

Beyond Acting-With: Places as Agents?

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> Abstract • I argue that Candiotto's account of loving presumes *participating-with* a system, rather than *acting-with* a system. I explore the implication of this: that to love a place we must understand places as agents.

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« 1 » I agree with Laura Candiotto that listening is a crucial part of enactive thought and that this “listening” is an active, engaged “letting-be” of the other that can be characterized as love. I also agree that we should engage with nature in this way. However, this presumes a “participation-with” an other rather than what I suggest we call an “acting-with,” which does not require the other to be an agent in their own right. Candiotto (§40) raises the possible objection of using the concept of “participation-with” non-human others, but – as far as I can see – she responds that we can participate-with other (non-human) organisms such as animals and plants in virtue of their shared aliveness (§40). Even if we grant this (as I am prone to do), I worry that her proposal fails to avoid the problem for the following reason. Candiotto's account of loving nature rests on loving (and therefore listening to) a place. However, even on a very liberal account of agency where we might be happy to see individual non-human others and potentially even whole ecosystems as agents, it would be difficult to understand a place to be an agent. This would imply that we cannot “participate-with” a place but only act-with it. In which case, it is unclear that we should think about our engagement in these cases as “listening” rather than just appropriately responding. In this commentary, I outline my reasoning for this conclusion.

« 2 » The purpose of the target article is to propose a new account of loving nature by extending the enactive approach of social interaction, loving, and knowing to

the domain of nature. Candiotto's motivation seems to be not purely abstract curiosity about the nature of “love of nature” but is rather guided by an ethical imperative: we should care about what is happening to the world. However, caring about what is happening to the world is not sufficient. Just because I think I love the world (or think of myself as a “nature-lover”) does not mean I do. As the well-known aphorism by Thich Nhất Hạnh goes: “To love without knowing how to love wounds the person we love” (Nhất Hạnh 2015). Perhaps, less well-known is the continuation of this thought in the subsequent sentence: “To know how to love someone, we have to understand them. To understand, we need to listen” (ibid).

« 3 » I take this kind of thought to motivate Candiotto's proposal in her article that we should love nature in a particular way. It is not sufficient that I have a strong affective feeling towards something, value it, care about its well-being, or feel connected. These might all be experiences of a loving feeling or at least a feeling of other-directed concern. Still, these experiences – individually or taken together – are not sufficient (perhaps not even necessary) for genuine love. For Candiotto (drawing on work by Hanne De Jaegher on engaged epistemology, “letting-be” and loving knowing), love is a kind of “existential engagement in a dialectic of encounter” (§2). The particular characteristic of this existential engagement is “an [...] openness to the other that lets the other be” (§32). Reminiscent of Nhất Hạnh's advice (above), she terms this “enactive listening.” This is an important concept that tracks what has been pointed to, and gestured at by applications of the enactive approach to various areas. Nevertheless, I worry that applying it here to the realm of nature might trivialize the notion of “participation-with” that is crucial for the very grounds of this approach.

« 4 » This concept of “enactive listening” captures a way of engaging with others that has its roots deep in the enactive literature (e.g., Thompson 2007; De Jaeger & Di Paolo 2007). Indeed, I would argue that it is a natural consequence of taking ourselves to be self-organizing systems that interact with other self-organizing systems by perturbing them rather than “communicating information.” This is because perturbations (no matter whether their cause is social or otherwise)

must not result in the perturbed system's losing its organizational dynamics (by disintegrating) or losing its autonomous dynamics (by becoming controlled by another system). Ezequiel Di Paolo, for example, has recently characterized the “thinking style” of the enactive approach as one of listening.¹ For Di Paolo, this is a way of understanding how enactivists engage with the world dialectically, taking the world neither as the object of study from which they are separate and of which they are an observer, nor as part of a whole, with which they are one, but, instead, as connected but distinct parts of a system. This tension between being both open to the world and distinguishing oneself from it as an identity is fundamental to our emerging as agents. The dialectic is the movement between these poles, and – as I understand him – our agency consists in finding a balance between them. This should not be conceived as a static balance where once the middle point is reached one remains there (a kind of balance that is a little too fragile – it can easily be lost with a slight perturbation). It is rather a dynamic balance of the kind you get when you are standing on a small boat and let your legs step with the movement of the boat to adjust to any perturbations by going with the movements a little deeper if need be. You are neither controlled by the boat nor control it but respond to it appropriately, moving with it depending on your body shape and size and how much turbulence you enjoy or want to induce.

« 5 » Should we think of this as “a dialectic of encounter” and “an openness to the other that lets the other be”? In one sense, yes, as these capture something of the lack of ambition to control or dominate the boat. Instead, we move “with” the boat to both retain our viability and its (as my viability here depends upon the boat's). Of course, the boat and its rocking have their own dynamics, which I must adapt to in order to be appropriately responsive to it. I must allow these dynamics to entrain me and then subtly bring it about such that I entrain the boat if I want to steer the direction of the process, all without a breakdown in these dynamics. I

1 | See, e.g., Di Paolo's recent talk “Enaction and the Dialectics of Nature” at the Varela International Symposium 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cqh81UnNCMM>

am, therefore, working “with” the boat (rather than against it) in my attempts to master/survive the situation. This is, of course, a lesson that goes as far back as the well-known story in the Zhuangzi where the old man swimming through the whirlpools of the waterfall surprises Confucius by surviving with ease – by going with the water rather than struggling against it (see, e.g., Karyn Lai (2022), who discusses this example with respect to agency).

« 6 » This notion of “with” is, however, extremely one-sided, even when we are working with systems with their own dynamics, and even when those systems are self-organizing and self-sustaining, such as a whirlpool. When we interact with them, these systems do not flexibly adapt to our perturbations of them (even over time), but either rebound and sustain their dynamics or dissipate. That is to say, they are not agents. When we interact with them, the “with” is all on our side. We are the ones who are flexibly adaptive, who are appropriately responsive, and not them. The “with” still captures an important difference in the manner of my attitude and behaviour, which distinguishes that manner from acting “on” or “to” it. Nevertheless, I am the one who balances with the boat, as it is the surfer who surfs with the waves, and the old man who swims with the whirls and eddies. Moreover, because I am the one doing the “with-ness,” any “letting-be” that I do is to refrain from interacting by trying to control the other rather than a letting-be of another system to unfold in relation to me in the encounter. There will, of course, be some changes as a result of my actions, and these might, in a sense, unfold over time, but as the other in this context is not an agent, it does not participate in letting me let it be. That is, there is no genuine encounter here.

« 7 » The examples I have been using are purposefully non-organic. We cannot take it as read that plants should not be considered agents (or even cognitive) in enactive thinking.² I am therefore very open to the idea that, over a suitable timescale, we can “encounter” plants (and other organisms) and therefore,

2| For fascinating work on plant cognition, see the research by Paco Calvo and collaborators (e.g., Calvo & Keijzer 2011; Segundo-Ortín & Calvo 2021).

an “enactive listening” account of love would be fitting. However, Candiottio explicitly says that her account is not one of our encountering individual parts of nature (§25–26; 39). Rather, hers is a situated account in which to love the Earth is to love a place by inhabiting it (with love) (§2).

« 8 » To inhabit a place with love is to engage with it with a particular set of attitudes and behaviours, critical amongst which is the engaged letting-be that Candiottio terms “enactive listening.” However, is it the individuals that make up the place that one listens to? The explanation in §39 would suggest not, as she states that –

“the strategy does not endorse a reductionist view that asks if a stone, isolated from its environment, is alive and can listen to me. Instead, the conceptual shift should focus on the place as the space of relationships between all the inhabitants.” (§39)

« 9 » This focus on relationality (in line with mainstream enactive thought) indicates that it is not the individuals, nor even the individual relations between the person loving and the objects of nature, that make up the “place.” So, if a place is a space of relationships between all the inhabitants, should we then understand it as a system? Moreover, if it is a system, is it one that might be understood to be agentive and thus capable of participating-with us, rather than just allowing itself to be acted-with?

« 10 » In order to participate-with a place (rather than acting-with it), we must engage with it at the proper system level. That is, when I participate-with another person, I am not participating-with one of their cells, one organ, or just their immune system, even though all of these are self-organizing systems that I can respond to appropriately and may be able to act-with. Instead, I “listen to” the person at the agent level. If it is not individual organisms that we listen to when we love a place in terms of letting it be, then to which system-level are we attuning? Furthermore, can we understand that system to be agentive? It is easier to see how we might consider the overarching Earth system (aka Gaia) an agent, and potentially large ecosystems within that. However, would it make sense to think of “places” as agents? Do they form a system with the right amount of both

openness and distinction that they emerge themselves as a system rather than our demarcating that place as a system through our own perspective? And, if not, then can the notion of enactive listening in this context be anything more than a metaphor? **Q1**

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