

**Making Contact:  
A Neuro Eco Ed Art Inquiry Into Collective Healing  
Using the culture of bees  
as a lens to look at home**

by  
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# Abstract

In this paper, I discussed ‘making contact’ as a way of connecting and transforming the perception of our individual and collective sense of ‘place’. The premise was that, given the severity of climate change, and the complexity of collective, cultural change, we need a methodology and praxis that shifts the hierarchical societal schema to one that sees our fellow earthlings (animals, insects, plants) as our allies. I used arts-based methods of research and arts-based environmental education, combined with mindfulness meditation, to investigate becoming nature-based allies. Through this process, I hoped I could help myself and others to see the land as a ‘place’ filled with a multitude of varied, intelligent life forms, as opposed to a ‘space’ full of resources to use and discard. I did four community arts projects which used different mediums to investigate how we can belong, to ourselves and on the earth. I did this using bees as a metaphor for making our home on earth. Whether individually or communally, bees take on the responsibility of pollinating plants, thus ensuring that many beings may eat, live, and reproduce. These projects included an arts-based, environmental education lesson about bees; an environmental advocacy mockumentary about a mythical super bee in Maloca Garden; a series of outdoor, meditation and mask-making workshops; and a sculptural and sound installation of a human-sized beehive. I reflected on those four projects, and linked my reflections to the work of many diverse scholars who discussed themes of decolonization, imagination, community arts, education, meditation, storytelling and shamanism, in an attempt to show how these projects related to my idea of ‘making contact’. The lessons that I learned were many and varied, including the immense need for quiet, meditative, arts-based spaces which help folks connect to their imagination, sense of wonder, and hope for the future of our planet.

# Foreword

In this paper, I hope to reflect on the intersection of art, the environment, educational outreach, social justice, meditative perception, and what it means to ‘make contact’. I wanted to combine my myriad interests into an interdisciplinary exploration of making home on the land and within ourselves, and how the shift in perception from space to place could be beneficial.

Writing this major paper on my art-based research projects has been a big struggle for me, as I have a traumatic brain injury. This makes organizing my thoughts into a comprehensible written reflection difficult in deed. During this process, my own perception of myself, and what I was capable of shifted tremendously. I suffered a few bouts of neural fatigue from trying to do too much, and I had to take many breaks along the way. Making contact with myself and with my places in nature kept me on track.

In my plan of study, I had wanted to look at our disconnection and alienation from nature, and how performative ritual, art, and mindful perception situated in the environment might address and heal this growing rift. I was interested in how our perceptions change when we make contact. It was important for me to consider participatory art-making as the foundation of my research into this idea of making contact, where thinking and creating were intricately connected. One concept that I kept in the back of my mind was whether perception can be altered by the act of creating art collectively.

My three were components were Community and Environmental Arts; Popular and Environmental Education; and Healing Perception and the Environment. I had hoped to pursue the study of this through art, theatre, storytelling and mindful perception. I had wanted to see if, by creating new cultural myths through popular educational outreach at community festivals, it would help people connect to the land, to each other and to themselves. I had also wanted to study how social/environmental justice fits within that framework.

My major project sits at the intersection of community and environmentally-based arts, arts-based, environmental education and healing, and meditative perception. Where my major project diverged and evolved from my plan of study was by being inspired by the culture of bees, and wanting to be an ally for them in my human culture. To my perspective, bees are an example of a species and a culture actively creating ‘place’ and a concept of home. I used this bee metaphor to engage elementary school kids, fellow MES students, and adult community members in a meditation and arts-based pedagogy to connect communally and individually.

While I had originally wanted to investigate community-based public space theatre companies, and produce my own version of a community festival, my focus changed as I journeyed through the MES experience. I did organize three attempts at community arts gatherings, with two of them being successful. (One of them got rained out.) However, as my studies progressed, I became more intrigued by looking through this metaphorical bee lens to investigate culture, and I wanted to focus my cultural production and research to reflect that growing interest. In my research and studies, I learned that engaging in art, performance, film and storytelling does help people to shift their perceptions. I learned that meditative spaces are greatly needed and they help to connect people to their sense of place.

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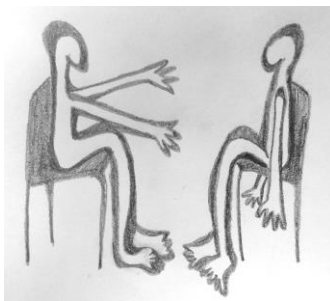


# INTRO

In this paper, you will be delighted and astonished! Well, perhaps. But you will read about my personal journey into the heart of my home and feelings of ‘place’. I used art and meditation as tools on this journey. I call this journey “Making Contact”, and it is a way to hold mindful awareness with someone else. That someone could be a person, an animal, a plant or a place. This journey involved making contact with bees and myself. This journey helped me to develop ‘making contact’ as a personal methodology and praxis. It entailed making a film, teaching environmental art lessons, facilitating mask-making workshops, and building a giant, human-sized beehive where folks could meditate. I hoped I could learn from bees what it meant to hold space for my feelings about place.

# Making Contact

I take healing classes down in New York State where we “make contact”. That involves meditation, connecting with the environment, learning our personal psychology and cultivating an awareness of personal energy fields. (Imagine girl guides on camping trips sharing reiki after analyzing their dreams.) While Oxford defines making contact as: “1. the act or state of touching; a touching or meeting, as of two things or people”. Karl, my healing class teacher, describes making contact as inhabiting a mindful presence with another. In class, we focus on extending our electromagnetic fields, or ‘auras’, out to someone else’s field, and sitting together with that connection. The premise is that we need to make contact with ourselves, with each other, or with the land, for healing to begin to take place. This is hard work, as there are so many things distracting or blocking us from embodying mindful presence.



We purposefully do our healing work outside surrounded by flora and fauna. For us, there can be no internal healing without a healing of the external. And the outside world will never be healthy if we are ill on the inside. The creatures that inhabit the outside also influence the process of our internal healing. If someone seeking healing sees a brilliantly

coloured cardinal fly by, or selects the presence of an old oak tree, or lies down by the curve in the creek, those all have an archetypal meaning in that person's healing. They need to make contact with that bird, tree or creek, to understand and heal themselves.

I use the term 'making contact' to mean overcoming alienation from the human and non-human environment by bringing awareness to the cracks in the perception of who we are and where we belong. It starts with becoming mindful of our breath. Making contact then extends out from our mindful perception of ourselves to noticing how we connect to, and perceive our relationship with the earth, and everything that lives on the earth. Making contact could mean using a social and environmental justice framework to stage community theatre in public spaces. It could mean having mindful, celebratory, public space festivals that connect people to themselves, to their landscape, and to their community. In my arts-based research, making contact meant working within the healing framework of mindfulness to study if, and how, perception of place could change with making art outside as the catalyst. I did this through the (compound eye) lens of bees. As I developed these projects, making contact became the road that I walked on to research and to learn more. In that way, making contact with bees, humans, nature and myself became my praxis as well.

## Bees

I wanted to look at the idea of the bee as a symbol for the relationship between humans and nature. I wanted to see how bees relate to their environment and share that inspiration with my fellow humans. We can take cues from bees to learn how to make our home here

on earth. Perhaps bees could help us heal our ability to make contact with the earth as a living being. I wanted to share my imagination of how bees make a space a 'place' -- somewhere to call home -- through community art projects. I thought this would provide a meditative space for contemplation of the idea of place and home. To my perspective, bees are magical; and everything that comes from their culture, from food to flowers, from honey, to wax and royal jelly, is magical.

### **Magic, Shamanism**

David Abram (1996), a magician, anthropologist, and philosopher, shares in *The Spell of the Sensuous* his opinion that magic, when applied to the natural world, is "the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives—from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself—is an *experiencing* form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own" (pp.9-10). From my perspective, what he is saying is that to know that all life is conscious, and is consciously perceiving me, as I perceive it, is to enter the realm of magic. It is in this expanded state of awareness where I am able to perceive the reciprocity of nature, and open up to non-human states of consciousness.

After spending time with shamans in Bali and Nepal, Abram speculated that the shaman's role is as an "intermediary between human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth" (p.10).

He goes on to say that the responsibility of the healer, or the person in charge of ‘making contact’ with the intelligence of nature for the community, was primarily to ensure that there was an energetic balance between humans and their surrounding environment (p.10.) This was done by sitting and listening, and communicating with the non-human life of nature.

Abram thinks that our Western culture lost our reciprocity with nature with the rise of a “supernatural heaven of Christian belief” (p.10). “When the animate powers that surround us are suddenly construed as having less significance than ourselves, when the generative earth is abruptly defined as a determinate object devoid of its own sensations and feelings, then the sense of a wild and multiplicitous otherness (in relation to which human existence has always oriented itself) must migrate, either into a supersensory heaven beyond the natural world, or else into the human skull itself—the only allowable refuge, in this world, for what is ineffable and unfathomable” (p.10). This split in the human psyche where we now have a world based on hierarchy and domination, allows for human animals to be at the top of the pyramid and non-human animals, and all other life, to suffer at the bottom.

### **Perception of Hierarchy**

Social psychologist Melanie Joy (2009) examines the psychological foundations of this hierarchical perception in *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs and Wear Cows*. “[V]ariations in our perceptions are due to our schema. A schema is a psychological framework that shapes--and is shaped by--our beliefs, ideas, perceptions and experiences, and it automatically organizes and interprets incoming information” (p.14). Joy reasons that we

western humans have a schema that slots life forms into various categories according to how humans can use, exploit or commodify them (pp.17-18).

Carolyn Merchant (1992) points out in *Radical Ecology* that this underlying schema which leads to the commodification of nature and its creatures is related to the egocentric ethic that has been with humanity since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the dawn of the era of industry and science. This egocentric ethic is “grounded in the self” (p.64) and the thinking that what is good for the individual is good for society at large. This ethic allowed individuals, and later corporations, to approach natural resources (including animals and insects) as something to be used, favouring competition and rivalry between people.

By using a perceptual framework that reinforces competitive disconnection, called "psychic numbing", people keep themselves unaware of the great environmental challenges we are facing globally. "Psychic numbing is a psychological process by which we disconnect, mentally and emotionally, from our experience; we ‘numb’ ourselves” (Joy, 2009, p.18-19).

However, we don't need to continue using our collective intelligence to numb ourselves psychically, as Susan Griffin (1996) shows in "A Collaborative Intelligence": "If one would create an egalitarian society, nature must be restored as the common ground of existence. Yet this common ground cannot be reclaimed without the transformation of an unjust social order" (p.46).

## Transformation of Perception through Education

I believe in order for this shift in societal schema to occur, we must turn to a non-hierarchical approach to education. In this way, the perception of domination over others can be shifted on all levels. Karen Warren (2000) shares in *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, that this consensus-based, social justice, popular education approach to environmental education "provides a distinctive framework for both reconceiving feminism and for developing an environmental ethic which takes seriously connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature" (p.325). When the hierarchy of domination and submission is transformed, an equal relationship where each can learn and share skills can emerge. I have used art and meditation as a way to expose interested folk to shifting perspectives on the environment.

## Decolonization

To my perspective, we need to examine and deconstruct our Eurocentric world view to begin the process of shifting perspective, environmental education and of becoming nature allies. As an Irish immigrant settler on these indigenous lands, I need to look at how I perpetuate this worldview of domination and submission. But I also need to actively look at the language I use, how power is shared in the activities I facilitate, and how I can support indigenous rights.

In "The decolonization of Aboriginal education", Indigenous scholar, Marie Battiste (2008) examines practical applications of decolonization in Canadian schools and looks at the root of this 'universal' Eurocentric perspective. "Often, this claim of universality is

a cloak for the projection of Eurocentric beliefs onto other cultures that possess different worldviews, ‘inner logic’, or localized knowledge” (p.184). Battiste reasons that this universality is another way to describe cultural domination and cognitive imperialism, “which establishes a dominant group’s knowledge, experience, culture, and language as the universal norm. Dominators or colonizers reinforce their culture and values by bringing the oppressed and the colonized under their expectations and norms” (p. 184).

At the beginning of her chapter, Battiste quotes Donald Macedo, to show that decolonization is a multi-step process. “It is only through the decolonization of our minds, if not our hearts, that we can begin to develop the necessary political clarity to reject the enslavement of colonial discourse that creates false dichotomy between Western and Indigenous knowledge” (Battiste, 2008, p. 168; Macedo, 1999) To my perspective, this is where I have started with my understanding of decolonizing education, and process.

However, I have learned that decolonization is not just a metaphor.

In “Decolonization is not a metaphor”, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang share that decolonization is not just for our hearts and minds. It is also for indigenous rights and social justice. They say that “making decolonization a metaphor means: ‘The too-easy adoption of decolonizing discourse’” (p.3). It could merely be nice words, without any concrete action.



Decolonization also means to take action, including “repatriating land to sovereign Native tribes and nations, abolition of slavery in its contemporary forms, and the dismantling of the imperial metropole” (p.31). This definition of decolonization means to actively dismantle the parent state of the colony; to dismantle the perception of the universality of those Eurocentric beliefs.

Sarah Flicker and her colleagues have worked with indigenous youth to dismantle Eurocentric universality, and to actively apply decolonization to their arts-based methods of approaching health research. In "Because we have really unique art", Flicker, et al (2014) note that participants have the opportunity to “participate equally in the decision-making process; learn and share new skills; create counter narratives that make visible previously hidden or silenced aspects of their identity or experience; and build on or reclaim their cultural identities or cultural practices” (p. 19).

With these guidelines in mind, decolonization can become practical as well as theoretical by helping to create environments that are more equal and empowering. Arts-based research especially can help with this decolonization process as art is not only a vehicle for conveying a message (product), but also a transformative medium for engaging with power structures, cultural values, and identity development (process)” (p. 28).

### **My personal transformation of perception**

As a longtime activist, I am also interested in engaging with power structures. As an artist, I am interested investigating our cultural values. And as a meditation practitioner, I

am constantly intrigued by identity development. I am also interested in helping to shift our communal perspectives on the environment because I had profound shift in my own perspective. A few years ago, I suffered a traumatic brain injury, after being rear ended by an SUV while riding my bike in Toronto. My perception of reality changed. How I understood myself, who I was and where I belonged changed as well. The more I thought about our dire, global, environmental situation, the more I felt that a huge shift in communal perspective was needed to help heal our relationship with the earth.

### **Transformation of collective perception and being an ally**

Wiccan environmental activist and therapist, Starhawk (2004), also contemplates shamanism and talks about David Abram in her book, *The Earth Path*. She shares that Abram suggests that traditional shamans were able to shift communal perspectives by not working with ‘supernatural forces’, but by communicating with the different intelligences of the natural world: “the powers and awareness of the insects, birds, animals, and other nonhuman beings around us. Insects know things that we don't, and perceive things that we can't. Once we develop friends and allies in the insect world, we can experiment with augmenting our awareness” (Starhawk, p.87).

Starhawk goes on to explore the idea of humans being allies to plants and animals. This allyship would expand our awareness, in an attempt to make magic and change our consciousness at will. She rightly points out that "insects are a challenge for many people” (p.86), and as a result, in every day life, insects are seen as pests to be killed with toxic chemicals whenever they interfere with human life in the home or in gardens.

But insects are the most populous demographic in nature, being half of all living things and we can't make contact "with nature without connecting with bugs" (p.86). We also need to consider that the green kingdom of plants and trees evolved with insects. Insects pollinate flowers and fruits; they eat dead plant matter; they truly are in an example of a reciprocal, conscious relationship. (p.86) It is through connecting with that awareness, that conscious reciprocity, that humans can become allies. The idea of being an ally for insects, animals and plants puts working with the intelligence of the natural world into a framework that allows a settler white woman like me to work with bees, without appropriating the history and culture of indigenous, shamanic cultures. Many (mostly white, western) new-age spiritual practitioners have called themselves shamans without knowing the history, and without having a respect for the colonization of those cultures. In being an ally, I hope to come from an activist tradition of solidarity while also recognizing that allies need to be quiet and allow traditionally marginalized voices to speak. To also be an ally for non-human animals, insects and plants means to listen to how these cultures speak in their own languages and in their own cultures.

I want to be an ally for bees, and to hopefully expand my awareness to understand them more because I really admire their culture; their magical world. Bees are matriarchal and extremely hard workers. They are essential for life. Their dedication, service and work ethic are inspiring to me. They know their sense of place intimately in ultraviolet light and by smell! And yet they are endangered. Where they are caught in the capitalist machine as mere pollinators, and have lost their sense of place due to being trucked

around for thousands of miles and fed sugar water, they have sickness in their colonies. The future of our home and the future of our sense of place rests with these tiny but mighty pollinators!

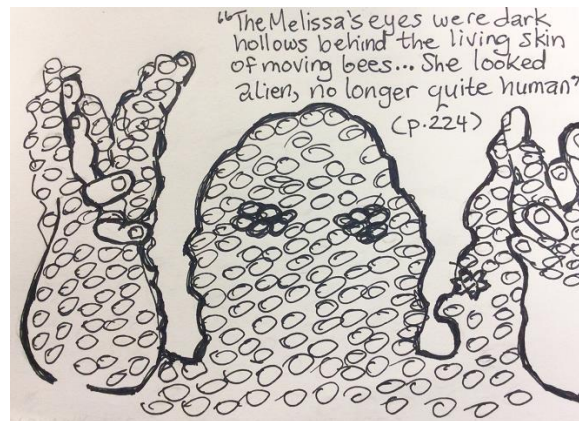
### Bees, A Reprise

Our planet teems with bees, about 20, 000 Asian species in all, most of them indispensable to plant ecology. (Preston, 2006, p.7) The relationship between bees and humans has existed for centuries, with humans admiring their ability to produce magic, from pollinating plants to making honey. As well, "[b]ees have a traditional association with prophecy and soothsaying. The original temple at Delphi was said to have been built of beeswax and tended by bees (probably connected with the *Melissae* who were the protectors of Zeus and later the priestesses of several cults)" (Preston, 2006, p.120).

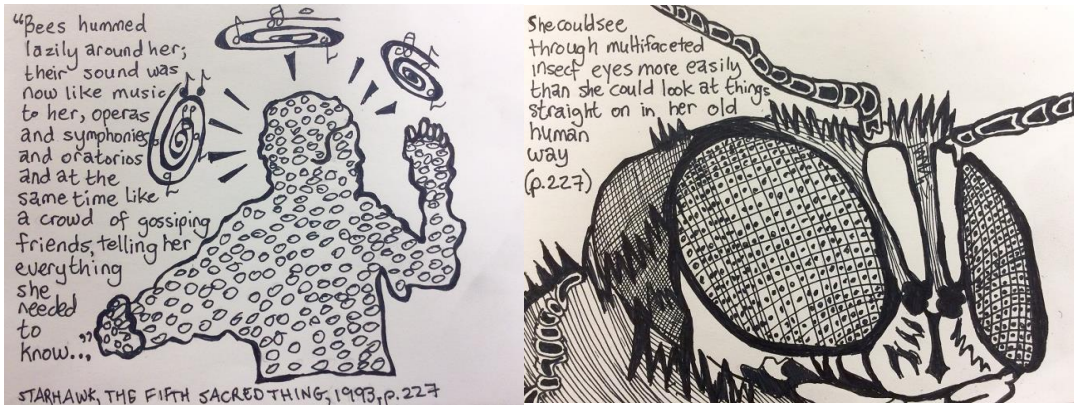
My first encounter with the idea of bees as a guide for humans to have a shamanic healing experience was in the fictional account of a post-apocalyptic society in California: *The Fifth Sacred Thing* by Starhawk (1993). While she has written many nonfiction accounts of earth-based spirituality and nonviolent resistance, this was her first work of fiction.

In the book, Madrone is a doctor and spiritual healer travelling through dangerous territory to help 'outlaws' who are fighting the repressive mono corporation that masquerades as a government. Along the way, she encounters the Melissa, humans who have merged their consciousness with bees.

To work with bees in a healing capacity, Madrone must be initiated by the Melissa and the bees for nine days. The Melissa did not look like ordinary people: "The Melissa's eyes were dark hollows behind the living skin of moving bees that covered her face and body. She looked alien, no longer quite human." (p.224) They appeared like "vortexes of whirling energies, a dance of beating wings that fanned the air around them and threw the brown dust into whirlwinds" (p.224.)



Madrone merged her consciousness with the bees during her initiation. She then came out of her shamanic bee experience not knowing how much time had passed, but forever changed. "Bees hummed lazily around her; their sound was now like music to her, operas and symphonies and oratorios, and at the same time like a crowd of gossiping friends, telling her everything she needed to know. ... She felt a sense of vertigo, almost a double vision. She could see through multifaceted insect eyes more easily than she could look at thing straight on in her old human way" (p.227).



She was disoriented when she came back to her human consciousness and wanted to stay in the hive, but the Melissa told her she needed to use her new-found healing powers of the bees back in the human world (p.227). The Melissa remind Madrone that the bees were autonomous beings and she needed to ask for their help and gain their consent: "[N]ever make the mistake of thinking you control them. They are wild. They will aid you if they wish to, but they will not always understand you." (p.229).



Because Western culture has moved so far away from gaining consent from other natural life forms, or being allies, reading this extrasensory encounter expanded my awareness of how to relate and communicate with non-human life. My perception of who I was, and what my identity could be, expanded.

## **Identity and Action**

It is through understanding our identity and our perceptions that we are able to better relate to the world around us. This understanding informs us how we can make positive social change. According to Rod Purcell (2000) in "Images for change: community development, community arts and photography", using the community arts milieu to facilitate potential changes in perception is definitely informed by Paulo Freire's seminal ideas on building community capacity for social change (p.112). Freirian ideology can help us in arts-based research "to develop an understanding of social and cultural processes" where we can see "private troubles as public issues" (p.112). By expanding our awareness outwards, we can become connected to something greater than ourselves, and along with that develop the courage through community to act for social change. Purcell notes that Freire looked at this expansion of awareness "as moving from a naive to critical consciousness and challenging what he called boundary situations through which people limit themselves and their potential for action" (p.112). As this consciousness grows, people can shift their perception of themselves as powerless individuals by envisioning "how life might be for them and the local community. From the vision, a plan for change can be made, leading to community action" (p.112).

## Community Vision and Meditation

Connecting to something greater than ourselves, connecting to a community vision, can be facilitated by meditation. Even after two decades, research on the impact of meditation is still in its infancy and further tests need to be done. According to Tang, Holzel and Posner (2015) in “The neuroscience of mindfulness meditation”, current findings do show that “mindfulness meditation might cause neuroplastic changes in the structure and function of brain regions involved in regulation of attention, emotion and self-awareness” (p.222).

However, mindfulness meditation affects beginners and more experienced meditators differently. They need different things from it. Beginners need "to overcome habitual ways of internally reacting to one's emotions and might therefore show greater prefrontal activation" (p.218). They use meditation to actively control cognitive functioning, and regulate emotions. Meanwhile, apparently expert meditators already have this "accepting stance towards their experience and thus no longer engage in top-down control efforts but instead show enhanced bottom-up processing." (p.218). For the more advanced, mindfulness meditation allows them to feel more connected to something greater than themselves.

Connecting to something greater than ourselves hopefully allows one to detach from thoughts themselves and the notion of individual identity. “According to Buddhist philosophy, the identification with a static concept of ‘self’ causes psychological distress. Disidentification from such a static self-concept results in the freedom to



experience a more genuine way of being" (p.219). When someone brings conscious attention to their awareness itself, they can detach from the idea of a separate self. They can start to "identify with the phenomenon of 'experiencing' itself" (p.219).

The conclusion that Tang and friends made was that mindfulness meditation facilitates a shift in perception from self-referential mode to one of greater awareness. (p.220). Being in an expanded state of awareness, or connection to something greater than ourselves, could facilitate healing shifts in perspective. Holding space for a mindful presence would help people know their place in nature. And, hopefully, this would help heal their perspective of their relationship with the environment. Through that healing, a sense of agency would develop so that they could act as an ally for the earth.

## **Ecotherapy**

In *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*, Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist (2000) look at the idea of "healing and growth nurtured by healthy interaction with the earth" (p.20). This was called ecotherapy. "It is important to bear in mind that ecotherapeutic practices cannot be used to lasting effect from within the old colonial-consumerist mind-set. Animals are not mere tools, nor is Earth a gigantic breast to be heedlessly sucked to exhaustion" (p.20). Buzzell and Chalquist make the connection that all living creatures, animals, insects, trees and plants, are all playing their parts along with humans on this planetary stage, and they all have their own needs and freedoms to preserve (p.20).

Where we now feel 'dysplaced', which is the sense of "uprootedness and angst of not

feeling at home anywhere on Earth” (p.20). We can instead all be partners together in healing our human relationship with the earth.

### **Art Projects**

I explored healing and making contact with our place on the earth through art experiences, using the idea of bees to frame those experiences. I made 3D bee sculptures with elementary school students to explore the impact that meditation and environmental art activities had on children and their perception of being a bee ally. I made an advocacy mockumentary about a mythical super bee in the FES Maloca community garden to use media and reach a wider audience about how bees can help us relate to caring for the earth. I facilitated meditation, drawing and mask-making workshops outside, focusing on bees, pollinators, and their environments to see how participants' perceptions of themselves and their nature-based identities would shift. And I built a human-sized, solitary bee hive art installation, providing a meditative space for folks to sit in quiet reflection about the bees and the state of the world. Participants were also invited to write love poems to the bees where the notes would incubate in small paper mâché, beehive time capsules. Like the benefits of meditation itself, depending on how accustomed someone was to the concept of mindfulness, healing or art shaped the experience for them.

### **Community Arts**

Many community cultural projects allow space for people, especially adults, to share feelings and memories of their often-complex relationships with nature, rather than

disconnect and over intellectualize. Describing a community eco-arts research project about salmon, Aileen Penner and colleagues (2006) reason that "[a]rts-informed methods offered greater possibilities to engage ourselves and the audience in a multi-sensory and cross cultural way...[B]y using arts-based methods we hoped to evoke emotions that tend to be excluded from 'objective' studies; we wanted to provoke the imagination to conjure up new possibilities" (Penner et al, p. 136). In another example, Darlene Clover (2000) references a community eco-art project that happened in Toronto that brought artists, environmental organizations, politicians and the labour movement together. "The creative process, too, draws out people's own, often extensive, local 'ecological' knowledge before moving onto outside facts and information which may be necessary to learning and future action strategies" (Clover, p.22). The arts mean so many different things to everyone. However, one characteristic the arts offer to each person is an invitation to communicate, and share their vision.

Explaining his work in community arts and cultural development, Patrick Overton (1994), the director of the Columbia College Center for Community & Cultural Studies, agrees that the "arts are an invitation. They invite us to tell our story and they invite us to listen to the story of those around us. They also invite us to celebrate who we are together" (p. 94). He draws on his extensive experience working with rural communities to bring community cultural expression to the forefront, by valuing the arts and imaginative activities "because the imagination enables us to see another way—and the arts give us the means by which to bring that vision—that dream—into existence" (p. 94).

To Overton, connecting with the imagination is a spiritual experience, both individually and collectively, when he says that art is “the voice of the soul” (p, 95). And like all experiences that involve connecting with something greater than ourselves, the arts have the potential to transform and change not only one person but it also “sets in motion a series of indirect influences that has an impact on the community as a whole” (p, 95).

Without the arts involved in day to day community life, we have lost touch with how our culture’s “values are identified, conserved, celebrated, and transmitted” (Overton p, 95). Without the arts and a way to share our values, then we forget who we are, and what values are important. “The end result of this is, we forget who we are and our culture beings to "disintegrate" because we have no center, no connecting point, no tether. Some of us believe this is the great spiritual crisis of our time” (p. 95).

From my perspective, the environmental crisis IS a spiritual crisis. It is through the healing of our spiritual relationship with the earth and the earth’s creatures that we will know our place; we will know how to have a right relationship with our home on the earth. We can use mindfulness, art and nature-based experiences to help us attain the state of mind needed to join with our insect allies

Bees can be a guide for us when we open our awareness and let their perspective penetrate our consciousness. They can share from the collective imagination their template for making ‘home’ in the environment and for caring for the earth as if we

valued life. I will share how I used community arts to tap into that collective imagination to help shift the perspectives and values of our community. All life exists in community. It is only in community that we will heal this lack of contact with ourselves, and lack of contact with the land.

# Eco Art Ed Reflection: Pollinate This!

Outreach, education and activism are all a very important part of what I do. Those concerns informed every part of my research. I teach at a downtown elementary school. I study Toronto artists and develop programming ideas based on their work. One of my primary goals is to help foster a love for creativity and imagination in the students. From my perspective, these skills will serve them their whole lives.

## **Pedagogical Approach**

My pedagogical approach to working with kids has come not from formal teacher training, but through trial and error. I have been teaching for fifteen years, in schools, in art studios and in community art centres. From that personal experience, I have learned that the more senses the children are able to engage, the fuller the learning experience will be for them. My emphasis on teaching art has evolved from a natural talent on my part, but also from a desire to help develop creative ways of being and thinking in young people.

When I am planning educational activities for children, I usually jam-pack the curriculum, so the kids won't get bored or distracted. In my experience, I have always needed to have 4 or 5 extra activities lined up, as the children will often burn through the main attraction. I think now that I was perhaps reinforcing the busy-ness of their lives,

and missing the opportunity to provide space for remaining still and silent. Because of my own growing mindful awareness, I now like to include mindfulness when I work with children.

As I come from an art & revolution, environmental activist background, I have always tried to also introduce decolonizing and consensus-building techniques to children when I teach. During our group reflections after an art lesson, for example, we always sit in a circle, and everyone has the chance to ‘pass’ on their turn to speak.

### **Imagination and Nature**

In these past two years, I have begun to feel more confident about incorporating environmental awareness in these cultural production classes. I had been exposed to a new way of thinking in Tim Leduc’s Environmental Education class that made so much sense: imagination comes from the land.

The idea that imagination comes from the land came out most clearly in Joe Sheridan’s “The Haudenosaunee Imagination and the Ecology of the Sacred” (2006). In it, he describes a cultural worldview that details the intricate weaving of imagination, culture and the outside environment. “Like everything Haudenosaunee, imagination has a place because *imagination is a place*, and because everything is connected to everything else, the encounter with imagination is a living communication within a sentient landscape” (p. 369).

Sheridan is saying here that communication from the land gives everyone our imagination and creativity. To *be in relationship* with nature, is what facilitates that communication. To know the trees and plants; the birds and the bees; to listen deeply and to share openly are all what constitutes being in relationship with the outside space that surrounds us. This relationship, this knowing changes the space into a 'place'. With relationship-building in mind, I developed an extensive environmental art education lesson plan called Pollinate This! It looked at the intersection between the arts, the environment, and mindfulness. I used bees and their culture to look at human culture and our sense of place. The multi lesson plan included yoga, meditation, movement, sound, visual art and storytelling activities. The visual art component included a sculptural installation inspired by Charmaine Lurch, a Toronto artist and MES graduate whose work looks at bees. (This lesson plan is included in the Appendix.)

### **Eco Art Lesson Plan**

I had a chance to present a shortened version of this lesson plan with children, aged 5 to 10 years, at Niagara Public School in April, 2016. We did not have time to go outside. However, we did have time to talk about the importance of bees, planting a garden, and growing our own food. To start, we did a short mindfulness meditation which encouraged the students to be aware of their bodies sitting on the carpet in the classroom, breathing, and trying to sit still. Then we did a visualization, imagining being outside and what sounds they would hear, or sensations they would feel, what they could see etc. In our discussion, we looked at the way bees see and their culture.



The kids took a while to settle into their bodies and not fidget during the short, introductory mindfulness exercise. With the visualization of the outdoors exercise, the younger ones always want to burst out with their ideas. I reminded them gently that it was just for them and they could keep those ideas for themselves.

They drew what they imagined as habitat for the bees on a flat board. That was the most enjoyable activity for most of the children. Some students did not really want to move on to the sculpture part of the activity in part because they were all familiar with how to draw and colour, and in part because it was a meditative exercise.

Making the bee was challenging for some, especially the younger students, but some really enjoyed the chance to be really creative. The base of the bees was two styrofoam balls attached with a paper clip and glue, they were then decorated and fixed to the nature drawings with a Popsicle stick and plasticine. I showed them a couple of examples of how to possibly put the bee together. I tore each example apart, so that they would know that mine was not an example to 'copy'. I had a diverse range of materials, from shimmery gold fabric, to garden fencing, pipe cleaners, fuzzy balls, coloured tape, and googly eyes.

The final product was meant to be a three dimensional bee sculpture standing on top of, and emerging out of, a two dimensional natural environment background. Some students had the bees flying out of the habitat board by a string. Some built a solitary beehive and laid a sleeping bee flat on the board. Others wanted their bees to roll around on the

ground they had drawn. Most used the stick and plasticine to continue the creative concept of the bee flying around its nature-based home on the board. Thus far, I have only had a few opportunities to teach environmental art. It is this area where I most need to grow and where I feel the most excited by that potential growth. Providing opportunities for whole body learning in nature seems essential, especially now that our relationship with the earth seems to grow ever more dire with each passing year. In “What if Teaching Went Wild?” (2004), American philosopher and ecological thinker, Anthony Weston reminds us to question whether we should be inside at all when learning from nature: “Specifically, is it possible to teach Earth awareness, and earth responsiveness, in classrooms?”

Based on my experience, and in ideal circumstances I would only want to introduce topics inside. The bulk of the lesson would be need to be shared and experienced in the outdoor classroom. Outside, children have the chance to run and jump, and building their physical balance, as well as their ecological balance. Doing art inspired by being outside, children develop their imagination, their creative thinking abilities while thinking critically about the world they are inheriting. Developing holistic curriculum, based on using six senses, (the five physical and the sixth sense of at-one-ness, or 'whole systems thinking') would help to foster the imaginative communication from the earth.

### **Arts-based Environmental Education**

Decades of research have shown the links between arts education and higher order thinking, communication and socialization skills, according to the Ontario Arts Council

(1997), in "Making the case for arts education" (p.10). In fact, a survey of Ontario elementary school teachers "found that arts programs help students learn 'in the general program of studies through improving perception, awareness, concentration, uniqueness of thought style, problem-solving, confidence and self-worth, and motivation'" (p.10). Coming from a background of arts based education, I applied this approach of marrying art with environmental education to the *Pollinate This!* lesson plan.

"Arts-based environmental education" (AEE) as a concept was first brought forth by Finnish art educator Meri-Helga Mantere in the 1990s." (Wikipedia, 2014) Mantere notes that art is not a special addition to teaching environmental education but a different process with a different perception entirely. "Art is not an added quality, the icing on the cake; it is rather the point of departure in the effort to find ways in which people can connect to their environment." (Wikipedia, 2014)

Mantere (1998) says in "Art and the Environment - An Art-based Approach to Environmental Education" that as an environmentalist and an art teacher, she is trying to facilitate a new way of looking at the world and "the pleasure of perceiving the world from the heart":

To achieve that, it is necessary to stop, be quiet, have time and feel psychologically secure in order to perceive the unknown, the sometimes wild and unexpected. At times conscious training of the senses, decoding the stereotype, is needed. I aim for an

openness to sensitivity, new and personal ways to articulate and share one's environmental experiences which might be beautiful, disgusting, peaceful or threatening.

I support and facilitate the conversation with the environment. -(Mantere, p.32)

I used this idea of AEE as a mindful "conversation" as a guideline when writing my idea for this arts-based, environmental learning program about bees. There are many different ways children learn, and I hope using thoughtful, creative activities helped them understand their world. And the Ontario Environmental Education policy works seem to agree. As stated in "Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow" (1997), they would like students to "understand our fundamental connections to each other and to the world around us through our relationship to food, water, energy, air, and land, and our interaction with all living things" (p.6).

## Results

The results of the first teaching of *Pollinate This!* were great given the constraints. I believe the full lesson would provide valuable feedback on how children interact with nature, pollinators and their sense of place. Hopefully the children gained a bit of understanding into their fundamental connection to each other and the world around us, even with being inside while investigating their relationship with nature and the pollinators of nature.

It was profound to be able to talk about serious issues with the kids and then have them contemplate it in a way where they could be successful and feel good about themselves. Building a bee habitat meant they had been introduced to the idea of stewardship and

how important pollinators are. However, it is so important to go outside to do any kind of environmental education facilitation. Being outside, seeing bees and learning to not be afraid of them would anchor the lesson so much more. As well, it is magical to be outside, truly appreciating the artistry of nature, and developing a relationship with nature. Encouraging that kind of appreciation and relationship would help the children know their ‘place’ in nature, and it would help them to develop their imaginative, creative communication with nature.

### **Going forward, Pedagogy**

Going forward, I will be offering a two-part workshop, starting off both lessons by going outside and meditating there. In the winter months, we will do a short visualization exercise and movement-based mindfulness exercise outside so everyone does not get too cold. Then we could venture back inside the classroom for more mindfulness exercises, and the art activity. I am developing lessons based on other animals and insects, while being inspired by artists working with those themes. These workshops could happen not just at schools but at after school programs and weekend nature based programs. This particular “*Pollinate This!*” environmental art lesson could also be good for the winter months when it may be hard to get outside.

Pedagogically, I will include more of an eco-feminist, decolonization perspective in the lesson. For example, during the discussion part of the lesson, we could think about: “Why do we think the way that we think?” “Where do our thoughts come from?” “Why do we see animals, insects and nature in a certain way?” “Does the way that we perceive them influence the way that we treat them or their habitat?”

I hope to apply this decolonizing analysis to the way I teach eco-art education by identifying , recovering , and creating “material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation)” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 8); and by identifying and changing “ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 8). In this short but sweet sentence, Gruenewald sums up a new way to share knowledge, while deconstructing the old ways we have gained knowledge.

Quoting Sobel, Gruenewald speaks to the need to develop a love for nature first, before working to save the natural world from ourselves. “If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it” (p. 39). Using art to introduce these serious topics about our environment to students may help to develop that love and appreciation for the earth.

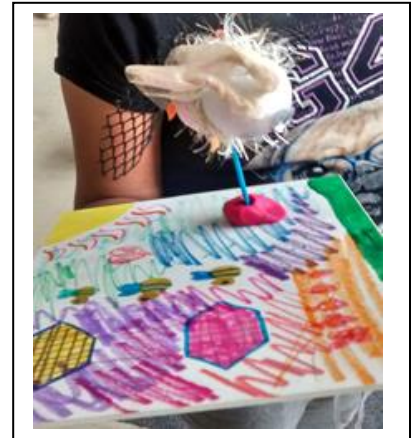
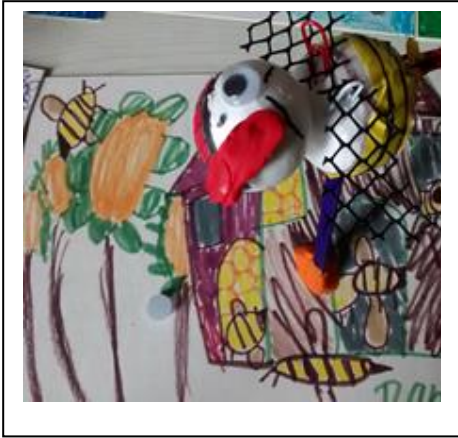
Once a love of being outdoors and a relationship has started to develop, an eco-feminist approach to environmental art education could be helpful to begin looking at what kind of relationship we humans have with nature. In “Environmental Education and Ecofeminist Pedagogy: Bridging the Environmental and the Social”, Harvester and Blenkinsop (2010) cite Gardner and Riley when explaining that an ecofeminist pedagogy must rid itself of anything that duplicates "the logic of domination" (p.139). This can be done in many ways, including reconfiguring the way the actual school buildings and classrooms are set

up, to evaluating the way material is shared, through to examining how relationships are built within the school between students and teachers (p.139). I would love to be involved in the development of a new nature and art-based school that spent copious amounts of time outside.

Through a decolonizing, eco feminist approach to environmental art education, we could then start to be in dialogue with 'other' nonhuman species. As Harvester and Blenkinsop (2010) say, "[t]hose advocating for ecofeminist pedagogy emphasize the role of dialogue in enacting new relationships between humans, and between humans and more- than-human nature (p.126). To have a genuine dialogue with someone, one has to be humble, open, and vulnerable. It "...is built on respect and a deep sense of the intrinsic value of the other being. This is a relation of the both/and, an acknowledgment of the immediate presence of both deep interdependence and the unique autonomy of each being. This is a relationship held together by humility" (p.126).

It is with humility that I would like to continue facilitating environmental art education, to paraphrase bell hooks, as the rent I pay on this planet. I now know the importance of having a relationship of reciprocity with the environment to keep fostering a well of creativity and imagination. Having grace, learning from the land and its co-inhabitators, and sharing that new way of knowing through educational, cultural production would be the way that I would like to continue my environmental art education activism.

Examples of Bee sculptures produced by Niagara students, aged 5-12 years





# Film Reflection, *Incident at Malcoa*, **The Case of the Maloca Garden Super Bee**

I took an activist video making class in the summer of 2016 and had hoped to mediate and propagate any shifts in perception of place, while looking at the intersections of art, the environment, education, and mindfulness. Seemingly, no activism can take place nowadays without a video to share on social media to spread the word and create awareness. We learned in class that 'advocacy storytelling' involves witnessing and inspiring others to act. The story can then serve the goal of social change. The story is defined by how I want the audience to act. And the story should inspire them to act, with options given on how to do just that.

When I thought about how I wanted to inspire others, naturally I considered the lens of bee culture that I had been working with in my masters studies. In making my activist video, I wanted to delve into how profoundly bees impact our sense of place. I hoped I could invite others, through humour, to become aware of environmental issues. I knew I had found the subject of my video when I thought of the Super Bee.

## **Inspiration**

I was inspired by the mock-documentary *Incident at Loch Ness*, by Werner Herzog and Sean Penn, which follows two mock film crews as they investigate the veracity of Nessy

in Scotland. My *Incident at Maloca* was also a mockumentary, documenting an investigation into alleged sightings of a super bee at Maloca Community Garden at York. I loved the humour of *Incident at Loch Ness*, and thought it would translate well to a film advocating for environmental awareness about bees. I thought creating rumours of a mythic creature called the Maloca Super Bee would bring magic to the garden, and it would hopefully help some folks think about our impact on bee habitat, and their own place in the environment.

### **If Nature could talk...**

I wondered what the bees would say in their own documentary if they could speak to us in our human language. We can currently only seem to understand them when they are dying in droves after the spraying of pesticides. We have lost the ability to listen to them, and communicate with them in a reciprocal relationship.

In "Nature and Silence", Christopher Manes (1996) explores "...the fact that in our culture only humans have status as speaking subjects" (p.15). He contrasts this to cultures that are animistic, or "those that see the natural world as inspirited" (p.15). In those cultures where nature is seen as conscious, there is also "the language of the birds, the wind, the earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls -- a world of autonomous speakers whose intents...one ignores at ones peril" (p.15).

I was speaking for the bees by creating this super bee character who could ostensibly speak for the bees, like Dr Seuss's Lorax who speaks for the trees. It was my way of trying to enter the place bell hooks (2008) calls the "space in the margin" (p.85). I would like

people to listen to the bees as a symbol for the culture of the environment that is under attack by human culture. I didn't want the bees to be speaking of their pain or wounds or unfilled longings (p.85). I wanted the super bee to be coming from the margin that "is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer" (p.85).

### **Democratizing the Process**

One way I tried to democratize the creative, filmmaking process was for the crew/actors to ad lib their own dialogue and to have agency in how their character's arc would unfold. We did discuss the objective of the scenes and what targets should be hit. But how the scenes played out was up to the creativity of the individual. This was their imagination at work; they were inspired by being in nature. Collaboration was a great way to democratize the experience and have all involved be invested in taking the underlying issue of the mock doc seriously. All the participants recorded a heartfelt plea for consideration for bees and the environment. (Due to time constraints for the final video, they couldn't all be included.)

Liz Miller (2008) discusses a collaborative approach to filmmaking with Katerina Cizek, a documentary filmmaker with the NFB in "Filmmaker-in-Residence: The Digital Grandchild of Challenge for Change. Interview with Kat Cizek". The project allowed Cizek to work with patients and health workers at St Michael's hospital in downtown Toronto. As she shared, the original project idea and goals should have influence and input come from the community participants, noting that collaboration doesn't mean agreeing all the time. "[I]t's actually more about respecting differences and responding

diversity of opinion” (p.430). All media used should be diverse as well, encouraging everyone to participate, rather than just to observe and to record. And any medium can be to document: video, photography, the internet, cell phones, ipods or just pen and paper.

The way the documentary’s message is conveyed is as important as what tools are used to document. I chose humour as the way I wanted to share my perspective on environmental advocacy.

### **Environmental Documentaries**

In "The Rhetoric of Ascent in the *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Everything's Cool*", Mark Minster (2010) looks at the effective impact of the environmental documentaries' call for action on climate change. He notes that most of us are not persuaded to act because of doom and gloom, or even because of facts. "[R]ather, we are persuaded by humour and believable emotion, by shared values and deeply embedded cultural narratives" (p. 26.)

Minster asks a very important question: "how does successful ecocinema aspire us to action"? (p. 27). He says that both *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Everything's Cool* “are surprisingly optimistic, arguing that it is imperative for their audiences to take personal and political action” (p. 27). Those two hugely successful environmental documentaries emphasize the positive over an end-of-the-world narrative. “As Michael Schellenberger quips in *Everything's Cool*, 'Martin Luther King didn't give the 'I Have a Nightmare' speech, he gave the 'I Have a Dream' speech” (p. 27).

I am often guilty of focusing on how dire our global situation is, especially regarding the habitat of animals and insects, and animal agriculture's impact of the environment. But I know from online and in person interaction, most people have little space to hold for this information. They typically shut down upon hearing more bad news.

### Mockumentaries

That is why I thought it was important to advocate through humour and education, using the specific 'genre' of mockumentary. The feedback about *Incident at Maloca* was generally good, with the humourous and creative approach being the most notable feedback. Approaching filmmaking with a playful perspective allowed the participants, as well as the audience, to have a creative release. When folks are laughing and enjoying themselves they are open to taking in information in ways of which they are not even aware.

In a seminal book on mockumentaries (indeed the only one I found), *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the subversion of factuality*, Roscoe and Hight (2001) say that mock-docs live neither within the territory of drama nor within the domain of documentary, but straddle the fence between both (p.6.)

Because it can be both fact and fiction, the mockumentary questions how truth is perceived and represented. The mockumentary subverts the authority that is traditionally afforded to documentaries by subverting "factuality" (p.1.) It does this through its relationship with the audience. The "construction of a new set of relationships between audience and factual discourse" (p.185) happens through the mock-documentary.

Viewers could begin to challenge the very notion of what is fact, hopefully moving “towards a position of critical awareness” (p.181.) Hopefully, this spark of critical awareness could spark an autonomous desire for information which propels audience members to become activist video makers themselves!

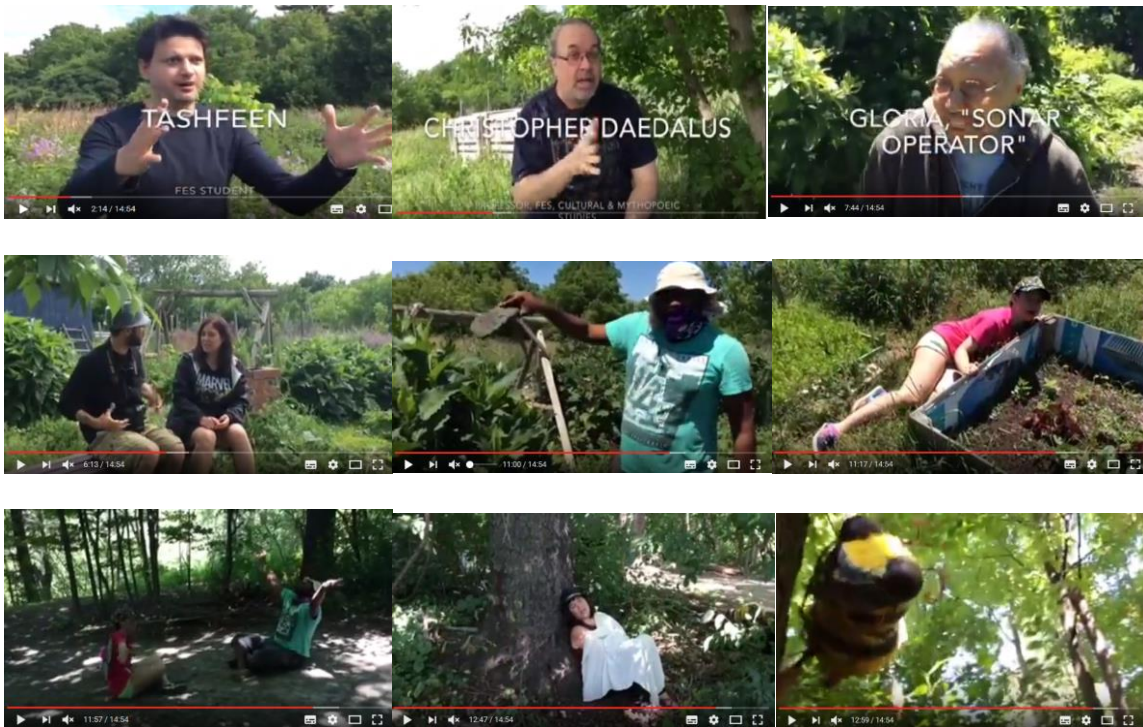
I am not sure if *Incident at Maloca* inspired anyone to make their own advocacy documentary using humour as a lens to investigate a cause near and dear to their hearts. I think I may have inspired some viewers to investigate how bees live. What I need to include in future versions are concrete steps to take to work on behalf of the bees, for example: write to you MP to ban pesticides in your area. When I edit a longer version I will include participants’ heartfelt comments about the effects of city living on the bees.

Environmental advocacy mockumentaries could be a viable avenue for starting and continuing to take action on climate change and environmental degradation. I can't think of any other films like this. Katerina Cizek of the NFB Filmmaker-in-Residence program said that 10% of the effort should go into making the video and 90% should be in sharing it (Miller, 2008, p.433.) So I need to share this work!

I need to share it more on social media and in person. Because it is still a work in progress, I don't yet have enough feedback on the impact of this type of approach to activist video making, nor this type of research into art that can help to shift perceptions of a sense of place in nature. Asking for specific, targeted, constructive feedback will help with this.

I feel that humorous activist video is an exciting and viable avenue to pursue to advocate for changes in perception of home and 'place' in the environment. It can be shared around the world. It can be used in educational and social settings. It can allow for repeated viewings so people can be mindful and take their time with digesting the material. In this way, *Incident at Maloca* was a successful beginning for me in using video as a medium at the intersection of art, the environment, education, and mindfulness, to shift perception of 'place'.

**Still Images from and Youtube link to *Incident at Maloca*:**



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxyjDXcAeMU>



# Mask-making and Cultivating a Sense of Place

I originally chose mask-making for my arts-based, research tool for two primary reasons. Firstly, there is an ease of production in outside environments. Masks are an easy and fun art activity to do outside, requiring no electricity or water. The materials are easy to transport. Secondly, the masks are a great tool for self-expression. Participants can explore alternate identities. As masks have long been used to shift perception and have helped humans to represent their relationship with the natural world, thematically, mask making allows for ease in contemplating these ideas. As my research has progressed, I have learned a lot about my facilitation style, my own identity and the need for more arts-based research activities.

## Mask-making as Arts-based research

For my workshops, I invited both adults and children to make pollinator masks, as I felt making bee masks might be prohibitively too hard for most participants. Not everyone was comfortable with art so more abstract design parameters were appreciated. As well, the children had a harder time with some of the tools used (e.g. scissors, stapler) and they needed more leeway with making their creatures.

To start the workshop with the children, we did a short mindfulness exercise. Then I read a book about bees and showed them pictures of the different kinds of bees and wasp pollinators. We talked about how important pollinators are for the environment. The



children then drew which kind of pollinator they wanted to be. I asked them how they were feeling after each new activity.

With the adults, our warm up activities included a nature-focused meditation, *Drawing on the Right side of the Brain* drawing exercises and journaling about their sensations, perceptions, and feelings. The adults also drew what nature-based character inspired them. The adults had a bit more room to dream and create. Along with pollinators, they could also explore being the elements, plants, or any part of the pollinator environment.

With my help, both the young and older participants constructed their masks from coloured bristol board, feathers, fuzzy balls, straw, grass, burlap, ribbon and pipe cleaners, using staples and glue. They then wore their masks, moving like their character would move, and vocalized the sounds their character would make. They finished off with reflecting on the experience. The adults took time writing thoughtful responses. The children, in contrast, gave short answers and then took off to run around playing pollinator games.

### **Art Therapy and Healing**

Usually, when I teach mask-making classes or workshops, we talk about the different uses of masks. Masks can be used as protection, decoration and disguise (or to transform, in a spiritual sense). Art therapy educator, Peggy Dunn-Snow (2000) articulates how she has used mask-making as one healing technique in training art therapists: “A mask is a face to hide behind. With a mask, anyone can become someone or something different. Masks conceal. Masks reveal. And, sometimes, masks transform.” (p.127) Here Dunn-

Snow is talking about how masks relate to the healing transformation of identity. I am most interested in this notion of transformation, and of using the tools of art production to aid in that transformation. It could be transformation of the workshops participants' perceptions of how they relate to their environment, or transformation of their idea of "place", or transformation of their identity within that place. If some transformation or shift in perspective could be achieved through this arts-based research, then I would know that mask making could be a viable modality to looking at the healing of the relationship with our place in nature. I would know as participants would experience the environment in a different way. Bu feeling more connected, to nature and to themselves.

While Dunn-Snow is writing within a therapeutic context, it is my hope to investigate personal-environmental healing through arts-based research. One sense of higher functioning could be that an individual sees themselves as an extension of their natural environment. By taking on a nature-based persona through mask-making, someone could incorporate that new way of perceiving the world into their daily lives and act in different ways; hopefully, in environmentally mindful ways.

## **History of Masks**

One way of healing the relationship between humans and the other fauna and flora of the earth has been the making and wearing of masks. Masks have long had an impact on people, causing them to act in different ways. They have been used to transform and shift consciousness. According to Dr. John W. Nunley (2005), a scholar well versed in masks and masquerades, "[t]he Western term for an object that transforms a face, *mask*, derives from the Arabic word *maskhara*, "to transform into an animal or monster" (Nunley, 2005,

paragraph 1). Mask making was a global, cultural practice of transformation: images of masks appeared in caves in what is now France around 30,000 BCE (paragraph 1). Mummy masks from 22<sup>nd</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> BCE were found in Egypt. In “Tequixquiac, Mexico, archeologists discovered a mask-like coyote head fashioned from llama bones that dates from 12,000-10,000 B.C.” (Dunn-Snow, 2000, p.128). Images of masked humans were also found “...on Mimbres pottery (ninth to thirteenth centuries) in the American Southwest and in painted images on rock surfaces in Australia, Africa, and Siberia” (Dunn-Snow, 2000, p.128).

Masking, according to Nunley, allowed communities to create their own culture and social identity. Nunley also postulates that the development of shamanism was informed by the making and wearing of masks. “By manipulating their image with paint, feathers, body scarification, and tattoos, people consciously reinvent who they are in order to strengthen social bonding and group identity, both crucial to survival” (paragraph 7). This idea of transformation of self through artistic conduits to the realm of spirit appears most strongly in the concept of shamanism.

### **Personal Experience with seeing Indigenous masks behind glass**

When I lived in Vancouver, I saw a show about Indigenous shamanism and social identity at the Vancouver Art Gallery called *Down from the Shimmering Sky*. It showcased ceremonial masks trapped behind glass. These masks had been stolen from the Coast Salish people. The masks had originally been used to bring rain, or sun; to help heal; to speak with the elements or different spirits. Hanging alongside the ceremonial masks were contemporary masks, free from enclosure, that had been made by local, First

Nations artists. These masks did not have the same intensity, or presence of power, as the ones used with a spiritual purpose. That exhibit made a profound impact on me. The ceremonial masks had their own identity, their own spirit, and they were imprisoned in the glass cases.

I learned from the "Shimmering Sky" exhibit that the more masks are used with an intention, the more that they embody that intention. They become a "place" for that intention to live and act as a conduit between that intention and the mask wearer. This can become the identity of the mask, and one of the identities of the person wearing the mask.

### **Mask workshop Results**

During the mask workshops that I facilitated with adults, participants meditated on a specific identity connected to their place in nature. It is my belief that most of us have lost that sense of place and nature based identity. Through community based arts, I was hoping we could get a sense of how to expand that perception of ourselves as creatures of nature and how to nourish that place based identity. I wondered if a sense of agency around taking action for the environment would occur.

From this art-based, mask-making research, I learned that the mindfulness exercises definitely relaxed participants. The drawing exercises for the most part did relax them. The art making was not always initially relaxing. But because we were outside in nature, they were more relaxed than if we had been inside.

With adults, it was much easier to track changes in mood and perception. When I did the exercise with children it was harder for them to vocalize their state of being, and also to note any changes, if any. Kids running around and making art outside seem to be in a steady state of bliss and curiosity, at least in my small sample size. This activity would seemingly be much more beneficial for adults.

When the adult participants had the time to explore their personal, nature-based identities, their perception did change, especially how they viewed their relationship with nature.

One participant wrote that when she is in the midst of nature she feels peaceful and safe because she becomes more relaxed with the wind blowing, the trees standing tall and the sound of birds singing. She felt relaxed because of the people around her and the creative environment. "I'm happy now because of Art."

One participant felt instantly uplifted just being outside, saying that it "brings instant peace." He enjoyed the walk to the garden, talking about making contact, what it means to have a place in the environment. After the meditation, he felt like a bird, yellow and black with wide wings, residing in his heart and lungs. The bird represented music and freedom through roaming. That is how he saw his connection; his niche in the bigger picture: flying on the wind of song across the holistic, wide vision of the sky. He was reminded of how important it was to use the breath to strengthen this connection. After the mask making, he felt glad to make space in his life for art. Art, meditation and exercise were ways he could create space in his life, and to feel more deeply.

Another participant noted that's he had been feeling disconnected from nature lately, being anxious about school and spending too much time on the computer. He felt calm listening to the birds, happy about the sunny weather, and excited for the summer. He most identified with tree seeds in the spring time, that he could hear blowing in the wind: "I could feel its seeds birthing and seeding around new plants." He felt grateful for the wind and the rain. After the meditation and masks Making, he felt much more grounded and felt the need to do more art and spend more time in nature, after spending too much time writing. He had quite an interesting take on his nature-based identity: "Afterwards, now that I have created my mask, I feel as though my idea morphed as I went along. I was focused on creating a grassy covered mask but then got into the idea of looking out of the grass. I covered the face part of the mass with the green veil. The eye holes as well were covered this way. I also felt it was important to add in the dispersal of the seeds by adding in various seed pods along the eyes."

One participant started out feeling quite anxious and worried about money matters. After drawing, she felt less anxious. After the meditation, she started to come back into her body, stopped worrying so much and started to feel the flies biting her. She felt sore and tired, sensing tension that she hadn't felt before because of her worry. She most identified with the wind as the movement of the breeze was calming. After making her mask of the wind, this participant felt content, and only tired, with a clear head and no anxiety. She actually liked wearing the mask, which was a surprise to her. It felt like protection, and so she didn't mind being "silly". This experience reminded her that "things are alive". It was

a grounding and anchoring experience. She looked at herself in a different way afterwards. The drawing and art making activities reminded her it was ok to have fun. The wind reminded her to stretch, move and run around, and make noise. "It's natural", she wrote in her journal afterwards.

These workshops highlighted for me that many of us don't live "natural" lives. Many people carry high amounts of stress in their bodies, and it takes quite a while before they feel comfortable enough to relax so that they disconnect from this disconnected culture, and reconnect with their breathing, their bodies, and with their environment.

### **Decolonizing cultural production**

Being aware of how society oppresses and silences our nature, is the work of decolonization. Along with being an art practice that people do, the making of masks could be coupled with discussions around decolonization. To apply it to the mask-making workshops, there could be a decolonialization of the art making itself by talking about the history of masks. There could also be an attempt at decolonization of our relationship to the land and of our own identities. This could bring about the shifts in perceptions and possible healing of relationships that I am so interested in.

During my mask making workshops, I didn't offer a history of masks. Nor did we discuss other cultures' mask making. To my perspective, this was to avoid interfering with the participants' creative process. However, I will need to address this in future workshops as it came up when members of the Accessibility Community Equity committee saw a workshop participant wearing a mask which they viewed as a 'white girl wearing an

African grass mask" in an advertising video for the eco art media fest cabaret in April. Another ACE member who had taken part in my mask workshops engaged with them in dialogue around issues of cultural appropriation. She thought since the participant was Latina herself she could have been referencing her own culture's history of mask making.

## **Feedback**

This incident was good feedback for me, and showed me where I need to decolonize my workshop. I need to examine where I sit within the dominant societal paradigm. I need to examine my own social location more and apply it to the facilitation of my mask workshops.

To decolonize and get to a place of mutual learning and understanding, art as a research method is only part of the whole package. As Sarah Switzer (2016) writes in "What's in an Image?: Towards a Critical and Interdisciplinary Reading of Participatory Visual Methods", it is not the use of arts-based research methods that allows one to deconstruct power dynamics. It is the open forum for discussing the process, facilitated by a skilled researcher that could redistribute the power and sense of agency (p.6). Discussion in a safe space dedicated to open dialogue is key for participants to have the best possible experience in the making of their masks, and constructing of nature-based identities.

Another way to decolonize the workshops would be through sharing skills, creating community and building equal relationships. Relationship building could happen through the scheduling of weekly potlucks where food, information and experience could be



shared on a regular basis. In this way, trust, capacity, agency, and community can be developed.

### **Building relationships with arts-based research**

The building of relationships was definitely emphasized in my own experience with the workshops. I learned so much about myself and about my friends through the process of mindful meditation, and through the cultural production of masquerading. I hope to build my communal connections with further workshops. But perhaps someday, using the cultural production process of art making to help develop agency and build community we will see students making masks to decolonize and help heal our relationships with the land and with each other.

This research study was good with quite varied activities and layers for participants to experience. Art and mindfulness activities produce great results in willing participants. However, a lot of time is needed and the process can't be rushed.

I would like to continue offering these workshops to help raise awareness that environmental issues start at "home". I might offer these workshops in shorter segments on different days, with each building on the skills of the last, as per my original plan. I could also add in costume making and having the participants construct their own nature identity play at the conclusion of the workshops. And along with decolonizing my workshops, I will offer space to discuss concrete steps to take for environmental advocacy. Participants had a heightened awareness about their place in nature, but I'm am

not sure if the workshops encouraged follow through, as we didn't have time to discuss that.

While the sample size was small, there was enough evidence that some transformation or shift in perspective could be achieved through this kind of arts-based research.

Meditation, drawing, mask making and vocalizing/performing using the masks could all be viable cultural production activities to look at the healing of the relationship with our place in nature.

Masks provide the "conceptual tool that has led to individual and social reinvention, the essence of being human" (Nunley, 2005, paragraph 20). They provide the possibility of being not-ourselves; of being something greater than ourselves. Hopefully, the nature masks workshops could give the participants a perspective on what it is to be a connected human, while making contact with each other at the same time.

Images from Mask-making workshops





# The Human-sized Beehive

Last night as I was sleeping,  
I dreamt - marvelous error! -  
that I had a beehive  
here inside my heart.  
And the golden bees  
were making white combs and sweet honey from my old failures.

Antonio Mercado (1875-1939)

Growing up in Canadian cities, bees were seen as pests or they were to be feared as stinging predators. People used to kill bees and other pollinators without a moment's thought. Now, with habitat destruction, neonicotinoid pesticides, the overuse of chemicals, and the traveling pollinator trucks, we have colony collapse syndrome. The bees are severely stressed. According to David Suzuki (2009), close to "90 percent of the world's plants rely on pollinators for fertilization and reproduction - including many of the plants we use for food... If we lose the bees, we lose the plants, and if we lose the plants, well..." (Suzuki, 2009, paragraph 1).

## **The Human-sized Beehive installation**

The Morning/Mourning Meditation beehive installation was an evolution of an idea that was a kind of love poem to the bees. Knowing that they are stressed and we humans are in danger of losing our apiary friends, I wanted to explore our relationship with this tension through an interactive, community arts installation.

The first incarnation was birthed in the summer of 2015 for Tim Leduc's Environmental Education class. I made three honey bee, time capsule hives from papier-mache and twine. I suspended them from trees in High Park. My classmates were encouraged to write and leave behind words of appreciation so that the bees could find and open them when the environment was healthier, perhaps when humans had a healthier relationship with the land, or even after humans have gone. The bees would see the beehive time capsules filled with good wishes and know they were loved.

During an environmental art education field experience at the Kortright Centre later on that summer, I learned that most bees in Ontario live by themselves, in solitary hives. Thinking I needed to decolonize my thinking around bee culture, I also wanted to honour the indigenous bees.

As well, I wanted to provide an interactive space for contemplation. This was important as people would have a chance to be quiet, check in with themselves, and reflect on their perceptions of the pollinating bees, and on how we humans relate to insects and the natural world, and ourselves. The human beehive was also a space for potential grieving. We can't ignore the changing climate and collapse of our natural systems.

And so the idea for a human sized, solitary beehive was born. The interactive sculptural installation, made from cardboard, mixed media ranches including the aromatic cedar boughs. The human hive had the same sound installation playing that played outdoors in High Park for the honey beehive time capsules. It was filled with the sounds of bees and

the elements, as mystical poems of nature are read. Honeycombs, made from popsicle sticks, marked the path from human bee home to the three times capsule bee hives.

I combined both parts of the Mourning/Morning Meditation installation: the human hive provided space for personal reflection on the sense of 'place', and the three time capsule hives provided the opportunity for taking action by writing love poems.

### **Artists creating a sense of place**

Artist and academic, Lucy Lippard (1997) writes extensively about artists creating a sense of place through their art in *Lure of the Local*. Our lived-in landscape is a subjective experience. A landscape we know intimately becomes a 'place' instead of just some space because we have explore it and know it intimately. (p.7-8). She rightly reminds us that, as immigrants to this colonized land, "[f]ew of us in contemporary North American society know our place....For many, displacement is the factor that defines a colonized or expropriated place" (p.9). As a first generation Canadian, I can certainly relate to what Lippard is describing here. If I can't ever truly feel at home on this land, then perhaps I can take the imaginative inspirations that the land gives to me to create places to help connect to the land. In the Morning/Mourning Meditation installation, I was attempting to create an interior place to reflect on outside spaces; to perhaps create an opportunity for folks to create inside themselves a place that they could return to with their memory and imagination.

### **Feedback and Results from the Beehive Installation**

From the feedback that I received from all who entered the place of the human sized beehive, the installation did give them space to reflect.

I have yet to read any of the love poems folks wrote to the bees and left in the beehive time capsules. It feels like it would be an invasion of a sacred communication, while I am a growing ally, I am only the interspecies communicator. Perhaps I could arrange a kind of ritual and read them to a large bee colony. I need to hold onto these love poem time capsules until the bees are doing better.

I had a different approach for the human sized solitary bee hive. I left a soft fuzzy book in the beehive for the human bees to write or draw if they felt so inspired. Most people wrote kind words without offering how their perception may or may not have changed while hanging out in the beehive. A few reflected on our relationship with bees and the natural environment. They offered apologies to the bees and hopes for a better future. Others shared fears for the human population if bees cannot pollinate anymore. Some reflected on the magical abilities of the bees.

In general people were thankful for a space that was created that allowed them to slow down and contemplate. The music and poems read in the soundscape seemed to help with that contemplation. One person mentioned that she felt awkward and self-conscious coming into Crossroads. But once she was in the human hive made that fall away; the music and ambient sounds, the smells and space reminded her of camping in a forest glen.



MES student, Carmen articulated succinctly how art can relate to solidarity work by making the connection to community building. “This is a space to remember that being together, and working together Is What Makes Us Alive. We need small caves to be close to each other, to shape from our hearts and create stories. It’s a reminder of the importance of building our own spaces, our own systems, inside of institutionalized spaces and systems. The only way to create them is through sweet, slow environments.” Creating and sharing safe spaces become ‘places’ of memory, inside of our imagination. We can carry those experiences with us and recall them when we are in need of some mindful memories.

A few people remarked specifically on how the space made them feel and how it reminded them of places from memory. They shared that the hive reminded them of being outside, in nature, or feeling safe and protected, or feeling embraced by the earth while haven a simultaneous broken heart contemplating the destruction of bee habitat. The smell of cedar triggered childhood memories in person. And one serious meditator made the connection to the start of life and a deep sense of home when she wrote, “It feels restorative, like being in a womb.”

When doing it again, I would like to know whether people who ventured into the hive had already been exposed to a meditation practice. While I am sure everyone appreciated it on some level, I wonder if that template for mindfulness helped them to appreciate meditative spaces at a deeper level? This project helped me to start asking questions

about art, and the environment and meditation. I will keep on learning the more that I develop this installation, and idea.

From this Eco Art Ed installation, I learned that bringing the outdoors inside and creating a mindful art space in Crossroads Gallery was more helpful than attempting to bring people outside to do art and meditation. Inclement weather closed the school and cancelled the mask workshops in the late spring, but it was hard to get people outside even when the weather was good. A lot of people gave excuses that they were too busy and stressed to put aside time to do art and meditation outside, even though art and meditation have been noted to help with stress.

I wonder if providing the reflective space inside and meeting people where they are (rather than where I wish they would be) is the work I need to be doing right now. Rather than straining to organize folks to try and make contact with themselves and the land when they feel too stressed to take part, I now feel my efforts would be better utilized in providing meditative art experiences which allow the space for people to make contact within themselves, and to connect with their sense of place.

During the deconstruction, the beehive didn't want to come down. It resisted moving. I forgot to thank it. It was a good lesson for me. I need to remember that “spaces” created with intention become “places”.

## Going Forward

The Mourning/Morning Meditation installation was an unusual environmental education experience. The use of art allows for a much difference experience to be had, and it allows participants to utilize difference tools of perception to understand that experience. Many senses were stimulated, including sight, sound touch and smell. There was also the bee metaphor narrative at play, which would allow folks unfamiliar with science a way to approach the subjects of habitat destruction, pesticide use and climate change.

Lippard mentions that "... [e]very landscape is a hermetic narrative" (p.33). If we can find a way into the story, in this case a story about the changing environment and our place in it, then we can "fit in". The world makes sense when we find our place and are able to tell our stories from that place. As Lippard notes, it is "the stuff of identity and representation" (p.33).

Tackling the concepts of environmental identity, representation in the landscape and place-making art are heady concepts. To do that topic justice would need a few sessions or workshops. If I were to do the installation again, and fully cover those ideas, I would like to do a preliminary session with potential participants beforehand. I could also introduce mindfulness techniques so that the quiet still space of the human sized beehive could be fully enjoyed.

While I did reinstall the beehive in the FES lounge for orientation, the feeling was not the same. The space was too small, and the experience was marginalized. To do it again and do it justice, it would need to be outside somewhere; perhaps near Maloca or Blackcreek Farms.

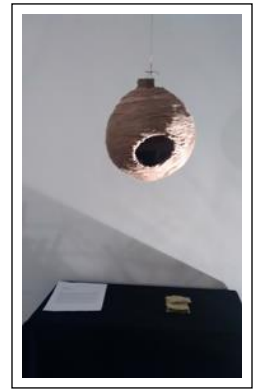
### **Future Plans**

I would like to build a human sized beehive outside to last a year throughout the seasons. This would be true "land art": art constructed or installed outside. Participants could help to build and install it. And it would be left open for them to come and go as they needed. Lippard mentions land art as having a great potential impact not just on the people who interact with it, but also on the land itself. The artwork "can change as the place changes, reflecting the reasons for the changes, good and bad, and functioning as a sort of community weather report" (p.288). If human sized bees like the solitary beehive and take care of it, it could become a place of refuge. It could become a "place" where they belong, but it would also be a place in their memory and imagination that they could carry with them.

The potential for this kind of art experience is huge and very promising, given the feedback from the Mourning/Morning Meditation exhibition. As Lippard says, art that "raises consciousness about land, history, culture, and place" can be a "catalyst for social change" (p.19). Combining art, environmental education and meditation is way to help people connect with themselves and their sense of place, whether it is inside or outside. In that way, their story of how they act in the world, and how they interact with the world changes. From the feedback that I received by beehive participants, providing

experiences and places like these do, indeed, help to shift ways of being and thinking, trigger memories, and even slow down breathing so that new stories can emerge into their fields of perceptions.

### Images from the Morning/Mourning Beehive Installation





# Conclusion

## Council of All Beings

I was lucky enough to recently attend a Council of All Beings gathering at the Unitarian Church in Toronto. Surrounded by mostly white women elders, some of whom were part of the political singing group, The Raging Grannies, we all talked about the need to be nature allies. The concept originally came from deep ecologists, environmental activists and Buddhists, Joanna Macy and John Seed, as a way to include a nature-based spiritual group experience to “directly challenge the anthropocentrism of industrial society” (Macy, *Coming Back to Life*, paragraph 2).

Macy, Seed, Arne Naess and Pat Fleming then developed the Council of All Beings idea by writing *Thinking like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* in 1988. In it, they talk about the grief we feel regarding our changing climate and the seeming impending mass die-off of species. They put forth the idea that we need collective grieving rituals to deal with that reality and to heal. The council of all beings has two-leggeds (humans) make masks and speak as part of non-human nature.

I first read about this kind of inclusionary council in Starhawk's *Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993), where the futuristic city council of San Francisco had people act as allies for animals, insects, plants, trees and the elements. They wear masks and costumes, and try to channel what their nature-based identity would say in a public forum. That practice seems predicated on a 'communitas' approach to nature.

In *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, D. Soyini Madison (2012) describes Victor Turner's take on spontaneous communitas as a kind of "moment of utopian unity, in which human differences and hierarchies seem to fade into perfect cohesion" (p. 175). It is a union beyond formal social bonds and is "experienced as a communion of individuals as equals, where all racial, class, gender, or structural divisions are dissolved in the spontaneous and immediate feelings of communion" (p. 175).

To incorporate this union between species, as nature-based allies in a formal governmental setting seems almost like it would be too good to be true, given the state of environmental distress and governmental dysfunction we are currently experiencing. But by methodically shifting how we see and treat each other, and our co-inhabitants on planet earth, and by using methodologies like cultural production, and meditation, we can make our way to living the future now.

In our Council of All Beings, we did meditations to relax and bring awareness to the present moment; then we moved on to theatre games to build trust and community spirit. We shared our pressing concerns and spoke about our objects that we brought for the



altar. We went outside to meditate on what life form wanted to speak through us. Using our nature-derived imaginations, we then spent a short time making our masks. We entered into the circle led by a flute-playing Forest Glade character. We spoke with passion.

I was a bee, of course.



I am not sure that all the two-leggeds were able to leave their human biases aside. But it did provide comfort and opened everyone up to new ways of looking at the challenges we face, by taking on the personalities and perspectives of other life forms. We ended by agreeing to help animals and plants with organizing a general strike against the colonizing humans powers that be; against the system of oppression that disrespects all life; against the schema that puts the two-leggeds at the top and everything else under ‘dirt’.

The Council of All Beings concept brings the nature-based ally work one step further to my research by bringing it into the physical realm. It asked us to shift perceptions, and then asked what physical actions we could take, on behalf of our allies. Community arts, environmental education and meditation, are the tools to help me continue with my methodology of making contact.

With the four projects that I have reflected on here, it seems that providing the meditative art experience and place, the beehive and mask-making workshops, were the most

successful. I learned decidedly that community arts can be used to help us make contact. Art practiced collectively has been used for community building, for activism, for advocacy, and for healing. It has given voice to those who have not been heard from traditionally. It allows those who would normally feel intimidated by cultural production practices to participate, and to explore being creative as well. Using community arts as a tool to investigate bee allyship allows us to expand our quotidian perspective and experience the worlds of our fellow critters in a different way.

### **Themes that emerged across all four projects**

The four community arts projects highlighted the practice of being a human ally for bees. They showed that making contact with our own nature through mindfulness meditation and art helps us make contact with other life forms. Meditation was shown to help shift perception, of ourselves and our relationship with the environment. Through being inspired by nature we can be an ally to the creatures of the earth. This further opens awareness to the differing intelligences that exist. With that knowledge, we can shift perception of how we view the earth and nature, and act to change our ways of living to be in harmony with our fellow earth allies.

Another theme that emerged was that people really need quiet spaces to make contact with themselves, and to contemplate their relationship to 'place'. So much healing is needed, both personally and collectively, and it is a worthy pursuit.

One of the biggest things I learned about myself through making contact with humans and bees alike is that I need to meet people where they are at, and not where I want them

to be. So often when thinking about the urgency of the global environmental situation, I am three steps ahead of myself. I can sometimes come off as intense or demanding, especially where animals and the environment are concerned. I am a long time vegan who wants the commodification of animals and the environmental devastation caused by factory farms to have stopped yesterday. By slowing down, through meditation and cultural production, I can be more present in the moment and meet people where they need me.

As well, eco-feminist perspectives and awareness of indigenous issues are needed in public schools, and in our wider culture. We need to evolve from a hierarchy to a circle, and to see ourselves as part of that circle, not on top of nature, or below other animals. We need to recognize the massive injustices that have historically happened, and still happen to First Nations peoples, and be open to those without societal privilege to share their truths. When we see ourselves as equal parts of a circle, we can be more open to speaking our truth. We can be more open to new ideas. We can hopefully expand our circle of community to include other life forms beside human animals.

### **What I learned from all four art projects**

I learned from this process that I need to keep following up. I need to facilitate community neuro-eco-art-ed projects that provide space for reflection. Reflection can sometimes carry on for days or weeks after the initial event, as one shift in perception leads to other shifts.

From my perspective, community arts are needed as a translator to communicate the abstract concepts of climate change science and environmental politics to the wider community. These kinds of interdisciplinary partnerships need to be developed further. People genuinely seem to care about bees as they recognize the biological importance of them on some level. But they don't know what to do about it or how their actions on a daily basis contribute to bees failing. More activism and more educational outreach is needed. Doing outreach with meditation and art makes it accessible and easier to understand.

Working within the school system, I will emphasize art and meditation activities done outside. I hope someday that art, meditation and healing will be incorporated in the school curriculum as a way for children to know themselves as part of their environment. Today, I don't really know how to influence governmental policy, but perhaps I can work with others who have that skill set, to incorporate more art and meditation. Perhaps someday, making contact through a Council of All Beings would be something that students can participate in.

Finally, I now know that talking about the difference between place and space and asking where we belong is a valuable discussion. It is a way in for people to make contact with themselves and how they relate to their outside environment, as well as their personal, internal environment. It is a way for them to shift the story they tell themselves about where and how they live with nature.

As an example, in “Ethical Imagining,” Leesa Fawcett (2000) talks about the idea of sharing stories with the flora and fauna of the earth. She describes an encounter she has with a moth, which inspires her to consider becoming a moth ally. “So thinking about that moth raises questions for me about agency (the moth’s and mine) and about reciprocal knowledge making” (p.136). By democratizing our approach to knowledge sharing and education, while looking at our own privileges and perspectives, we can begin the work of building solidarity with our fellow nature allies. “[A]cts of conscious critical positioning and taking responsibility for one’s partial perspectives can ground struggles over what gets to count as knowledge, in particular places, and with particular beings” (p.139). Fawcett reminds us that we “need to nurture our imaginations...so that we don’t reduce the unknown subjectivity of an ‘other’ being to the limited range of our own experiences” (p.140).

With the beehive and the mask making workshops, I tried to open up to the inspiration of the bees, using art and meditation as the bridge of communication. Fawcett asks: “how do we tell stories that acknowledge other animals/beings as subjects of lives we share, lives that parallel and interdependent in profound ways? How do we ensure that their voices are audible and that we can co-author environmental stories to live, teach and learn with?” (p.140). I feel that I told more of my story about the bees, with the film and the art lessons. I need to remember what Fawcett says; that non-human animals are autonomous beings with their own wills and purposes, and not objects in my stories.

Fawcett shares that humans “are social and political animals and we grow up in a storied world, listening, telling and re-telling. We are story-telling animals” (p.141). She goes on to argue that for us to care about the stories we tell, “they need to help us see with keen living attention, not naively, but with sense that smell, hear, taste, and touch environmental narratives in all their imagination, pain and grace” (p.143). Stories and the culture we produce need to help us viscerally feel that new worlds are possible. Those worlds are stewarded by different animals, insects, plants and trees.

In *Humans and Other Animals*, a book concerned in great detail with how animals are treated, how they communicate and how they are represented in culture, Barbara Noske (1989) reveals “Animals are not lesser humans; they are other worlds” (p.xi). Each life form could be considered a portal or gateway to other worlds, or other dimensions of reality. Meditation in natural spaces will help us shift our cognitive functioning, so that we can meet, peek through these doorways, and share our perceptions with these other worlds.

This experience would bring us to a state of *communitas*, or as Edith Turner (2012), describes it “a collective *satori* or *unio mystica*, but the phenomenon is far more common than the mystical states” (p.1). It is my goal that we humans experience *communitas* with nonhuman species as equals, to inform our allyship. It is through the practice of mindful meditation and feeling connected to something greater than ourselves, that we could reach that moment of community beyond barriers. It could be in this expanded state of awareness, and inspired by the ‘other’ worlds inhabited by animals, insects and plants,

where we can learn again what it means to feel at home in our own place on the land.

### Going forward

Going forward, I know that I need to continue with my flora and fauna allywork. I will continue with this healing work through community arts so that it is accessible. I will continue to develop my methodology and praxis of ‘making contact’. And I will continue to share that praxis of making contact through neuro-eco-art-education.

A practical suggestion for environmental education practices comes from Leesa Fawcett. From her experience as an environmental educator, she shares that one “way to encourage a kind of narrative intimacy in our teaching and learning is to have students pick a common, local organism of their choice (e.g.: plant, spider, mouse, ant, bird, or dog) to observe daily, and to create a journal about their relationship. I believe that by enlarging our direct experiences of other lives and other worlds we deepen our collective ethical imaginations. To observe, to give attention to another life is no small task in these days of hectic, frantic activity. It is in the fullness of such attention that possible new ethical relationships lie”. (p.146) This is an easy and fun activity for children and adults to do. Insightful discussions could take place which further help to make contact with the ‘local organisms’ and with the individual’s sense of place.

On a personal level, I need to re-wild the places inside myself that are broken and disconnected from nature. With the head injury I sustained, my brain got disconnected and I had to rewire my neural processing to function in society. Similarly, the places inside of me that feel alone and unseen need to be rewired and reconnected to thrive with

love and in community. I need to cultivate the sense of peace brought about by spending time in my place in nature. As well, I will keep connecting my personal, inner journey with that of the outer and greater journey of humanity's attempt to regain a sense of place in nature. By cultivating a sense of inner peace through art and mindfulness, I will help to create peace externally in my community.

## Conclusion

Even though we are increasingly merging our consciousness and nervous system with technology, to my perspective, nature is where the future lies. Everything comes from the earth, and everything will return to the earth. We have forgotten this, and so we have forgotten ourselves.

Donna Haraway (1992) tells us in "Otherworldly conversations; terrain topics; local terms", that nature is "a *topos*, a place...nature is, strictly, a commonplace" (p.67). Gods in 17<sup>th</sup> century England were spirits related to specific places on the land. "We need [these spirits] in order to reinhabit, precisely, *common* places - locations that are widely shared, inescapably local, worldly, enspirited; that is, topical. In this sense, nature is the place in which to rebuild public culture" (p.67). We can shift our perception to see nature as enspirited and conscious. We can view all life as other worlds in reciprocal, *communitas* relationships with us. We are surrounded by worlds to explore and we are worlds to be explored by them in return.



We are not the sole storytellers in this world and we need to listen to other creatures. “We can focus on ‘situated knowledges’ and we can highlight interdependence, imagination, mystery, and the co-authorship possible in our relationships to other beings. Critical-utopian narratives can disrupt the dominant story of human omnipotence, challenge the notion that humans are in the story all by themselves” (Fawcett, 2000, p.145).

Community rituals, using art and meditation, like the Council of All Beings, are a way to tell badly-needed new stories to a rapidly changing human world. I was always too scared to step into the role of facilitating community rituals as the responsibility seemed so great. However, with the experience that this master’s has given me, I would now feel more comfortable using these tools to create a communal culture of *communitas*. Indeed, during the commitment ceremony of my last healing class, I vowed to continue the work of community arts, animal rights awareness and healing.

Starhawk shares how she does this healing work through community ritual in *Earth Path* (2005). Similarly, I would like to continue to share practical exercises to do outside, to observe, to listen, and to hopefully gain knowledge "about how the natural world works by engaging our hearts and spirits as well as our minds--through storytelling, myth making, and trance journeys" (p.13).

Through collectively doing these exercises of art, meditation and making contact, hopefully the connection we feel will remind us what is important and inspire us to act. They help to form a vision for a way forward through the challenging times we will all face. We absolutely have the knowledge and the skill. As Starhawk writes, "it lies within

our human power to create economies and societies that can provide for our needs sustainably, that can create shared abundance while healing and restoring the environment around us, and that can nurture human freedom and creativity along with natural diversity and health" (p.14).

We just need the collective socio-political will to shift. I believe that shift will come from a collective shift in perception. By bringing together the tools of storytelling and art-making, meditation, perception, and education, along with spending time in community ritual and in the environment, we can create a collective sense of place. This in turn helps us to make contact and heal our relationship with ourselves and with the earth.

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# Appendix A

## Pollinate This! Building a Buzz with Bees Lesson plan

**Grade:** Primary to intermediate

**Time:** 1.5 hours

**Arts based learning:** meditation, drawing in sketch books, sculpture construction

**Discussion:** Many of the young children who attend the studio are terrified of bees, wasps and other small pollinators, so we will begin with a gentle introduction to bee culture, what they eat, how they see and communicate, and how their work helps to pollinate most of the plants we see. They will learn about bee culture and that some bees live alone in solitary hives, or others live in community hives.

### **Activity#1: Stretching, and Mindfulness exercise—guided meditation**

Spend five minutes stretching and doing ‘animal yoga poses’ like eagle, frog and dolphin, to get ready for sitting in meditation.



Mindfulness meditation: Just as we have a place, bees have their own places. Other creatures also consider this their place. Let's sit on the ground. For five minutes we will close our eyes and focus on extending our ears out to the edges of the green space, to hear the buzzing hum of nature. We will try to hear every single sound



### **Activity #2 How Bees See**

Bees see far into the ultraviolet spectrum and it helps them locate pollen and nectar very efficiently.

Children will take time to check out the flowers and plants, looking for bees pollinating.

The will draw the flowers in their sketch books, from multiple angles, to mimic the compound vision of bees.



Compound eyes    Bees' ultraviolet vision    Bees see super colour at super speed

### **Activity#3: Bee sculptures inspired by Toronto artist (and MES/15 grad)**

**Charmaine Lurch**



Supplies needed: recycled, multi-coloured, copper and aluminum wires, tissue paper, coloured twine, styrofoam balls, glue, scissors



Children will draw their ideas for bee sculptures and making their own bee habitats. After a demonstration of how to use the coloured wire and coloured twine, children will construct their own bee sculptures. In a circle, children reflect on the experience and discuss what they liked and what they found hard about the activity. Everyone has the chance to share their artwork.