5. The Politics of Shaping Home

The imagining and practicing of new shapes of social and political belonging is an aesthetic and performative act. It shifts how we see ourselves and thus how we act and respond. I believe, for instance, that public reactions and political interpretations of this moment of ‘crisis’ both humanitarian and ecological are largely informed by our images and metaphors of who we are, who they are, and how real the boundaries between us are.

Mennonite peace worker and theorist, John Paul Lederach, and his daughter, Angie Lederach, describe the practical power of metaphors in their book When Blood and Bones Cry Out (2011). “...metaphors are more than just poetic devices,” they write,

... they are deeply related to our ways of perceiving, understanding and interpreting the world. By their very structure metaphors organize the way we understand our experience and create meaning... Depending on how we use and mobilize the very structure of language and how we use metaphor to shift meaning and, through comparison, the framing of reality (Lederach and Lederach 2011, 43).

If metaphors indeed shape our perception, organize our meaning and thus frame our actions and policies, re-imagined metaphors for political belonging are crucial at this moment, and artists, in the broadest sense, are needed to undertake this creative, political act. And as I have shown, from phenomenology to ethics, this re-imagining of the political belonging begins with conceptions of the self and the its manifestation, the body.

5.1 The Power of Metaphors

A metaphor is a mask that molds the wearer’s face (Erazim Kohák 1976). An entire tradition of reason separated representation from knowledge, form from content, spectacle from theory, illustration from interpretation. Yet, to illustrate is to interpret: to choose the right metaphors, describe them, clarify the tale, is to propose an interpretation of history, a way of thinking, a way of knowing (Baecque 1997, 7). I first became aware of the power of metaphors while working in the field of contemporary dance, which is heavily influenced by somatic practices. There is a belief, which is practiced in nearly every moment of the training, that our internal image of our body and its movement affects its function, ability, appearance, mobility and even structure. If this image shifts, so can our range of possibility (Hartley 1989b; MacNaughton 2004b; P. Levine 1997). Essential for this is cultivating a sensual awareness—or felt sense—of one’s own body, and its relationship to the shifting landscape of which it is a part. Through the cultivation of a deep connection between attention and movement, a re-imagination of body as water pouring or hand as reaching through and beyond the wall completely alters not only the experience but also the mechanics of the movement.

By shifting my awareness, sensing into my body, shifting my imagination about its limitations and boundaries, I have expanded far beyond what you see when you look at me, reaching from one wall to the other across the room with my intention. I have been brought to disassemble and reassemble anew on the dance floor, been shown movement possibilities from within myself that I could never have imagined. I have merged with other bodies, reached through their flesh, have had mine penetrated by their touch or their eyes, danced in partnership with the ground, felt the dynamic flow and sensitive resonance within the
very structure of my bones—I have become, in moments, a body without organs, inseparable from the shifting intensities and thresholds of the world around.

David Diamond (2007) talks about and works with this capacity of re-imagining our limits and interconnection in Theater for Living. And the power of metaphor and imagination are employed centrally in meditations and visualizations in various mindfulness, contemplative and spiritual practices (P. Levine 1997; Chödrön 2001; 2012). Many fields of health are now embracing the power of imagination and metaphor for transformation and healing (Van der Kolk 2015).

This is what led me to wonder what influence our narrow-minded view of ourselves and each other had on our creation of political bodies, systems and structures of co-existence. How do imaginations of ourselves as parts of a greater machine, or discrete, bounded, independent beings, or as cored out by the other, affect the way we move through the world and participate in it? How does it affect our engagement and responsibility? How are we changed, how do we move differently, respond differently, imagine differently, when we are told that our breath is part of the systems of lungs of the earth, and we are in and of a greater dynamic body? Or, when we are to be submissive parts of a perfect, greater body?

Significant work has been done on the role and place of metaphor as an important, if not key, mechanism by which we make sense of the world. Approaches to metaphor and meaning, while traditionally relevant in literature and linguistics, are also found in arenas such as philosophy and phenomenology (Kóvecses 2002; Ricoeur 1987), therapy, counselling and mediation (Burns 2001; Gordon 1978; Lawley & Tompkins 2000; Monk et al. 1997; Winslade and Monk 2000; Lederach and Lederach 2011). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, leading cognitive linguists have found,

[... that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature... The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday lives (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3).

Metaphors are how we understand anything which is beyond our direct experience, which is complex, abstract, or new. We define phenomena, ideas, concepts by other things we know better or experience more readily. They can be used intentionally to shift a meaning or reframe a perspective, or they can be invisible, entrenched, and as the opening quote of this section describes “mold the wearer’s face”, such that it is no longer apparent that the metaphor is defining the meaning of that which it is meant to describe.

Metaphors reveal certain faces of an experience and hide others. They are powerful, creative and can also be manipulative and dangerous. Metaphor making is meaning making. Whether in politics or everyday life, people with power get to impose their metaphors, metaphors out of which, or after which, social and political realities are designed. A certain metaphor may shed light on and organize perfectly an aspect of our experience, or it may cast a great shadow over it.

Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 156).

Entire political movements and policies can be based on metaphors—war on poverty, war on drugs, refugee crisis, economic collapse. New and conventional metaphors alike “can have the power to define reality,” and prove their own validity tautologically (ibid, 157).