporary environmentalism differently. I have critically taken up Mitchell Thomashow's metaphor of the tree (Thomashow, 1996), the roots of which, he says, are the "environmental archetypes": Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Rachel Carson. He draws on this metaphor in his book, *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist*, to discuss the many iterations and conceptualizations of what he calls "modern environmentalism" (Thomashow, 1996, p. xvi)—a term that I find contentious. Via the tree metaphor, Thomashow provides a framework for those engaged in ecological identity work. He states that "Ecological identity refers to how people perceive themselves in relation to nature, as living and breathing beings connected to the rhythms of the earth" (Thomashow, 1996, p. xiii). In this paper, I reveal the shortcomings of an environmental ethic based solely on these ways of knowing and, in particular, on Thoreau, Muir, and Carson as foundational thinkers, though I am not the first to do so (Lowan 2011; Lowan-Trudeau, 2013). I attempt to dig at the roots of Thomashow's "Trees of Environmentalism" (Thomashow, 1996, p. 25) to explore a different approach to what guides environmentalism.

Given A Rocha's roots in the Christian faith, it is important to acknowledge the connection between foundational Western environmental thought and Judeo-Christian intellectual traditions (Evernden, 1999). A Rocha was founded in Portugal in the 1980s and, as such, emerges out of a historical legacy and intellectual tradition that has often been in tension with the Indigenous knowledges I cite in this paper (Kimmerer, 2013). With that in mind, many staff at this particular A Rocha site diligently attempt to decolonize their own thinking in order to challenge the colonial hegemony with which the Judeo-Christian tradition

has approached these lands and communities—and the human and more-than-human beings found therein. Although a more nuanced exploration of these tensions and contradictions is material for a paper all its own, suffice it to say that the interviews I engaged in with staff often explicitly or implicitly gestured toward a posture quite different from the one many of us associate with the Judeo-Christian preoccupation with human dominion over land. These insights have led me to more deeply consider Indigenous scholarship concerning human relations with land and the more-than-human world. I have done this while continuing to acknowledge the ever-present risk and colonial legacy of co-opting and assimilating Indigenous ways of knowing into Western environmental education paradigms (Agyeman, 2002; Simpson, 2002). Importantly, the program community was itself religiously and culturally diverse, so this study is by no means the analysis of a homogeneous Christian community.

Environmentalism, though identified by different names, is an ancient practice, situated on land, and guided by relational connection and responsibility to the beings that surround us—that is, to those who occupied the land long before humans (especially Settlers) did (Rasmussen & Akulukjuk, 2009). Being "connected to the rhythms of the earth" (Thomashow, 1996, p. xiii) should not be a symptom of our interactions with the work of environmental archetypes—as important as some of that work is—but should rather be, primarily, a result of a living, breathing relationship with the places we inhabit, the memories we hold, and the more-than-human futurity we imagine. By highlighting the multivocality of the community I was enmeshed with over the past year, my research aimed to "create space" for some of the quieter voices (Russell, 2005, p. 439). Drawing on that research, I suggest in this paper that Thomashow's framing of ecological identity is a concept based on a Western, individualistic understanding of connection to earth. While it is important to promote reflexive environmentalism and "know your roots," such applications for EE have been largely isolating and anthropocentric concepts that do little to radically reimagine the ways we might depend on and interdepend with the natural environment. Therefore, I outline a theory of relational ecological identity, which encourages the interdependent, intergenerational, and interactive components of ecological identity-building.

Of course, Thomashow is not the only scholar who has helped illustrate the concept of ecological identity. Kay Milton (2002) expresses the ways in which deep ecology scholars have tried to understand "what it means to identify with nature" (p. 76). Milton argues that identity can be cultivated through the ontological acknowledgement of personhood in and intersubjective experiences with "non-human others" (Milton, 2002, p. 86). This work has been more recently taken up by Teresa Lloro-Bidart (2014), who examined staff interactions with lorikeets in an aquarium setting to understand how relationships are developed in spite of (or maybe, along with) the "unpleasant aspects" (p. 402) of human–nonhuman relations. She suggests that some humans are capable of "knowing the Lorikeets as persons "like me"" (p. 403).

Charles Scott (2011) suggests that an "ontological stance of relationality" (p. 137) is fundamental to acknowledging the "complex webs" (p. 138) we are located in. Relational ecological identity, in his view, relies on "dialogical capacities" (Scott, 2011, p. 138) that allow educators to facilitate awareness, affirmation, and inclusion of the "others in our surrounding ecologies" (p. 142). In terms of our ecological "webs," John Seed understands identifying with nature as meaning we see ourselves not as "protecting the rainforest" but actually as being "part of the rainforest" (Seed, Macy, Fleming, & Naess, 2007, p. 3); this appears to be a step closer than traditional Western perspectives to Indigenous ontologies of land as described by Bang et al. (2014): "Land is, therefore we are" (p. 45). Similarly, Leroy Little Bear (2000) describes all life's organizational structure as "a 'spider web' of relations" (p. 79). But there are significant differences between Indigenous ontologies of land and those articulated by non-Indigenous deep ecology scholars. While deep ecology scholars seem to suggest that it is the recycling of atoms that generates "consciousness of our past [and future] in other forms" (Milton, 2002, p. 77), Indigenous scholars such as Dwayne Donald (2009) emphasize that, for instance, rocks themselves are "animate in that they have vitality to them, an internal hum of energy that, in a spiritual way, retells the stories of Creation" (p. 12). I draw attention to these thinkers to reveal the ways that non-Indigenous theories of ecological identity have largely overlooked the kinds of relationality present in Indigenous knowledges. What this has done is build theory that tries to subvert Western concepts of self (see Milton, 2002, p. 88 for an example), while entertaining an awareness of the nonhuman other founded on paradigms of Western science rather than on the kinship of creation (Donald, 2009; Little Bear, 2000).

Extending this line of inquiry to include scholars of disability studies, it is noteworthy that a sense of self predicated on kinship and relationality (Donald, 2009; Kimmerer, 2013) mirrors the way that the eco-ability movement seeks to reject individualism and foster interdependence (Nocella II, 2017; Nocella II et al., 2012). Nature and the disabled community are both at risk of commoditization, that is, "the privileging of commodities and property over relationships and mutuality" (Smith & Manno, 2012, p. 62). This is reminiscent of Lloro-Bidart's (2014) argument that the aquarium space limits the human–nonhuman relationship as aquarium visitors are constructed as "neoliberal consumers" (p. 405), rendering them incapable of authentic mutuality. The authentic relationship is one that acknowledges citizenship. I conceptualize citizenship as composed not only of the socio-political but also of the ecological dimensions of belonging and recognition within a community. Thus, we are both citizens of land and citizens with land; such a perspective offers a more inclusive, generative way of thinking than does a perspective that simply recognizes human-state citizenship. In recognizing this broader understanding of citizenship, I am influenced by Indigenous scholars such as Donald (2009) who reminds Settler environmentalists that Indigenous peoples "recognize the land as relative and

citizen" (ibid.). Notably, disability studies scholarship has considered the precarious nature of citizenship for those identified as having disabilities (Arnold, 2004; Parekh; 2014; Prince, 2014). It is indeed possible for some to experience formal citizenship status while still experiencing societal exclusion and its associated vulnerabilities (Yuval-Davis, 2011; see also Parekh, 2014).

Ecopedagogy scholars such as Greg William Misiaszek (2016) also ask us to consider "humans in the future as fellow citizens" (p. 601). By widening our definition of citizenship, we might also see earth as "the most oppressed citizen" (Misiaszek, 2016, p. 597). It is my contention that the—where needed, reclaimed—citizenship and intersubjectivity between the disabled and the nonhuman community help to correct the "map" that Thomashow was trying to draw with his "trees of environmentalism." It is time that the mainstream environmental education movement recognized the voices of disabled communities who have learned much about kinship, fellow citizens, and the mutuality found beyond the reach of neoliberal and colonial orientations.

Context

Operation Wild is an EE program developed by A Rocha for adults with disabilities. In the organization's own words, Operation Wild is committed to "providing hands-on environmental education and accessible nature experiences for adults … [facing] barriers or [with] disabilities, building inclusive and engaged communities, and encouraging others to support a healthy and sustainable environment" (A Rocha Ontario, 2019). The programs are hosted either at the Cedar Haven Eco-Centre, just outside the City of Hamilton, Ontario, or as urban-based programs within the city. My research was conducted using a participatory action research methodological framework alongside participants and support staff from a partner organization, Good Shepherd Centres of Hamilton, as well as A Rocha staff. The challenge was to develop a way to engage a variety of people with a range of abilities in meaningful environmental education that connects people to place, generates social capital, and provides meaningful access to the outdoors in an inclusive and transformative way.

Participatory research for adults with disabilities is an understudied landscape among EE scholars. Even interrogations of ableism within environmental studies are infrequent and relatively recent (Brodin, 2009; Kafer, 2017; Magnusson, 2006; Nocella II, 2017; Ray & Sibara, 2017). The aims of existing scholarship include examining the social-ecological benefits for diverse and often marginalized urban communities (Krasny & Tidball, 2015; Kudryavtsev, Krasny, & Stedman, 2012), enhanced inclusion through outdoor education (Brodin, 2009), and the promotion of lifelong and enhanced learning through outdoor experiences (Szczytko, Carrier, & Stevenson, 2018). Operation Wild programming is, at least in part, motivated by an understanding of the social model of disability, which locates disability as the fault of restrictive social, political, and

economic systems rather than as bodily impairment (Burghardt, 2018; Oliver, 2009; Taylor, 1999). In the case of nature-based programs, researchers have observed that who does or does not have access has historically been of "peripheral importance" (Brookes, 2002, p. 415). As the various groups involved with Operation Wild evidenced, it is important to recognize that the categorization of "adults with disabilities" or "persons facing 'barriers' to EE" certainly does not refer to a homogeneous group (Brodin, 2009). Though individuals from Good Shepherd Centres of Hamilton encounter restrictive access to privileged economic, social, and political spaces, it was not a prerequisite that they identify as having a disability or as being disabled.

I initially sought to critically examine EE practices, particularly citizen science and civic ecology, aimed at increasing social capital and place attachment for Operation Wild participants. I grounded my work in the following question: What stories emerge from places used in EE programming for adults with disabilities? How is involvement in citizen science and civic ecology experienced in this context? To what extent do adults from the Good Shepherd community feel they have agency in the planning and facilitation of Operation Wild? My aim was to imagine how more inclusive forms of EE might better inform the development of future projects, and thus inspire more progressive approaches to and understanding of EE programming and pedagogy. What emerged as a result of my methods of inquiry was a new way to understand ecological identity and its relationship to environmentalism, which I will explain below.

Methodological Considerations

The communities participating in Operation Wild come from a variety of assisted-living organizations operating in the City of Hamilton. The participants in this participatory action research (PAR) study were members of the Housing with On-site, Mobile and Engagement Services (HOMES) community, which is made up of individuals living in independent housing supported by Good Shepherd Centres of Hamilton (Good Shepherd Centres, 2014). I conducted interviews with the following three groups: members of A Rocha staff at the Cedar Haven Eco-Centre (the not-for-profit organization); community support staff from Good Shepherd Hamilton (the partner organization); and the adult residents of the Good Shepherd HOMES community who are participants in A Rocha's Operation Wild program. I refer to these three groups together as the "program community." An important aspect of Operation Wild is the gratitude circle that occurs at the end of each program, wherein all members of the program community relate something that they are grateful for. Near the outset of my involvement, this led me to consider what it might look like to also gather to address our hopes for the program. This would be in keeping with the "shift from a focus on 'getting information to people' to create awareness, to 'getting people together' with information so that they can deliberate problems and

endeavour to bring about change" (O'Donoghue, 2014, p. 11). Ultimately, our focus group was inspired by Penelope, a program participant, who said, "I think that's the thing ... where do you go from here? Do you get a group of concerned citizens together and you sit down and have a jam session?" The intent was to strengthen the Operation Wild program in a manner developed by and with program participants and stakeholders.

While PAR is what ultimately guided my research goals, grounded theory allowed me to employ an "intermeshing" of returning to the field, analyzing data, and reframing research questions in order to best serve the needs of the participants and provide the most accurate picture of the data available (Glaser & Strauss, 2009, p. 73). Though general themes were determined in advance—insofar as the study commenced by examining what I termed "the stories that emerge from place"—many of the central research questions and codes emerged throughout the study. For example, although the organizations involved in the program emphasized goals such as social capital and place attachment, a grounded theory methodology allowed me to continuously revisit my interview data and field notes to assess and explore the presence of other emergent themes. This iterative process quickly revealed that the theme of ecological identity was most apparent, while place attachment, in particular, and what I identified as "collective becomings" were evident, but less explicitly relevant to the experiences of participants. This gave me the opportunity to restructure the kinds of prompts I might use in my interviews; ultimately, the interviews with the program community guided the subsequent design of the focus group, which occurred toward the end of the study.

To assess each participant's desires for program development, I adopted the method of the go-along interview (Carpiano, 2009; Kusenbach, 2003), with which I could conduct a semi-structured interview. This method allowed participants to guide the interview process as they saw fit, while letting their "experience-in-place" (Manzo, 2005, p. 74) influence the shape of the interviews as well. In emphasizing a participatory process, I did my best to allow the interviewee to guide the interview process, acknowledging that the program community itself may "have the best questions as well as the best answers, and may perceive a different, more relevant scope, to the area of inquiry" (Rishbeth, 2013, p. 103). I conducted go-along interviews with all members of the program community. Although go-alongs are designed to be conducted with as little guidance from the interviewer as possible (Kusenbach, 2003), I did compile a few prompts based on field observations and early conversations—adding to the list as I conducted interviews. The following are the prompts as they existed at the end of this cyclical, iterative process of dialogue:

- What stands out/What is significant for you from Operation Wild?
- What learning and/or place do you connect with the most at Operation Wild?
- What do you know about the place where you live? What are some of your most special memories of being outdoors/in nature?

- How do you connect to nature/the earth?
- Do you feel like you have a voice in what happens here at Cedar Haven?
- What would you change?

Operation Wild is a program intended to enhance participants' learning from, and connection to, place. Thus, in considering a meaningful, participant-centred research design, I aspired to utilize a methodology that might further the aims of the program itself. Recognizing that conversation, dialogue, and storytelling practices allow communities of people to cultivate meaningful connections to places (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012; Stokowski, 2002; Williams, 2013), my methods were designed to scaffold the stated aims of the program I was researching. Moreover, storytelling and go-along interview methods emphasize the value of prolonged informal contact and casual interaction with research participants—for over half a year—as a way to build trust and rapport with the community (Rishbeth, 2013; see also Lesseliers, Hove, & Vandevelde, 2009, p. 416). As a result, I spent eight months involved with Operation Wild programming, using my background as a teacher and naturalist to help facilitate programs. Despite my privileged identity and positionality as a researcher, I was able to avoid being an intruder by developing a rapport with the Operation Wild community and by being present as an insider and collaborator. As Claire Rishbeth (2013) reveals, located storytelling and participatory approaches have been shown to aid in carrying out cross-cultural research and in addressing power relations in qualitative research. These approaches thus foster "more inclusive engagement [for] many people" (p. 109). The stories collected informed the ongoing, cyclical research process in order to better represent the full story of Operation Wild and result in authentic feedback for the continued growth of this kind of inclusive, accessible EE programming.

Findings and Discussion

In the following, I explore my ongoing dialogue with the Operation Wild program community by emphasizing the relational dimensions of their environmental thinking. Though many did not explicitly refer to Indigenous intellectual traditions, I argue that by disrupting dominant paradigms of Western environmentalism, the program community was largely pointing toward a relational and collective sense of kinship relations, which is inherent in Indigenous understandings of land and community. This necessarily challenges the way in which ecological identity has been conceptualized by Thomashow and others, creating openings for critique and opportunities to reframe what it means to become an environmentalist. I do this by discussing the way we might listen to the more-than-human communities and by emphasizing the reciprocal nature of these relationships. Next, I establish the importance of the collective, intergenerational, and interdependent aspects of relational ecological identity. In the

Collective Becomings section, I briefly point to the way in which critical disability studies scholarship orients us toward a posture of mutuality, while challenging Western notions of singularity and autonomy. And finally, I discuss the importance of naming as a process of kinship, while remaining wary of colonial efforts to name and claim.

Exploring Relational Ecological Identity

Thomashow's efforts to understand and support the formation of the ecological self highly influenced my emerging understanding of the perspectives of program community members as I engaged in dialogue with them. Thomashow's concept of ecological identity was useful in the analysis of the Operation Wild program community insofar as the members therein demonstrated the perception of self as connected to the earth. Not only that, Thomashow's work also provided me with questions designed to reveal the kind of thinking *behind* this perception of selfhood and identity. Indeed, there are four questions that Thomashow (1996) suggests are "at the heart" (p. xvii) of EE:

> What do I know about the place where I live? Where do things come from? How do I connect to the earth? What is my purpose as a human being? (p. xvii)

Increasingly during the interview process, these questions guided my reading and coding practices. I found myself continually drawn back to them in my analysis and in the subsequent exchanges I had with program participants. That said, I also found that being "connected to the rhythms of the earth" took on other forms perhaps overlooked in Thomashow's discussion. The concept of ecological identity appears to be drawn solely from the personal (read: human) experience of the natural world, such as childhood memories, perceptions of wilderness, and reactions to the ecological crisis (Thomashow, 1996, p. xvi). David Greenwood (Gruenewald, 2003) reveals the ecocentric dimension of this identity-building: the recognition that "places themselves have something to say" and thus, he emphasizes that "learn[ing] to listen (and otherwise perceive)" (p. 624) the more-than-human world is central to the ecological self. There were several instances that affirmed the ecocentric and relational dimensions of the ecological identity work that I saw happening around me. For example, when a focus group was interrupted by house sparrows, the following exchange occurred:

> Penelope: Yeah the birds - they want part of it…
> All: [Laughter and nodding]
> Andrew: Yeah let's bring them in here - get their opinion.

It might be easy to pass off such interspecies exchanges as mere humour, which was certainly a characteristic of the program community, but these are cases where the nonhuman world had to first be *noticed*. In this particular case,

the birds were not immediately visible and thus they had to be heard—or "otherwise perceive[d]" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 624). What does it take to get interrupted by the voices of birds?

Yi-Fu Tuan (1990) discusses the vulnerability and awe we experience in nature as a result of our auditory sense. During a focus group, Phoebe, a Good Shepherd HOMES tenant offered comments that revealed the impact of leaving one auditory landscape for another:

> It was nice being out away from the city. Away from the sirens and the police car and everything else, you know. It's nice to get out in nature, you know, and stuff like that. I really enjoy [being] out and doing things.

With regard to increasing the accessibility of Operation Wild programming, Penelope also emphasized auditory engagement: "And if you're visually impaired and you come ... how could you make that person see what you're actually describing, without them actually seeing it?"

One might argue that Tuan's (1990) concept of topophilia—"the affective bond between people and place or setting" (p. 4)—is sufficient to describe the experiences of Operation Wild participants, but that would fail to take into account the ecological worldview wherein someone can experience the ecosystem as "part of oneself" (Thomashow, 1996, p. 12). Perhaps Operation Wild participant Paul said it best when he revealed:

> For me, all I can say is, it feels like that's where my roots are as a human being. As a living being. And, I can sum it all up as I don't call it 'Cedar Haven' farm, I call it 'Cedar Heaven' farm—that's how I feel when I'm there, well, and most outdoor places too.

He added:

> What you folks are doing at the farm is really interesting, because that's what we all did naturally 2-3-4 hundred years ago … on our little plots, on our little farmlands, we were connected to the land … now we're trying to figure out how to do that again, but we're kind of moving more the other way generally.

Penelope discussed the way that she spends time crossing different landscapes, using old rail tracks in and near the city. Even though she has struggled with how land has been developed and impacted by human settlement, walking the rail tracks is a way that she has felt connected to the earth:

> So for me, it's about seeing that track that goes between two pieces of land, which is pretty amazing—like, I mean, stuff has to be transported somehow, so I get it, but, yeah so for me I think, part of the—land has always been part of … who I am. I think that's important.

The engagement with the earth expressed here situates the self in terms of where things come from and how one experiences profound moments of

connection. What differentiates ecological identity from place attachment in these comments is the focus on the general, ongoing connection to the planet we inhabit, rather than on the specific particularity found in examples of place attachment. The "roots" Paul described are embedded in various "outdoor places," while Penelope described the way that land and the paths across it are a part of who she is.

In Thomashow's (1996) "Trees of Environmentalism" (p. 25), the leaves represent various approaches to environmental thinking, such as ecofeminism and deep ecology. Branches of the tree constitute major disputes in the conceptual framing of environmental work, such as the preservation–conservation debate. I offer these as examples of how the tree serves as a metaphor, but I would like to focus on the roots. For, it is in the roots that my argument diverges most dramatically from Thomashow's. Thoreau, Muir, and Carson make up the roots of Thomashow's tree. And while I appreciate the contributions of these three, I question the long-standing tradition of Western environmentalists paying disproportionate attention to Western environmentalism (Bargout, 2019). Moreover, these archetypal figures have undoubtedly generated thinking rooted in Euro-American cultural elitism and the belief that Western science, which caused the ecological crisis, holds the only solution to the problem (Lowan, 2011). The first—and most glaring—problem with this is the way it silences the work of relational care that the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island have provided since time immemorial. And second, there is a sense in which this makes invisible the land itself. To reiterate Paul's words: "it feels like [the outdoors is] where my roots are as a human being." Thus, environmentalism is not some theoretical disposition that arises in a vacuum, void of influence from the living, breathing bodies around us; it most certainly is guided by the pedagogical work of land (Simpson, 2014); it is always awake to the breathing body of earth itself (Abram, 2011). Inspired by the work of Martin Buber, Scott (2011) posits that relational ecological identity emerges out of dialogue with the members of our neighbouring ecologies. Environmentalism is not merely, as Rachel Carson would have it—as important as her work is—a response to violence *against* earth. Rather, it is a visceral reaction to the love of and relationship *with* the land. It is time we sought out the actual roots; it is time we got digging.

Thomashow's understanding of the ecological self emerges as a result of the work of psychologist Richard Borden. In the paper, "Ecology and Identity," Borden (1986) discusses the ways in which working in the field of ecology influences one's sense of self in terms of our membership within a broader ecological community. A crucial distinction must be made here. Borden's—and thus, Thomashow's—understanding of ecological identity focuses centrally on the human capacity to think, exhibit concern, and act (Borden, 1986; Thomashow; 1996). This emphasis on taking action establishes that the domain of agency and care rests entirely in the hands of the human actor (perhaps exclusively, able-bodied) in ecological systems. Ecological *relationship*, on the other hand,

develops on the premise that the fabric of both the local and the global system is at least as caring, thoughtful, and full of action as "we" (the human species) are. Undertaking relational ecological identity work is a step toward understanding ourselves as members (Seed et al., 2007) in a much broader community of caring, life-sustaining relationships—one that Indigenous thinkers have demonstrated is a network of relations that humans are simply "*part of*" (Lowan, 2009, p. 49, emphasis original).

Collective Becomings

Members of the Operation Wild program community demonstrated an ecological identity that was collectively produced; it emerged from an embodied connection to land. This evokes David Abram's (1997) insistence that we experience "a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy *with* the living land that sustains us" (p. 69, emphasis added). This is not merely an individual experience, but rather an understanding of collective decision making and responsibility for all (Little Bear, 2000). Eve Tuck has referred to this as "co-generosity" (Tuck et al., 2018). Indeed, the relational ecological identity experienced by Operation Wild participants is motivated by an empathy for land, inspired by the perceptual and ecological dimensions of place (as discussed in Gruenewald, 2003, pp. 623 and 633). For several participants, such a relational identity was motivated by their childhood experiences on farms and in rural areas, thus legitimizing Tuan's (1990) claim that farmers' physical relationships to and dependence on land result in land functioning to preserve memory and "sustain hope" (p. 97). Poppy revealed long-standing memories of caring for the land through bodily sacrifice:

> Poppy: And my grandfather asked me to dig for the plants and I remember I had a big big - how do you call, you know, the—when it's filled with the liquid?
> Sarah: Blister?
> Poppy: Blister! Oh god, so so bad. Because I was doing so much! hahaha, it took a while to heal…
> Me: Ooh yeah
> Sarah: Mmm
> Me: So gardening has been in your life a long time?
> Poppy: Yeah it has been—and my balcony is always fully flowers…

The concept of relationship can also be present in the desire for the development of ecological identity in other communities and even in later generations. Herein lies another shortcoming of Thomashow's individualistic concept of ecological identity. The Operation Wild participants demonstrate that the heightening of someone's relational ecological identity is predicated on the desire to bring the earth into relationship with *others* as well. It is not only a question of how I connect to the earth, but how we collectively connect and develop our understanding together. This is echoed in Scott's discussion of relational ecological identity, but he seems to suggest that this pedagogical work is unidirectional;

it is imparted only from teacher to student (Scott, 2011). Though the notion of intergenerational care is expressed in feminist posthumanism (Lloro-Bidart & Sidwell, 2019), ecopedagogy theory (Misiaszek, 2016), and Indigenous knowledges (Kimmerer, 2013; Kovach, 2010; Lowan, 2009; Restoule, Gruner, & Metatawabin, 2013), it has yet to be considered at the intersection of disability and ecological identity in an EE context. Relational ecological identity extends beyond the boundary of the individual; the relational community "re-members" itself (see Krasny & Tidball, 2015, p. 19 for a discussion on the re-membering of community life amidst urban decline). This was clearly demonstrated in Penelope's desire to generate a summer camp or a kind of educational training ground for the next generation:

> I think [a summer camp would] be great to have ... for kids to be able to come out ... that could be really cool for me I think—again, we're looking down the road, but that would be really cool. 'Cause that's where this starts. That's where the environment stuff starts—with those kids—it doesn't start with me. It starts with them.

Wendell Berry's advice for sustaining local communities, which is echoed in ecojustice literature (e.g., Bowers, 2001) reads, "the community knows and remembers itself by the association of old and young" (Berry, 1996, p. 413). Interestingly, the program community did not define attempts at intergenerationality as occurring solely within a family unit, as has been the case in earlier EE literature (Lloro-Bidart & Sidwell, 2019; Payne, 2010).

Relational ecological identity was displayed in novel ways, demonstrated below in Penelope's desire to speak on behalf of participants with different levels of mobility:

> Phoebe brought something up to me, and I thought of Phoebe … how do we make Cedar Haven accessible to walkers and wheelchairs without kind of, disturbing the land? …'cause you can only go so many places in your walker and your wheelchair so you don't really get the same ... equal opportunity ... so how do we make it accessible ... without disturbing that environment? ... So it [the major questions for our group/learning community] can go: what's missing and ... what prevents you from connecting? 'Cause that can be a big issue, right? Especially on a rainy day or a muddy day—like, you know, if you have a walker or wheelchair, it's really hard to manoeuvre—so I'm not sure how you could do that and still keep it environmentally friendly.

Penelope not only took up issues faced by other participants (Phoebe) who were more reluctant to share their experience, but also suggested new research questions that need to be asked. This reveals the participatory nature of the research to the extent that the questions themselves came from the participants and the research would, ideally, lead to direct benefits for them as well. Reminiscent of the interlacing of feminist, postmodernist, and critical disability theory provided by Margrit Shildrick (2015), Penelope's line of questioning also suggests the complex "co-corporeality" (p. 16) of bodies and the dependencies

on and "new becomings with others" (p. 24) inherent in and offered by the experience of disability. Inclusive EE programs must address not only bodies as entangled (Ingold, 2008) with others, but the body as an "entwined" (Shildrick, 2015, p. 16) assemblage as well. Thus, EE programming needs to consider that the participants themselves, once invited into the learning community, have essential perspectives on how programs are designed and how barriers are revealed; they not only reveal an unbounded, embodied experience of earth, but they also work to tackle the Western obsession with the individualized, autonomous self (Shildrick, 2015). These emerge out of, or are highlighted by, the social-ecological dimensions of connecting to place—described here as relational ecological identity—which shares concerns for the body *with* others: the land and all fellow participants.

Kinship and Naming

One of the other ways that relational ecological identity became evident in this study was in the desire of participants to name aspects of the landscape. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney (1980) terms this the process of attending to "personal drama" or a "communal situation" (p. 148). Certain participants of Operation Wild saw the lands of Cedar Haven as part of their story and thus wanted it to carry names and associations that might help tell that story. Insofar as participants had a relationship and a desire to commune with specific places, they wanted these places to carry names (Gruchow, 1995). Penelope offered the following comparison during the focus group:

> I think [naming the pond] makes it special from another pond. Like, it's different - it gives it some identity. 'Cause, 'The Pond' just doesn't cut it with me. It's like, if you named Arty nothing - like generic— 'the Horse'—no, it's not the Horse, the horse has a name … so the pond is also a living thing, so it should also have a name. The pond is a living part of—yeah, so it should have a name.

The process of naming also has important implications for discussions of ecological identity. Frank Vanclay asserts that "[p]laces exist when we start naming them" (Vanclay, Higgins, & Blackshaw, 2008, p. 4). This is not to negate the importance of understanding the colonial context of the place where you live and recognizing that more work needs to be done to disrupt colonial processes of naming that have disconnected places from their history (Bradley, 2015). Indeed, naming and language are essential to Indigenous land education practices (Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014). To use a geographically relevant example, lands known as the Haldimand Tract, which bracket the Grand River, were recognized as Haudenosaunee territory in a treaty with the British Crown in 1784. However, the treaty was subsequently, in large part, ignored by the Settler government and the land stolen (Stevenson, 2018). The Haldimand Tract is in close proximity to Cedar Haven Eco-Centre; this offers an opportunity for

the program community to engage with a significant example of local Settler colonialism and treaty violation. One program participant, Penelope, declared her determination to learn about the complex history of the land that Cedar Haven operates on:

> I'd love to learn the history—as far back with this piece of land and what did it look like then compared to now. And what was it—what'd they use it for then compared to now. Like, what was it then, like, did it have cattle, did it have … what was it? … And how does that affect how the land is today?

This sentiment echoes Tuan's (1979) claim that understanding the past is an important prerequisite to one's love of place. Evidently it can also help Settler communities engage in the work of decolonization. Indigenous scholar Dolores Calderon (2014) emphasizes the way in which place-based pedagogy can serve to "disappear" (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 7) past and present acts of Settler colonialism that remove Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and ways of being from land. Sandra Styres (2018) similarly encourages a process of "journeying" (p. 29)—that is, finding the stories and knowledges embedded in the land and acknowledging the rupturing caused by colonial encounters within which Settlers and Indigenous people alike are still implicated (Little Bear, 2000).

The kinship inherent in relational ecological identity recognizes individual identities in nonhumans and invites them into these constellations of relations through a collective process of recognition and naming. This kinship may also, where necessary, call into question colonial processes of naming in order to reconnect place and story. Rather than being a colonizing force, the emphasis on naming was a way for Operation Wild participants to engage in the concept of landfullness, which involves embracing the idea that "relating to the land is a part of who we are" (Baker, 2007, p. 249).

Conclusion

Everyone has the potential to experience and exhibit relational ecological identity. The participants in Operation Wild prove that relational ecological identity is not limited to those who are empowered by a Western, neoliberal political economy. Indeed, ecological identity does not emerge as a result of having had access to summer camps, outdoor education, eco-tourism, or other sites of privilege—though it can, perhaps, be prompted by critical educators or participants at any of these sites. That said, it is a matter of a deep human need, long forgotten by some, to sense; to listen and to hear; to mourn and celebrate the passing of time measured not in the ticking hands of a clock but rather by the glistening dew drops, the staccato notes of sparrows, and the steady cadence of perennial plants. Relational ecological identity is the lesson we all must learn if we are to inhabit places in a good way. This identity is one that seeks to

undermine colonialism, which Donald (2009) understands to be a "project of dividing" (p. 4) and a "preoccupation with individual imagination and identity" (p. 8). Vanessa Andreotti (2016) paraphrases this as "a denial of relationship and ... an atrophy of the senses" (p. 81). Given the recent scholarship on Indigenous cultural appropriation at summer camps (Clarke, 2018) and my own comments concerning A Rocha's Christian roots and attempts to decolonize, this presents a significant area for future inquiry within EE scholarship. Further research is needed on the ways in which Christian or other religiously affiliated organizations are engaging with and being informed by Indigenous peoples and intellectual traditions.

The key findings of this paper ground themselves in the study of the Operation Wild program to provide the basis for a critique of the way ecological identity has previously been theorized as merely the solitary experience of a human self connecting to nature. I suggest a new theory of relational ecological identity as one that is necessarily interactive and interdependent with one's human community as well as with the more-than-human world. This has interesting implications for the concept of ecological identity within EE insofar as it moves programs toward a deeper empathy for future generations, new understandings of citizenship, and the recognition of interdependence with diverse (human and nonhuman) communities. Perhaps noticing "the bird in the tree" is not merely a symptom of the ecological self, but a prerequisite to these ethical and relational commitments. It is these relationships—these connections to land and fellow beings—that are, in fact, at the root of the tree; they are at the root of our environmentalism.

Notes

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