

Treading the path of the heart

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Abstract

Through a dialogue with two spirit-animal helpers, each aspects of self, the author reflects on the ways movement and displacement continuously shape her relationship to her Indigeneity and to her identity as a student and arts-based researcher. This piece engages storytelling, choreography, received knowledge and a/r/tography to touch on notions of *nomadism* and *becoming* from an Indigenous perspective.

Keywords: *movement; nomadism; Indigenous methodology; received knowledge*

One night, as I was beginning to fall asleep, Bird, the Blue-capped finch came tapping on the door between my subconscious and my waking awareness. Flo had come along, peering at me with those sea-green puma eyes. She is my spirit animal, and Bird, who loves to flutter and jest resembles the child within. Because they are part of me, the separation between “I” and “she” is thin. They had come to suggest that we work together, Bird, Flo and I, because they had heard about the difficulties I'd been having following a positivistic model for communicating qualitative research ideas through writing. Bird had the idea of presenting my ideas through a dialogue, reflecting the centrality of relationships in Indigenous research methodologies. She reminded me that listening deeply or intently to the voices of scholar, teacher and artist-relatives, and responding to them through creative and respectful dialogue was the way I best engaged with these ideas. “Why not engage our own ideas this way through this paper?” Bird said. As an animal of expansive migration ranges, Flo took this idea beyond the bounds of my previous inquiries, suggesting that I needed to shape-shift in order to embody all aspects of

myself to access my own voice. She wanted me to inquire from her own spirit animal form, but also to explore the embodied experiences of the ancestors that made me. She suggested that there are two ways to achieve this: through movement and performance, an intuitive way for me to embody animals, plants, elements and people, and through juxtaposition through storytelling. Orner, Miller and Ellsworth (1996) describe juxtaposition as,

"an aesthetic device in postmodern art and a rhetorical device in postmodern theory and writing, (that) provokes viewers and readers to make associations across categorical, discursive, historical, and stylistic boundaries – associations never intended or sanctioned by the interest that construct and require such boundaries." (pp. 73-74)

So in order to allow the audience to experience "fluid, shifting relations" between the character(s) of Self, Flo and Bird in my story, I purposely switch between "I", "we", "us", "Our Human", "Flo" and "Bird". I choose to use juxtaposition, and deliberately leave space for readers to make their own connections between the ideas presented in this paper (Miller and Ellsworth, 1996, p. 74). In Storywork (Archibald, 2008), a methodology which allows the audience to make meaning of stories that are multilayered and interwoven with reference points grounded in Indigenous culture, the intention is for the audience to make meaning of the stories through their own personal experience. As a Polynesian dancer steeped in a tradition of storytelling through movement and song, I take up Storywork as a mode of inquiry through which I perform story through prose, poetry, choreography and filmic composing. Shape-shifting acts as the trickster aspect of the paper by illustrating the unpredictable nature of reality in Indigenous stories (Vizenor in Kovach, 2008) and is my own performative device for accessing and juxtaposing moods, tones and meaning to layer into my storytelling.

This is a story of my journey towards grasping the multiple ways of understanding, "movement" through an alternative perspective of Indigeneity that accounts for the displacement of peoples and their disconnect from ancestral lands (Dei, 2011, p. 22) where I perform "resistance that is creative rather than merely responsive" (Ritskes, 2011, p. 419). It's a story that is inextricably tied to my experience in higher education because the difficult knowledge (Pitt and Britzman, 2006) I encountered within it led to a holistic path of connection with community, with ceremony, with introspection, and enhanced clarity in my inquiry around movement and Indigeneity. Thus, Bird and Flo set off on this nomadic journey of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) that we call the path of the heart.

Bird swoops over my head and lands on my shoulder with a chirp.

Flo: I told Our Human to shape-shift for this paper because that *difficult knowledge* resurfaced, where I feel conflicted and the flow of my writing seems stunted, making it even more challenging to respond adequately to the demands placed on graduate students like ourselves. We shape-shift to describe a narrative that in some ways derives from the "unresolved psychical

conflicts" that stem from hardships experienced during our doctoral studies because it provides us with alternative symbols to understand and negotiate them through (Pitt and Britzman, 2006, 381-385).

Bird: Like *transference*, but intentional. It's our way to make sense of our scholarship despite the ongoing, unresolved challenges in the background, the ones that make us anxious when we walk through the building of our department... When we fluidly switch between I, Our Human, us, Bird and Flo it really alleviates some of the pressure dumped on our young scholar identity.

Flo: Let's introduce ourselves! We honor our relatives and identify our heritage, which is common protocol across many Pacific and North-American Indigenous nations. It's an important way to reaffirm relationships and connections to others while honoring them. Identifying ourselves in relation to place is a little more complicated, but we'll get to that later. I'm the daughter of Diane Kinslow of African-American, Cherokee and Choctaw descent, and Joseph Kuzma of Slavic descent, also the hanai daughter of Hosea Koani of Kanaka Maoli descent.

From the heart, I would also like to acknowledge the Musqueam people for being the most kind and gracious hosts on their un-ceded territory. Many elders and scholars have had a significant impact on my learning on Coast Salish territory and continue to shape my path of the heart: Late Elder Rose Point, Dr. Jo-ann Archibald, Dr. Lee Brown, Elder Larry Grant, Dr. Peter Cole, Dr. Pat O'Reilly, Dr. Rita Irwin, Dr. Candace Galla, Ms. Marta Madrid and Mr. Stefan Honisch to name a few.

My name is Flo and this pastel blue, fluttery finch is my companion. No, no! She's not like the Twitter bird, that bird isn't real! Bird is a real, playful, curious and sweet Blue Capped Finch with whom I converse and share ideas freely, knowing that she won't judge me. She knows that while I'm a graceful and incisive leader, I secretly feel awkward about leading. Bird is our child within. We don't take her form, but she always flies over and lands on my back in time to bring light to my serious side. Together, we are merely aspects of one.

Bird: A bird and a puma, isn't that funny?!

Flo: Yes, we are! Flo is short for Florida Panther. Florida is where our ancestors' traditional territory now lies... in part. It was much larger than that before the U.S. government took it all from our people and displaced them through the Trail of Tears between 1831 and 1838. Many people did not survive this tragedy. Others persevered on the lands where they were held as political prisoners in Oklahoma. Some were able to escape as a group and survive in separate communities. But many others were scattered in the four directions, separated from their people, surviving by whatever means were available, including being integrated into non-Indigenous communities, oftentimes forcibly. Although we do not know exactly by which circumstances, we know that this is how our grandparents survived. So while our extended Indigenous relatives live

in Oklahoma, and are proud of what they have achieved on their reservations, our line neither has physical or emotional attachments to those places.

All of our ancestors have experienced displacement in the recent past: Choctaw & Cherokee: Trail of Tears, African-American: Middle Passage, Ukrainian: Russian Civil War. The interesting thing in our lineage is that every generation that came after those that experienced massively, soul-wounding tragedies like the Trail of Tears, seems to have never stopped moving since... Every generation of women before me has made a drastic, life-changing move at least once in their lifetime. Because my great-grandmother's parents had to flee from life threatening conditions, she was raised thousands of miles away. Socio-economic conditions also forced my grandmother to move thousands of miles away to make a living. Finally, my mother just abandoned the United States altogether to cross the Atlantic and live in France for twenty years. Here I am in Canada, becoming aware of how important a role movement has had in the very survival of the generations of women and men before me. Movement as relocation is so much a part of our reality that the first impulse we have when responding to crisis is to consider whether or not it is time to move again!

Bird: movement!

movement-travel

movement-protest

movement-migrate

movement-packyourthingswegottago!

movement-displaced

movement-compose

movement-palpitate

movement-interpret

Flo: Bird is playing with the different ways to think about movement, from the urgency of having to remove your body from harm as one might experience on a personal scale; to the forced displacement of entire nations; to different manifestations of political interventions; to the embodied musings of artists.

I encourage Our Human to engage her body in all of these ways, ways that an agile and powerful panther like myself cannot engage in! I tell her that this set of inherited knowings, impulses, memories and experiences form an *assemblage*, as Deleuze & Guattari (1980) say, because all of these elements gather into a single context, within the body (pp. 3-4). Within this *assemblage* is a process of change, or of *becoming*, and engaging with single aspects of this *assemblage* ushers this transformation (p. 272).

Our Human, Bird and I are *nomads*, because we all have a way of life that exists outside of the organizational *State* (p. 380), which exists to control our movements and partition our territories, to create structures from which to harness and control our bodies. Our way of life is

characterized by movement across territories which are defined in contrast to boundaries imposed by the State (which for us is simultaneously the government and the academic institution): Bird's migratory flights, Flo's perching in high places and long-distance territorial surveyings, Our Human inquiring from her body and through our spiritual animal hearts. These examples, which are characterized by movement and change, by existing beyond systems of organization, by moving within the *intermezzo* are *nomadic ways of being*.

Bird: And there is not one ancestor of ours who has not been that kind of *nomad*.

Flo: Performing through dance is one of those things, because it allows Our Human to shape-shift in very rapid and fluid ways. The dance traditions she learned from, like the Tahitian and Ghanaian ones are also storytelling traditions. So when she performs, she embodies whatever character she is playing. For example, she could move like a frail grandmother, prance about and swing her tresses from side to side like a young girl, or even embody a male warrior from the Ewe nation, who is about to go to battle.

Bird: She's done that one recently, it was scary!

Flo: It's a very *in-the-present* practice, the state of being from which she can connect to ancestral identities, or even places and events in time, whether they occurred within the span of a moment, or at a geological pace. Kumu Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahale describes how dancers in Hālau o Kekuhi gain a holistic understanding of time and space by learning and recounting a creation story through their bodies and hand gestures. While performing, dancers actually re-live the moment and the experience described in the poetic text and story performed. This way of re-connecting to a time that has passed is achieved through what has remained constant: the space/place of Hawaii. This is what she describes as the *timelessness* that her lineage's ancient hula chants and movements can relate about the spiritual and geological attributes of lava (2012). We could think of these kinds of performance practices as rhizomatic for favoring a nomadic system of growth that resists chronology and organization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p. 25), the way ginger spreads latterly, transversely, upward or downward, making all sorts of connections along the way. But Bird sees it differently from atop that Cedar branch...

Bird: Indeed, from my perspective there are *radicals*, *radicants* and *radidons*... He, he! I know I'm silly! But really, some plants don't actually have roots! Have you ever heard of an epiphyte? It's a plant that could be resting on a boulder, a hollow log or another live plant, and that is not parasitic... and it doesn't have roots (Webster, 1976, p. 764). My favorite epiphytic plants are Tillandsias, or air plants. I care for about twenty of them, myself. They live all bunched up together, in a little community. Interestingly, those little communities are also called *assemblages*! The incredible thing about them is that they are able to make their own food from water and light, so they don't need a living energy or organic carbon source. They flower and

seed like other plants, but they are not anchored in land, so if their assemblage gets dispersed for some reason, and they get spread out in all four directions, not only can they survive, but they can generate new assemblages of their own (WCSP, 2013, p. 1753). They are the true nomads of the plant world!

When I think of my identity as a person descended from at least three diaspora communities, I remember the etymology of the Greek word *diaspeirein* which means to disperse from *dia*: across, and *spora*: sowing, seed, and *speirein*: to sow. Then I imagine the movement of individual nomadic plants. Spreading without either the stability or the nourishment that the land provides, but nevertheless living in relation with the rest of creation, receiving nourishment directly from the sun and ubiquitous elements around them, part of a community, releasing important nutrients and medicines, while also possessing the ability to live through, for and with the in-between states of being without a community-base.

Flo: We like this metaphor to talk about alternative, more inclusive definitions of Indigeneity that account for nomadic identities like ours, that are part of a diaspora that no longer have a physical connection to our ancestral land. Like Tillandsias that nourish themselves directly from the sun, so can we think of our relationship with our ancestors, our communities and our land as having not only a physical connection but also a spiritual one, symbolized by the invisible and almost ethereal relationship the Tillandsia has with the sun and the world around it. One cannot see it actually planted into the earth, but yet that connection is there, and it's acting within it. If it weren't it wouldn't actually survive. We see this as a metaphor for received knowledge: spiritual knowledge that integrates intuition, experience and cultural customs (Ritskes, 2011, p. 417). Indigenous people can learn from dreams, visions and channeled insights from wherever they happen to be in the world. These are the gifts, messages and teachings that are offered to us in "non-verbal, non-cerebral pathways" (McIvor, 2010, p. 143).

Flo looks away from the astonishing mountainous landscape she's been surveying from atop a sturdy tree branch and blinks lovingly at Bird resting on the perch right beside her. The brown tip of her tail can be seen swaying through the leaves.

Flo (adjusting herself on the branch): Let's talk about the heartfelt path of *becoming* that the *assemblage* we have been describing has led us on. And we will lead into depicting an embodied creation that we have channeled in the process of walking together.

We're going to tell you two separate stories that may seem unrelated, but the three of us can assure you that they are. The first is a vision that sets the stage for the path of the heart. It's a vision we had before even coming to study on Coast Salish territory. Just like this paper, it too begins with the door between the conscious and the subconscious, except that this had nothing to do with falling asleep. This was a vision that involved a mountainous landscape quite like the one Bird and I are looking at from the top of this tree, but we are much closer to them now.

I ∞ Our Human looked quite a bit taller than she does, and her hair was darker in color. She was wearing a dress made of dark brown suede, and she walked on very flat land towards the mountains. But with every single step that she made, myriads of heart-sized rainbows would appear and fade again. Some rainbows were shaped like arches in a half moon, and others were complete circles and the colors were truly vibrant and beautiful. Our Human seemed to accept the presence of the rainbows, as companions on her journey. This vision was rather startling at first because it seems so completely unrelated to what was happening at the time. Upon reflection, I interpreted the vision as an indication that the path ahead was good and clear, and would result in much growth. It is here that I began making the implicit connections between my experiences and the spiritual, emotional, and embodied currents within it, thus identifying it as a path of heart for the first time. To honor and remember this gift, I drew the image of myself with the rainbows. In this drawing, I am not walking but dancing in fancy dance attire, with a shawl appliquéd with bold, rainbow stripes and fringes. Since I began studying on Coast Salish territory, this drawing remains a reference to strive for my goals artfully and joyfully. When sunlight beams through the faceted crystal sphere hanging over my bedroom window, and beautiful, shifting rainbows cover the walls and floor, my attention is drawn back into the drawing and the vision, like a silent reminder of what I need to do.

In Reo Tahiti, the Tahitian language, the word 'a'au, describes the center of emotions and intuition, and is located in the gut, just like the word na'au in Hawaiian (Meyer, 2003, 59) this stands in contrast to the western paradigm where the heart is the center of emotions. In these two Polynesian cultures, listening to one's a'au is preferable and wiser than listening to mind chatter, whereas "listening to your heart" may be considered frivolous in a western context. For me, listening to my 'a'au is a point of entry into reflection. Through listening deeply to dreams and received knowledge, I am able to gather meaning and accept these as gifts of guidance towards navigating my path. In my deep listening around the experience of visioning, creating and reflecting on my drawing, I understand that I can rely on my own grace and creativity as a dancer for resilience. Hence, listening to my 'a'au | na'au | intuition, this "present-state awareness of all that is possible", this "non-judgement via discernment" (Meyer, 2003, 60) is a way to acknowledge the spiritual as an entranceway to a path – the path of the heart.

Bird: You see, we shape-shifted again! Through dreams, choreography, writing, learning and inquiring – engaging in nomadic movement, we are constantly becoming and exploring the in-between.

Flo (*gracefully descending from the tree*): Exactly, dear Bird. The third story is by no means the last, since we are constantly moving and in a process of becoming. The three stories happened at about a year and a half's interval from each other, but throughout this higher education experience the connections between art, research and wholistic Indigenous knowledge in educational research are becoming more obvious.

Bird flutters off of her perch and delicately lands on Flo's shoulder as she finishes her last feline stretch and begins to walk away.

II ∞ Our final story doesn't tell like one... It must be performed on film. It too came as received knowledge, this time channeled. It's a dance piece, featuring Ukrainian Hopak dance moves, Ghanaian Ewe Atsiagbekor moves, and First Nations Powwow Fancy Dance moves. I keep moves from the respective traditions together in the choreography, transitioning to a set of moves from the next dance, for the next four bars. This is not a fusion piece, it's a piece showcasing each dance separately, but the editing of the film is such that it shows a costume change each time the dance changes: four bars in Ewe clothing, four in fancy shawl, four in Ukrainian attire, and four in my contemporary clothes. Sixteen counts with variations, and a couple of visual surprises along the way. The background doesn't change, neither does the place I am seen dancing in. The film doesn't exist in digital form yet. It is mapped out in my mind, living there, in motion, flashing before my eyes often and more persistently to urge me to go through with creating it. It is based on our discussion about nomadism, and the movement of Indigenous peoples from our ancestral lineage. It is dance, it is story, it is a film, but it is also becoming. We juxtapose the meanings of both movement as caused by displacement and movement as artistic dance practice. We play with the notion of movement across time and space through removing any traveling movements (dance moves where you utilize as much space on stage as possible, as opposed to staying in one place) from the choreography, to accentuate the notion that all of these Indigenous identities reside with and within the dancer. This assemblage is an inquiry created to deepen our own understandings through the lenses of my experiences of Indigeneity and displacement, and to generate possibilities for interesting conversations within and beyond my communities of practice.

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