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The Possibilities of Rhizomatic Imagination and Ecopedagogy Amid the End of an Era



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*Note: This essay is adapted from its original version as a script for a presentation delivered at the Spirituality and Sustainability Conference in Assisi, Italy, on 10 June 2023.

First, a vignette that encapsulates the main themes of the essay.

During early May 2023, just as the weather started feeling like spring in New England, I noticed a dove nesting in my neighbor's gutter. For three weeks, I observed with fascination and admiration as the dove diligently remained in place, awaiting the next generation to emerge from its shell of comfort. Then one day rain and thunder suddenly interrupted the weather pattern. A flash rainstorm—more common during summer—washed away the nest. The eggs, the very promise of new life, now lay cracked on the concrete ground. The dove would periodically return to where its nest once stood over the next three days or so. Was it hoping the rainstorm never happened... hoping the eggs were there or even hatched? Or did it forget about the deadly rainfall? Or was it mourning? Perhaps all of the above and more.

Was it all for naught? The entire process, from mating to laying the eggs to nesting... all the dedication and effort... for what? Is there a divine plan or reasoning behind it? Was there some telos that should serve as the foundation for futures? I think not. Climate change, the presence of the gutter, and bad luck all coalesced for a perfect storm that ensured the dove's

failure. A tragedy! Death that serves no *raison d'être*. A waste amid a necropolitical landscape. A wasteland that can teach if we are willing to learn.

What is possible is foreclosed by narratives that make anything other than its own storylines impossible. What decolonial scholars call the pluriverse is dominated and limited by the universe. The cacophony of dissonant and dislocated voices is silenced by the symphony of voices obsessed with their own melodies that play on loop across generations. Education is unable to teach beyond its own self references to a decaying culture, limiting the possibilities for what never was. Languages unable to allure: dead languages.

All our institutions, even progressive ones, are deeply embedded within the colonial matrix of power, which leads to a matrix of domination that emphasizes hierarchies, binary thinking, mechanistic separations, hyper-individualism and an uncritical acceptance of the way things are. So what to do?

I suggest we embrace the end of an era in order to dislodge stagnant imaginations and pedagogies. Portuguese sociologist Boaventura De Sousa Santos (2018) states: "Imagination of the end is being corrupted by the end of imagination" (p. ix).

"The end of an era." This catchphrase is common in our quotidian parlance. What



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does it mean, though? It usually means the end of some alleged coherent block of time, the passing of the torch from one generational representative to another or imagining the way things were—the fabled past—as no longer able to continue in the present. It is done. "Concluído". "Finito".

I usually approach with suspicion any narratives of a linear past, present and future. For me, time is rather messy—a sometimes cyclical, often chaotic, occurrence. I tend to agree with French philosopher Michel Foucault (2010), who describes history as one of domination upon domination. All histories repeat in cycles around power's multivalent distributions. Even the biblical book of Ecclesiastes raises the harsh reality that time is nothing but a repetitive cycle. For example: "There is nothing new under the sun." / "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever." / All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full" (NIV, 1:4-7).

Until now! Seas are indeed filling up and rising, disrupting ecosystems and bodies of all sorts, especially along coastal areas. The gift of prophecy is elusive. It might come in waves—if at all. In this case, the author of Ecclesiastes got it partially right. Yes, generations will come and go—and not just hominid ones—but earth will remain forever, though in a poisoned state. Biblical writers could not have imagined the catastrophic impact of homo sapiens, through technology, on the planet.



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But what about the promise of the rainbow? Was it not Yahweh's symbol of the covenant never to flood earth again? Genesis 9:14-15 states: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." Extinction level devastation was never to occur again. Never say never.

The end of an era? Divine protection is not guaranteed. Even faith in collective human agency is under suspicion—and rightly so. If at the end, what will our swan song be? Human all too human, of course. We deny and hope, especially at moments of deep existential and physical pain. Warding off the inevitable—this is the cycle of bodies, particularly of privileged bodies. Those in precarity, at the edge of nonexistence, know better.

Hopelessness, nihilism and lack of faith in collective agency envelop us like the waters on our vulnerable shores. Promises no longer hold their rhetorical weight.

Turning to the youth, I've often heard that they are tired of being told they will remedy all ills, solve all problems. They also say that they don't need any more science to convince them that things are awry. Enough with "hope" talk, they say. Their batteries are already depleted with energy-draining preoccupations like how to survive with low and stagnant wages that leave them vulnerable to the exuberant rising costs of living. And so we reach a major conundrum, a major roadblock, to transforming worldviews, to thinking and being otherwise. How can we expect youth to change lifestyles and imagine another world when current economic, political and religious systems—bolstered by educational paradigms—are all presented as sacred, as sacrosanct, as given... as the only possibilities then, now and forever?

Have we reached the end of an era in terms of imagining what is possible, in terms of even envisioning—dreaming about—other ways of thinking and being? Or have these "imaginings" always been the prerogative of a select few throughout history? Indeed they have. And those



select few recruit and coerce others to buy into the imaginations, the fictions. The ability to dream and to imagine is crucial. If that too is policed and disciplined, then we can forget about any lofty hopes of systemic change.

For unpoliced imaginations to take off, one must walk the tightrope of delving into the reality of inherent precarity experienced by most bodies while looking toward a different future. Bodies are always in motion through time and space, never settled in a wondrous but chaotic cosmos that precisely because of its vastness will remain ineffable and enigmatic. The Divine. Mystery. Clouds of unknowing.

Playing with ideas means fragmenting them and then arranging them into infinite constellations of possibility. To create is to express—and to imagine is to exercise divinity. Rubem Alves [2002] writes of teaching in the following way: “At the end, instead of having a clear, simple and cogent conclusion, what I had was a collection of fragments and a number of question marks...” [p. 7]. Fragments and question marks. These are teachers’ best friends, though they could always morph into enemies if not intentionally pursued. What does it mean to teach departures and not arrivals? What does it mean to learn always in motion, with moments of suspension? What does it mean to teach and learn as bodies subject to precariousness and/or precarity and so at the mercy of life’s inherent vicissitudes?

To help us begin to think about these questions, I turn to a “rhizomatic imagination” or way of thinking. French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari [1987] define a rhizome in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* “as a continuously growing horizontal underground stem that puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals” (p. 22). Rhizomes have no center; they conjure images of multiplicities, assemblages of all kinds (including unexpected ones) that are always in movement. They are decentered and always travelling in unexpected directions, with no telos or end point. Rhizomes can spring up in several forms and at different junctures. And they are always in between, “interbeing intermezzo,” messing with fixed borders or even with settled concepts of self. Rhizomatic connections, then, are transformational, multiplicitous; they are offshoots that form unexpected alliances across seemingly irreconcilable differences [Baldelomar, 2022].

Thinking and being rhizomatically open us toward forging paths—other synapses and portals—toward a pluriversal reconception of our own positionalities and epistemes. This renders any one worldview—any one consciousness or educational paradigm—as simply one among a multitude of possibilities.

In pedagogical terms, rhizomatic learning is always open to any and all connections beyond the systematic, strategic or rational, though it no doubt recognizes

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their importance. And that is the key: rhizomatic education does not conceive of learning and teaching as dualistic. All is useful in forging knowledges, worldviews, and worlds. Nothing is to be discarded, for one cannot know what combinations of fragments or offshoots will emerge for complex beings such as we. Such learning and teaching are always in motion and fluid, much like our bodies and lives, despite our futile attempts to be arboreal and planted.

The most important questions for me today are: how can we allure through what we teach while sitting in contexts that might not, to put it colloquially, have light at the end of the tunnel? How does our flesh both limit and expand what can be taught as bodies of all kinds die so that we may live?

A possible pedagogical offshoot of rhizomatic imagination is an ecopedagogy that can guide us through a collapsing era. It is a pedagogy with roots in critical theory and the Global South, especially in Brazil, that critically unites human rights with the rights of earth, which the Earth Charter so cogently underscores. Ecopedagogy seeks to envision other worlds through an integral ecology that disrupts normative anthropocentric, ego-centered, market-oriented educational philosophies and paradigms. It straddles utopia and reality, never peddling denial of our collective precarious state. At its center is the importance of non-Western, non-Global North knowledges for fresh imaginations, collaborations, and creative [transformative] energies [Antunes and Gadotti, 2005].

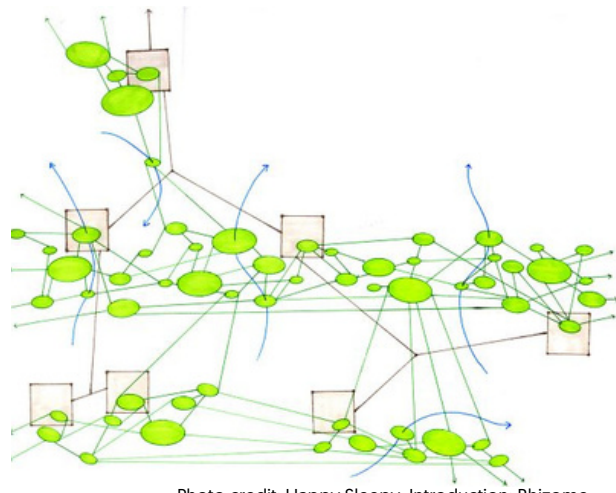


Photo credit: Happy Sleepy. Introduction: Rhizome

Ecopedagogy can enhance ecoliteracy and education for sustainability both conceptually and practically to cultivate two broad aspects crucial to confronting the ecological crisis: 1) critical imagination and creativity, which are essential to transforming paradigms and worldviews often trapped by simplistic religious and ecological narratives of our [usually exalted] place within the matrix of life and the cosmos; and 2) ability to sit in the “dark night of the soul” in order to honestly engage [to radically accept] and mourn the mass suffering and death [necropolitics] of all species and life on earth. Ecopedagogy demands that we accept our roles in perpetuating death-dealing paradigms [imagination] and practices.

If we are to emerge in states of decreased precarity, our thinking must be chaotic and eclectic, imaginative and creative, playing with categories in the process of undoing them. Only then will fragments emerge that might, just might, result in life-giving constellations.



Principle 14 of the Earth Charter—which gels perfectly with ecopedagogy’s goal of paradigmatic, systemic transformation—reminds us that formal education and life-long learning should integrate the knowledge, values and skills needed for a sustainable way of life. The arts and humanities figure prominently into this. We can allure through words and dance, painting and poetry, music and thought experiments. But most importantly, we must let all our surroundings and its inhabitants, from the micro to the macro to the cosmic, teach us. Beauty and ugliness should inspire both awe and dread.

The end of an era is a welcome prospect for bodies in movement, for imaginations taking flight to worlds not yet here, for beings seeking guidance for what never was but what could be.

Continually unlearn in order to re-learn and learn anew, especially from multiple sources. That is our best “hope” for any prospects of finding pockets of air in an increasingly suffocating environment replete with cracked eggs.

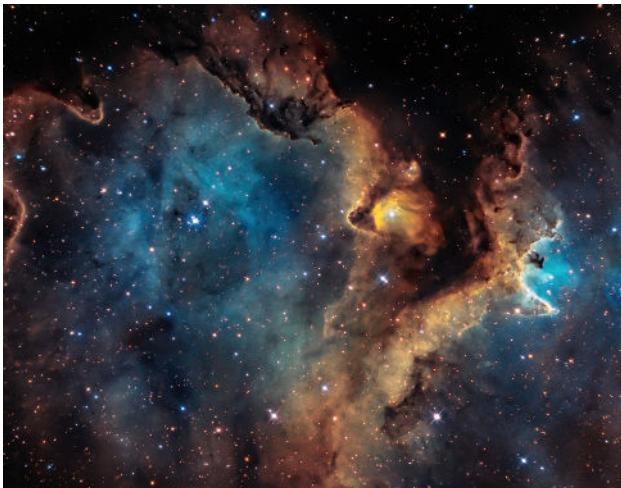


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