



Biophilia: A View of Human-Nature in an Era of Contradictions

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ABSTRACT

The natural world and humanity through an interrelated series of appropriations are in critical condition, perhaps even approaching extinction and human beings are increasingly disconnected from the natural environment due to advancement of biotechnologies that engender new forms of existence (Braidotti, 2013). In order to respond to the profound transformation of this era, this inquiry draws on Wilson's (1984) notion of biophilia, which suggests there is an inherent connection between humans and the natural environment. The intention is to deepen understanding of, relationality through the lens of educational experience or currere (Pinar, 1975) thereby cultivating possibilities for a curriculum of ecological consciousness. This paper focuses on the inter-relationship of humans and nature and argues for a reconceptualization of the ways we live and educate. Through a narration of lived experiences the potential of re-humanizing curricula through encounters of our integrated bodies in nature is evoked.

Keywords: biophilia, ecophenomenology, natural world, rehumanizing curriculum, ecology

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INTRODUCTION

We are living in an era marked by terrorism, war, genocide, and technological advancements that have led to modernization, which has subsequently resulted in unintended catastrophes of global warming (Spectra, 2014). Commercialization of planet earth in all its forms and shapes is prevalent, whereby the commodification of exotic animals is the third largest illegal trade trailing only drugs and arms. Humanistic studies have been downgraded to a level beyond "soft" science and are used as a finishing school for the leisurely classes, indicating the seriousness of the endangered field of humanity (Braidotti, 2013). In a time that "Pragmatism's progressive formulation of social engineering has been eclipsed, as we are painfully aware, by political conservatism, intent on side-stepping culture and history by focusing on "learning technologies" such as the computer" (Pinar, 2006, p. 2). In an era that "If only we place computers in every classroom, if only school children stare at screens (rather than at teachers, evidently) they will "learn," will become "competitive" in the "new millennium" (p.2). The kind of oversight has led to dualities and has separated human from their natural environment for far too long. In this paper we argue for a reconceptualization of the ways that humans view themselves in the technological era. The recent collapse of the separation between the notions such as culture and nature Braidotti (2013) has put an emphasis on the value of relationality and connectedness between human and nature that has been lost in the contemporary time. A kind of relationality that must be re-presented, re-viewed, and re-valued.

BACKGROUND

In recent times, researchers have manipulated the connectivity that human has with the natural world to examine nature's impact on the well-being of individuals and noticed since a sense of meaningfulness is involved when engaging with nature, the eudaimonic aspects of well-being may come to focus (Howell, Dopko, Passmore, & Burro, 2011). Researchers have also demonstrated that immersion in either simulated, or actual nature exposure have boosted vitality, physical, and mental energy and sensing enthusiasm and aliveness (Ryan et al., 2010). Although this research objectifies the relation between humans and natural world, what is being considered here goes beyond vitality and further focuses on benefits of relationality as the "I-Thou" relationship, an emphasis that creates a more intimate environmental affiliation that helps the individual to feel part of the greater whole (Knapp, 2005). The suggestion for action here is threefold. First, the current kinship view with nature is neither satisfactory, nor is it our only alternative in providing ethics for our relationship with nature (Brown & Toadvine, 2003) hence further provocation is warranted. Second, drawing attention to the phenomenon of relationality and the inherent connection that human beings have with the natural world is a way to create a new mutually beneficial subjectivity, which may lead to the enactment of a currere (Pinar, 1975) promoting relationality, ethics, love for life, and care. Third, inspiring attunement to integrated (body, mind, spirit, heart) human experiences with the natural world deepens our connectiveness.

Attention to humans as integrated beings is enacted through reflections on direct experiences that are encountered through the senses. We argue for an epistemology in education that acknowledges humans as integrated whole beings rejecting dualistic view of mind and body and the relegation of spirit and heart (emotion). Understanding, a work performed through our minds housed in our brains, (as a part of the body) is, both, intellectual and emotional and always *embodied*, which is biological and neurological, but inherent, and that should settle the argument of body and mind in favour of the body (Pinar, in press). Education should realize the importance of body and embraces embodied knowing that are situated within place using imagination as a precursor to deepen connections with life and the earth through human recognition with plants and animals known as Deep Ecology (Kentel & Karrow, 2007). In a similar vein we argue for education that destabilizes the binaries of conceptual and pre-conceptual understandings, and requires moves toward reviving a way of being that is more ontologically, culturally, and ecologically sensitive (Kentel & Karrow, 2007). Such an education is a study of biography and embodied life experiences, which refines the complex epistemological processes that leads to the creation and recreation of the disciplines and promotes equilibrium between the view of “I think therefore I am” and the phenomenological view of “I am therefore I think” (Pinar, 1975). It is further embedded in embodied experiences in natural settings through a connection with place, in which people become aware of their environment at a deeper level and begin to ask questions about their whereabouts and their surroundings. This transpires through the exploration of immediate and distant interactions and relationships that one might have with outdoor embodied experiences (Baker, 2005) in addition to self-knowing that follows from an individual’s reconstruction of what is around and within her/him (Pinar, in press).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Wilson (1984) there is an inherent connection that humans feel towards living things. He claims that this bond is genetic, a result of evolution, and it enables a great survivability. Wilson makes a distinct connection between human well-being and survivability, and human affiliation to the natural world which he calls *biophilia*. Considering that human history began hundreds of thousands, or millions of years ago, and that for the majority of this history people lived as hunters and gatherers, completely involved with other organisms, human connections to other living forms should not, indeed, appear as a mystery (Wilson). While Wilson coined the term *biophilia* this phenomenon has been noted in the literature of ancient civilizations such as in Persian culture. For example, Persian philosophers and poets Khayyam and Ferdowsi, have highlighted the existence of this connection throughout their poetry. Ferdowsi shows his empathy for an ant in one of his famous poems: *Don't hassle the seed bearing ant ... Since it is alive and its happy about being alive*.

Despite the groundwork in *biophilia* by Wilson and others the concept has been scantily theorized. In some instances the notion of *biophilia* has been over-romanticized lacking intellectual rigour. In response to this quandary Blenkinsop delineates what he calls *topophilia* (love of place):

In summary, *topophilia* is a sensory involvement with and a desire relation to the assemblage of human, socio-natural, and

wild entities and their inter(intra) relatedness in a particular loosely bounded locale. It is a state of permanent becoming, a devotion to pursuing, encountering, and understanding the relations that which coalesce to make a felt sense of place without having a pre-existing concept of place. It is a commitment to seeking the relations that make us feel that we belong within the world of places, yet it acknowledges that we are always haunted by the placelessness of the human condition. (Phillips, 2014)

Blenkinsop’s work speaks to the complexity of the connections of all living things and underscores the need for ideas to be deeply theorized with rich description through a critical lens. While Wilson (1984) suggests that humans have an instinctive desire to affiliate with other forms of life, technological saturation in an industrial society circumscribes the occasions where this yearning is realized. Hence when we use the term *biophilia* (love of life) we refer not only to the instinctive bond of humans and other living systems but also the action towards making these connections and deepening our understanding of them.

METHODOLOGY

The method we use to consider the notion of *biophilia* is a merger *ecophenomenology* (Abram, 1996) and *currere* (Pinar, 1975). *Autobiographical writing* is used to demarcate our phenomenological stance. Through the redescription of our lived experiences and the lens of *currere* we unearth our understandings of *biophilia*.

“*Ecophenomenology* is the pursuit of the relationalities of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures” (Wood, 2001, p. 80). Wood observes that although, one might suppose what *phenomenology* points to is a level of causality, one presupposed by the operative causality of daily phenomena, another level is to describe it through evolutionary naturalism (e.g. “how living creatures have acquired functionally integrated and environmentally responsive bodies ... and perhaps explain how it is that multiple, complex, individual, living beings developed in the first place [p. 79]). He further questions, “Does such a case of deep causality make *phenomenology* redundant, or this actually facilitate an engagement between *phenomenology* and naturalism?” Focusing on two rich dimensions of such involvement, a middle ground of relationality (a space controlled neither by a simple causality nor intentionality), in which *phenomenology* can recover from the trauma of its birth in opposition of naturalism (Wood) is the theoretical/methodological basis for this inquiry.

The *currere* (Pinar, 1975) framework is used to deepen our understanding of ourselves and our educational experiences in relation to *biophilia*. “Curriculum conceived as a verb – *currere* - privileges the concept of the individual in curriculum studies” (Pinar, in press, p. 190). “The verb form is preferable because it emphasizes the lived rather than the planned curriculum, although the two are often intertwined. The verb emphasizes action, process, and experience, in contrast to the noun that can convey completion” (Pinar, in press, p. 189). The method of *currere*, consisting of four steps: regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetic, is drawn upon to understand our embodied experiences and their relation to our educational interest in *biophilia*. Further

delineation of *currere* is provided in the following section in the analysis of our autobiographical writing.

FINDINGS

“Memory in the posthuman nomadic mode is the active reinvention of a self that is joyfully discontinuous, as opposed to beings mournfully consistent” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 167).

Our experiences in an integral way contribute to our understanding of ourselves and other living things. Here we draw on our experiences in order to understand more deeply the notion of biophilia. The following narrative accounts and the subsequent analysis describe our ecophenomenological engagement with *currere*.

When I was six years old, my family moved to north of Iran beside the Caspian Sea for six months due to the nature of my dad's business. The very first day that we arrived there, we all went for a swim at the beach. I am hanging onto my dad's back while he is swimming in the Caspian Sea. I love this free floating in the water especially when my dad is with me. I feel the coolness of the water over my skin and how it washes the heat of the sun from my body. I can taste the saltiness of the water in my mouth every time that I take a gulp of water accidentally. However, I don't mind that as my dad tells me: “Its ok, you'll be fine”. I can see the blue colour of the sea that stretches as far as I can see. When finally, my dad brings me back to the shores, I can feel the sands tickling my feet and how they move under my feet making me fall in the water. Every time that I fall, I look at my father and he encourages me to get up again by nodding gently. I can hear the birds before I can see them. I play with my brothers in the shallow waters until my little body is exhausted. I do not want this to stop, but I am very hungry and ready to eat without any argument when we all are called for dinner (which was pre-packed and served by my mom out of my dad car's – a turquoise blue 57 Chevy – trunk. While eating, I asked my dad if we could do this everyday. When he said yes, I asked (wishing that it would be): Daddy is six months a very long time? (Bigloo)

The *regressive* process involves going to the past to deepen understanding of it as it was and ways it hangs over the present. I noticed the complexity of this statement and wonder “In which present is one absorbed” (p. 6)? Is it the literal present of sitting at the desk and writing this paper, or the abstract present that I am dwelling in (Pinar, 1975)? Observes Pinar, the extent one dwells in the conceptual and subjective present “is the extent to which one dwells in the past” (p. 6). This biographic past is usually ignored, but not absent. He noted that, “the biographic past exists presently, complexly contributive to the biographic present” (Pinar, p. 7). He indicates that in order to discover where and when one is, one must locate the past, which is taken-for-granted and to understand the present one must regress to the past and in this regression “one detaches from one's acculturated character” (p. 7). In the process of regression, I was able to avoid making complete identification with my self and I was able to observe how much I enjoyed my interactions with the natural world through my senses. Through body memory those sensations are transferred to the present time.

Now many, many years later I am a resident of Vancouver, Canada. I am an adult who has raised a family and who has had many roles in life. I spend a typical weekend day hiking up Grouse Mountain (one of the most spectacular sceneries in my view in the world) in North Vancouver, Canada. On a gorgeous sunny day, I have taken BCMC trail, which is a little longer, a little quieter, and a little friendlier on my body, as a choice for my hike. As soon as I start the hike, I am transported and placed in a different world. I don't remember when this transition exactly happened. If I can explain it, I would say that it is like the transition time from the state of awokenness into sleep (the exact moment when one falls asleep that one rarely remembers). The big difference is that the one is conscious of her environment, but totally in a different way. It is like getting into a space, where the distance between oneself and many other selves is reduced to zero, so one literally feels as “one”, or united with its environment. It is like entering a different world, but strangely being familiar with it, being close to it, and feeling safe in it. After a short while of listening to my breath and the sound of earth under my footsteps, I am reminded that I am awake in the world by feeling the itchiness that my sweat drops have created when rolling down on my skin and rolling down from my head onto my face. After a short slow down to scratch my head and my body I continue physically and it does not take long to go back to the same state of unity cognitively. I am sensing the rays of sunshine on my back and smelling them through my nose before I can see them. It is like I can't separate myself from this natural environment feeling that I am linked to the whole eco-system. There is a mystic sense that makes me feel very insignificant and small when I find myself walking up this silent giant mountain's back. I remember being six years old again and hanging on my dad's neck when I am going up the mountain and holding on the tree stumps poking out of the ground. It is both serenity and longevity of the place that makes me feel young and safe like when I swam on the back of my dad in Caspian Sea. I feel very small. Hiking up I am looking at these tall trees that kindly and quietly are watching my every step, and it is like every once in a while, they help me to climb up by nodding their branches and their leaves like when my dad nodded and told me that it was ok. It seems that they are conversing with me in silence, and everything is in a harmonious state and I climb up effortlessly. This is a Phenomenon that I can only link to my own self, my past, and my experiential learning, my *currere*, my live life. I am exhausted, invigorated, and victorious all at the same time when I get to the top of the mountain; I am also very hungry, so, again, I do not challenge a suggestion for having lunch on the top before heading down the mountain. (Bigloo)

It seems that there is no reason, but there is a motive as Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) eloquently observes. As Pinar (1975) intimates, etymologically *progressive* “derives from *pro* meaning ‘before and *gradi* meaning ‘to step, go” (p. 11). In the progressive stage through understanding what was before we can think about the future. In thinking about the future and the past as encountered in the present, our thoughts are quietly woven allowing us to envisage possibilities. Our childhood experiences connect to the present and our interests in the future. What lies beneath encounters of biophila is relationality.

The relationality in the aforementioned narrative is between learning or coming to know (embodiment, life experiences), connection to something bigger and stronger (a father), and connection to the whole (the natural world). Here we imagine a future that is attuned to those connections and looks upon ways of educating with, through and about living things.

As a youngster I was taught to swim by being thrown into a lake. While some might oppose this approach in that moment I needed to determine whether the water would be my friend or the source of my demise. My first response was to gasp and vigorously paddle to little avail. Moments after the initial shock and distress I began to calm and my movements began to flow as my body floated just below the surface. It was not until later that I learned the many ways to propel through the water but it was at that time that I befriended it. Since then I have noted my deep affiliation with natural waters. Wherever I travel, whatever the climate, I pause if even for a moment to immerse my foot the local body of water. It is this way that I feel connected to the world I am in. (Kentel)

Being drawn to the water is being drawn to an ecophilosophy. Our intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and sensual interests and needs are intertwined. It is in this state of *being* that we can see relationality within oneself and self and others. Following on with currere's (Pinar, 1975) *analytical* step we wonder if in the ways we exist in the here and now inundated with technological saturation, environmental negligence, and high stakes schooling, connections with living systems are being fostered. Changes in the world cause us to reflect on the past nostalgically longing to be in a time where playing and being outdoors was a regular occurrence. Is it possible to reclaim these ways of being? Will those that follow us do so?

"My mind is identified as a part of me. (Descartes is thus corrected.) ... Mind in its place, I conceptualize the present situation. I am placed together. Synthesis" (Pinar, 1975, p. 13)

Synthetical is a derivative of "Syn" which means together + "tithenai" meaning to place. We are focusing on ourselves and our experiences in order to understand the biophilia phenomenon. A deeper understanding of our chosen fields and our evolving autobiographies lead to moving into a higher level of being (Pinar, 1975). In order to envision a transformed educational environment we must not only look to the connection of humans with living systems but also the human condition itself. Often, particularly in education, we are trapped in our minds as if minds even exist without bodies. "As the body is a concrete whole, so what occurs within and through the body can become a discernible whole, integrated in its meaningfulness" (Pinar, p. 13). And what about spirit and heart or the spiritual and emotional aspects of ourselves? We our integrated selves and integrated with other selves. This inter/intra connection is one way we can begin to theorize differently about biophilia and stimulate discourse about ways we might evoke emergent curricula attuned to all living and non-living things.

SUMMATION

Encountering the process of an ecophenomenological currere enables us to realize ways our biographical past is related to our present and future, ways body-mind-spirit-heart are connected, and ways our personal storied lives are connected to our educational endeavours. We understand how the experiences and feelings we had as children have stimulated our brains and enabled our integrated bodies to respond in the present time. We are both connected to and desire to engage with other living things. Biophilia. Our task as educators is to nurture this innate desire in ourselves as well as others.

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