An Ethics Of Embodiment, Civic Engagement and A/R/Tography: Ways Of Becoming Nomadic In Art, Research And Teaching

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The notion of an embodied subject is central to my understanding of living in the world as difference. I take the concept of the body to be a flow of energies and surface intensities; a complex interplay of social and affective forces. This is a shift away from the psychoanalytic idea of the body as a map of semiotic inscriptions and culturally enforced codes, towards an understanding of the embodied subject as becoming, as enfleshed.

Embodiment becomes a process of encounters, emphasizing our continual interactions with other bodies (Weiss, 1999). This suggests that the production of knowledge is not created within a single, autonomous body, but through the intermingling between bodies. Embodiment is thus, relational (Springgay & Freedman, 2007; Springgay 2008). Relationality is connected to notions of responsibility that I will argue, recognize the limits of knowability. In this sense then, ethics refers to not only the conditions by which we encounter difference, to embodied subjectivity, but also entertains questions for educators about knowledge production—ways of being and living a/r/tographically.

In order to consider an ethics of embodiment, I make eclectic use of various philosophers and critical theorists. Not all of their positions are compatible and I do not make any attempt
to synthesize them, allowing for their contradictions and tensions to complicate my thinking. And, as it often happens when trying to make sense of something, I further tangle these theories with visual art. Therefore, in laying down my understanding of ethics, I engage with art work created by Rebecca Belmore[1]. Moreover, I make another connection between Belmore’s work and a/r/tographical research, arguing that her work embodies the qualities of a/r/tography, by exposing us to a fluid, in process, and non-unitary vision of subjectivity.

For instance in the video installation “Fountain” movement and sensation are experienced as “affections localized within the body” (Kennedy, 2004, 118), thus materializing a pedagogical encounter imbued with forces, oscillations, intensities, and energies. The video projection captures the performance of a lone figure—the artist—moving along the shore of an industrial beach near Vancouver, British Columbia. The cold, grey winter day, adds to the bleakness of her surroundings. The solitary figure flails in the water near the shore, struggling with a bucket. She then kneels and holds the vessel beneath the surface of the water, only to rise and walk, again, along the beach. She stops abruptly and throws the contents of the pail outwards, so that it splashes up against what is perceived to be the screen of the camera. What at first appears distant and separate from the viewer becomes immediate and intimate, conflated by the fact that the water has turned to thick, red blood. The blood oozes and drips along the skin of the film (Marks, 2000) fragmenting and distorting the image. The action is further altered as the viewer watches this performance through quite literally, falling water.

Rebecca Belmore’s “Fountain,” compels us into a place of knowing that is aware of how much it does not know, leading us to an elsewhere that is replete with what Barbara Kennedy (2004) calls an “aesthetic of sensation.” An aesthetic of sensation “is not dependent on recognition or common sense” (110), but operates as force and intensity, and as difference. This, argues Kennedy, has significance for the way we approach perception. Images shift from representation to a material embodied encounter as sensation. An aesthetics of sensation is not an aesthetic based on normalcy or structuralist semiotics, but an aesthetics that vibrates and reverberates in modulation with, in, and through bodied encounters, shifting such concepts as “beauty” from form, to a process, an assemblage.

I see Belmore’s work as a kind of figuration (see Braidotti, 2002/2006) or a materialistic cartography of embodied positions. Figurations de-centre images offering multi-layered visions of the subject that are dynamic, accentuating that we live in a world that is always in transition, hybrid, and nomadic, “and that these stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation” (Braidotti, 2002/2006, 2). Belmore’s works become living maps, a transformative account of the embodied subject. They are not metaphors, but highly specific figurations that account for power-relations, agency, and corporeality.
Embodiment, desire, and nomadic becomings

A deleuzian body is dynamic, creative, and full of plentitude, potential, and multiplicities. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) conceptualization of the body as a series of processes, flows, energies, speeds, durations, and lines of flight is altogether a radically different way of understanding the body and its connections with other bodies and objects. The body, they argue neither harbours consciousness nor is it biologically pre-determined, rather it is understood through what it can do—its processes, performances, assemblages and the transformations of becoming.

Not only do they propose very different models of materiality and encounters between bodies, they also develop a different understanding of desire. Desire, they contend, is a process, something that can be produced when new kinds of assemblages are created. It is not a desire for something, a desire determined and organized through a norm, but a desiring production that makes its own connections.

Desire, writes Rosi Braidotti (2002/2006) “is for me a material and socially enacted arrangement of conditions that allow for the actualization (that is, the immanent realization) of the affirmative mode of becoming” (99). Desire is the activity or encounters between multiple forces and the “creation of new possibilities of empowerment” (99). Desire posited as force (not as lack) proposes an embodied subject that is dynamic, corporeal, and in-process.

Reconceptualizing desire as production, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) posit the Body without Organs (BwO). The BwO is a body without discrete organizing principles. This is not to say that it is an empty body, but that it does not organize itself according to hierarchical orders such as those associated with the functions of organs. The concept of an egg helps to describe the processes of a BwO. An egg (embryonic) is a system of flows and intensities. It has no boundaries and represents potentiality before individualization. Its becoming is organized through various forms that could always have been otherwise—change is constant and inevitable.

The BwO involves a letting go of determinate properties; a deterritorialization that allows for new assemblages. This mutable, amorphous, body knowledge resists predisposed patterns in exchange for assemblages that constantly mutate and transform. Tasmin Lorraine (1999)
suggests that the BwO opens up awareness to creative processes by challenging “one’s sense of corporeal boundedness and one’s social identity as well as one’s perceptions and conceptions of everyday life” (171). It is a concept which challenges the traditional mind or body dualism of Western thought. Focusing on processes rather than substances, the body’s becoming subverts conventional boundaries while suggesting new forms of living in the world.

In exploring the concept of relations it is necessary to try to understand Deleuze’s work regarding becoming. Becoming, according to Deleuze, refutes notions of a fixed identity or teleological order, replacing it with a nomadic and creative body. Subjectivity then, exists in flux, as affect, and through rhizomatic assemblages (Kennedy, 2004). Nomadic subjectivity is experimental, producing new alignments, linkages, and connections. Through forces and desires that act as empowering modes of being, nomadic becomings constitute ethical relations.

Rebecca Bilmore Vigil Courtesy of the artist

**An ethics of embodiment**

Feminist poststructuralists argue that ethics is concerned with affect and desire, and less to do with the moral content of actions, behaviours, or logic. Alterity, otherness, and difference are important terms of reference in feminist poststructuralist ethics (Braidotti, 2006; Ahmed, 2000). Thus, an ethics of embodiment, defined by processes, movement, desire, and force is materialized through sensation.

Ethics in a poststructuralist sense is not confined to rights, justice, or the law, but is embedded in notions of political agency and the management of power-relations (Braidotti, 2006). When education takes up the project of ethics as morality, it is interested in particular principles that govern bodies such as regulations, laws or guidelines (Todd, 2003). In this instance morals are designed to assist students in learning how to live and act. It is made into concrete practices, duties, and systems of oppression. Sharon Todd (2003) suggests that an ethics understood through social interaction, and where knowledge is not seen as absolute gives importance to the complexities of the ethical encounter. This, Todd and Ahmed both claim, insists on transitioning from understanding ethics as epistemological (what do I need to know about the other) and rather problematizes ethics through a relational understanding of being.
For example, in discussing Luce Irigaray’s account of sexual difference, Judith Butler (2006) argues that an ethics premised on “imagining oneself in the place of the other and deriving a set of rules of practices on the basis of that imagined and imaginable substitution” (111) assumes a symmetrical positioning of subjects within language. This substitution “becomes an act of appropriation and erasure” (111) and thus ethics is reduced to an act of domination. Rather, the ethical relation emerges between subjects when one recognizes that self and other are incommensurable.

I am not the same as the Other: I cannot use myself as the model by which to apprehend the Other: the Other is in a fundamental sense beyond me and in this sense the other represents the limiting condition of myself. And further, this Other, who is not me, nevertheless defines me essentially by representing precisely what I cannot assimilate to myself, to what is already familiar to me. (Butler, 2006, 111)

Such an understanding discloses the impossibility of putting oneself in the place of others. In a performance entitled “Vigil” Belmore embodies and bears witness to the missing women from the downtown east side of Vancouver since the 1980s. In the eyes of the authorities, these unnamed missing women were insignificant because they were native and worked in the sex trade. When questions of a serial killer were proffered the police responded that there were no bodies and that the women who led erratic lives were impossible to trace (Watson, 2002). In 2001 an intense examination of a pig farm in the lower mainland of British Columbia revealed DNA from numerous missing women. The list of DNA findings continues to grow.

“Vigil” is a thirty minute performance (and subsequent video installation) acted out at the corner of Gore and Cordova Streets in the downtown east side of Vancouver, the site of many of the missing women’s abductions. In the performance the women’s first names are written in black marker on Belmore’s arms. Screaming these names she rips a rose and its thorns through her teeth. Through her own body Belmore embodies the crimes committed against the native body, the woman’s body, and the social body. Her performance does not claim to speak “for” the missing women, nor about their lives and experiences, but rather weighs heavy with the flesh of the body. It is not possible to assert a feminine kinship with Belmore, or with the women whose lives are implicit in her work on the basis of identifying with some universal female experience; what we as viewers/co-participants experience is an awareness of the importance of the knowledge of the body as we engage in relations of bodied encounters.

“Vigil” is a figuration, a performance of becoming-ethical, transforming the affirmative power of life (as opposed to rules and moral principles) into affects. These affects of sensation are collective, not in the sense that we experience them together or in the same way, but that the forces of knowing lie in the relationality between and among bodies. Desire connotes the subjects’ own investment—or enfleshment—in the network of interrelated affects.

Butler (2006) in her re-visitation of the work of Irigaray contends that the ethical relation is premised on the “never yet known, the open future, the one that cannot be assimilated to a knowledge that is always and already presupposed” (115). Ethics does not claim to know in advance, “but seeks to know who that addressee is for the first time in the articulation of the question itself” (115). This argument, Butler (2006) suggests poses a more difficult question: “How to treat the Other well when the Other is never fully other, when one’s own separateness is a function of one’s dependency on the Other, when the difference between the Other and myself is, from the start equivocal” (116).
It is the never yet known that Todd (2003) argues is at the heart of pedagogical relationships, stating that “our commitment to our students involves our capacity to be altered, to become someone different than we were before; and, likewise, our students’ commitment to social causes through their interactions with actual people equally consists in their capacity to be receptive to the Other to the point of transformation” (89).

Thus, ethics shifts inquiry from “getting to know the other” to a processes of becoming that are themselves ethical in nature. Todd (2003) explores this sense of lived ethics in her discussion on teaching.

Teaching would not be focused on acquiring knowledge about ethics, or about the Other, but would instead have to consider its practices themselves as relation to otherness and thus as always already potentially ethical—that is, participating in a network of relations that lend themselves to moments of nonviolence.” (p.9)

We cannot create a simple list of expected behaviours and have them function as ways of being ethical rather ethics itself involves a rethinking of embodiment through desire as force. This argues Todd (2003) moves us from empathetic understandings where the Other is ultimately consumed, to openness and risk, attention to ambiguity and to what we cannot know beforehand, and “to be vulnerable to the consequences and effects that our response has on the Other” (88).

It is these acts of engagement that are taken up and embodied in Belmore’s actions. Another of Belmore’s installations also makes reference to missing bodies and likewise enacts the theories of flesh that it also interrogates. “Blood on the Snow” evokes the massacre by the United States Calvary at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota. On December 29, 1890 some three hundred unarmed Sioux, mostly women and children, were killed. The bodies, frozen under a blanket of snow, lay obscured for four days before being buried in mass graves. This slaughter is marked as one of the most violent incidents in the history of the American settlement of the west. The installation includes a chair enveloped and surrounded by an expanse of white quilted fabric onto which blood red pigment seeps. The comfort and purity of the white quilt is violated, white violated by red blood.

If we take “Blood on the Snow” as a figuration it becomes an expression of the body in space and time. Deterritorializing and destabilizing any certainty of the subject, figurations “allow for a proliferation of situated or ‘micro’ narratives of self and others” (Braidotti, 2006, 90) and re-articulate the relations between bodies. Producing an alternative and relational mapping of a nomadic subject, Belmore’s installation challenges the idea of location and particularity. Releasing subjectivity from any notion of containment or knowability, an ethics of embodiment insists that particularity “does not belong to an other, but names the meetings and encounters which produce or flesh out other, and hence differentiate others from other others” (Ahmed, 2002, 561). Ethics is concerned with the processes of encounters, the relationality and affects that are materialized through nomadic becomings. An ethics of embodiment “opens the possibility of engagement with others as genuine others, rather than as inferior, or otherwise subordinated, versions of the same” (Gatens, 1996, 105).

Belmore’s art highlights the need to find alternative ways of re-conceptualizing the body outside of the binaries that reduce it to an object; to an Other. In her performative–installations we are offered flesh filled singular gestures that place the body of the artist, the
body of the women, and the body of the viewer at the in-between. The implications of such a way of thinking are bound up with understanding the relations between identities rather than in terms of describing identities, intensions, or acts of individuals or groups. Her art, I argue, maintains the alterity and unknowability of the Other.

In 2002, when Belmore performed “Vigil” on the streets of Vancouver, fifty-one women had been “identified” using DNA. Many more women were still “missing.” Slaughtered body parts were still being unearthed on a pig farm. Fifty-one roses slashed through screaming teeth. Fifty-one names articulated, opened, and embodied. Understood in this way the never yet known becomes an interstitial space, the in-between, the space of perverse mutation, and force. The possibility, or impossibility, of the never yet known invites us to face the Other not through particularities that are descriptions of her body, but as bodied encounters. Beyond the veil of blood, “Fountain”, “Vigil”, and “Blood on the Snow” offer the power to conceive of knowledge and research as embodied and becoming.

What I’d like to do now is shift this discussion of ethics to a/r/tography in an effort to provide some (incomplete) thoughts on ethics in education—particularly in terms of research and teaching.

A/r/tography and the ethical relation

A/r/tography, an emerging arts-based research methodology, has been theorized using concepts from Deleuzian philosophy, namely the rhizome (see Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Gu, & Bickel, 2007). A rhizome is an assemblage that moves and flows in dynamic momentum. The rhizome operates by variation, perverse mutation, and flows of intensities that penetrate meaning, opening it to what Jacques Derrida (1978) calls the “as yet
unnamable which begins to proclaim itself” (293). It is an in-between space, open and vulnerable, where meanings and understandings are interrogated and ruptured.

It is precisely the in-between of thinking and materiality that invites educators to explore the interstitial spaces of art making, researching, and teaching. According to Elizabeth Grosz (2001) the in-between is not merely a physical location or object but a process, a movement and displacement of meaning. It is a process of invention rather than interpretation, where concepts are marked by social engagements and encounters.

Concepts, argue Deleuze and Guattari (1994) “are centres of vibrations, each in itself and every one in relation to all the others. This is why they all resonate rather than cohere or correspond with each other” (23). Meaning and understanding are no longer revealed or thought to emanate from a point of origin rather they are complex, singular, and relational. As such, a/r/tographical texts are not places of representations where thought is stored “but are a process of scattering thought; scrambling terms, concepts, and practice; forging linkages; becoming a form of action” (Grosz, 2001, 58). As living inquiry, a/r/tography expresses meaning as figuration, the never yet known.

The features of a/r/tography are theorized, described, and exemplified in numerous other texts (see Springgay, 2008; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo &Gouzouasis, 2008). What interests me, in this paper, is to push a/r/tography to the limit of knowability; to examine it in relation to ethics and embodiment. In doing so, some of my thinking may in fact challenge previous mappings. In particular, I am thinking about the six renderings used to describe a/r/tography: living inquiry, contiguity, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations, and excess (see Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005). As I’ve introduced already, Belmore’s work deterritorializes any notion of a metaphor through the concept of figurations. Therefore, what I’d like to do in this section is examine her photograph “Fringe”, as a way to de-centre some of the existing work on a/r/tography.

“Fringe” is near life-size backlit photograph of a woman, naked but for a white sheet over her hips, lying on her side facing away from the viewer. On her back is a huge wound starting at her right shoulder and ending below her left hip. The wound is sewn together, and hanging from the stitches are the beginnings of beadwork; small red beads on decorative threads hanging from the grotesquely damaged skin.

A violent and visceral image by all accounts, there is a dynamic sensation of life’s positivities, energies, and becoming that flows through the violence. Beneath the horror that the image implies, lies a rich, effusive confirmation of hope, of life’s volatility and its germinal possibilities. Life continues and evolves, despite and because of the horrors of colonialism, genocide, rape and murder. There is a need to look at the image as an event of movement and becoming, rather than as a text with a meaning. Her back to us, our gaze is disorientated, disavowing spectatorial identifications. Read molecularly, the image is a process of becoming, an event of experience, an intervention.

Altering our understanding of the image as a metaphor (for Colonialism, violence against women, racism, teaching and learning, etc.) to one of figurations means we need to re-think what it means to be in relation. Considering “Fringe” as a figuration of a research methodology, the image emphasizes that research—the intervention—must share the conditions of a situation, and the outcomes it brings about. If it is to be experimental, it must not only be interested, but involved, which means that it cannot be blind to the conditions of its own production, the systems of relations that grant it credence.
This means that the processes of research and its outcomes need to be responsive to each other, and it is this responsiveness, or responsibility that is inherent in an ethics of embodiment, a form of civic engagement that is produced in the chaotic networks of relations. As a mode of theorizing multiplicities, a/r/tography is embedded in imagination and experimentations of force and desire. As such, a/r/tography is a process of endless questioning, a “thinking [that] involves a wrenching of concepts away from their usual configurations, outside the systems in which they have a home, and outside the structures of recognition that constrain thought to the already known” (Grosz, 2001, 61).

Artists engaged in relational art practices (see Bourriaud, 2002) are less concerned with an artistic product (eg. painting or sculpture) and invested in the desire to create active subjects through participation, collaboration, and community-building (Bishop, 2006). Relational or socially-engaged art focuses on the collective elaboration of meaning and aims to produce new social relationships and thus new social realities, or what Daren O’Donnell (2006) refers to as “an aesthetic of civic engagement,” whereby art is based on social relationships that make culture and creativity a central part of civic life. It is the processes of participation that are the works of art themselves. While Belmore’s work would not necessarily be characterized as relational art, in that they are not performances that directly involve audience/participants,[2] understood as figurations, they become nomadic assemblages that transform passive reactions on our part into active desire.

The conditions of possibility for such as ethical position rely on an opening up of spaces in which to activate a productive force. It is potentia that constitutes the opening of time engendering the possibility of hope. Braidotti (2006) contends: “To desire a vibrant, affirmative and empowering present is to live in intensity and thus to unfold possible futures” (154). Becoming thus marks a new political ontology, which takes the form of a radical ethics of civic engagement.

In/of blood

Bodies are embodied and relational entities fully immersed in networks of complex interactions and transformations. Nomadic subjectivity is a process that aims at flows of interconnections, affects, and desires. Embedded in the corporeal materiality of the self, potentia embraces discontinuity, multiplicity, and the never yet known. This does not mean, as Braidotti (2006) so aptly argues, that to be nomadic is a form of limitlessness. On the contrary, the never yet known, the openness through which nomadic becomings are continuously re-configured, is an ethical relation, a receptiveness, a sustained engagement with what we can not hold or grasp.

At the threshold of the limit, or what I am calling civic engagement, is a radically immanent intensive body, an assemblage of forces, flow, intensities, and passions. The exquisitely braided threads and tiny red beads that leak out of the sutured wound in “Fringe” speak of this relationality, the particularity of the encounter between self and Other, that can not be fixed, immobilized, or known. Figurations do not imply an erasure of memory, violence, guilt, or empathy, but unravel a becoming responsive that creates positive energy in the process. The conditions which encourage this engagement are embodied in a/r/tography, a methodology of living in the world in such a way that we become accountable for our actions, we abandon the humanistic vision of the self in favour of a nomadic and relational cartography, and we shift into a space of becoming ethical. This is the potentia of art, research, and teaching.
References


**About the Author**

**Stephanie Springgay** is an Assistant Professor of Art Education and Women’s Studies at Penn State University. Her research and artistic explorations focus on issues of *relationality* and an *ethics of embodiment*. In addition, as a multidisciplinary artist working with installation and video-based art, she investigates the relationship between artistic practices and methodologies of educational research through a/r/tography. She is the co-editor of *Curriculum and the Cultural Body*, Peter Lang (2007) with Debra Freedman and author of *Body Knowledge and Curriculum: Pedagogies of touch in youth and visual culture*, Peter Lang (2008). Currently she is involved in a Youth Participatory Action Research study with African American youth exploring the ways they use contemporary art practices as forms of civic engagement and social justice youth development.

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[1] The interpretations of Rebecca Belmore’s work are the author’s, intersected with writing by contemporary art scholars, feminist theories, and conversations with the artist. The style of writing used to discuss her work follows closely the work of such visual cultural theorists as Irit Rogoff (2000), and while may appear different from traditional writing in education, it attempts to write in the in-between. In other words the author understands contemporary works of art as theoretical, and thus theory and art interpretation are not intended to be “separate” but embodied and enmeshed.

[2] For instance, O’Donnell, a Toronto based artist, is well known for his public “Q & A” sessions, where members of the public interview ask strangers questions with the sole purpose being, the asking of questions, or the art of inquiry. It is not the answers to the questions, or composite characters drawn from the Q & A sessions that become works of art, but the act of inquiry itself.