8. A Practice of Paradox: Breathing Life into Theory

Here we are, aware of the pitfalls of the body politic, trying to understand home and how we can all belong on this earth together. I am convinced that though Butler, Deleuze and Guattari, and Braidotti (to name a few) are pointing in the direction of transformation, there is another step to be taken, a shift in consciousness that cannot be guided by the rational mind alone. As my teacher and peace philosopher Norbert Koppensteiner writes,

Only by an act of de-focusing of our cognitive mind, of letting go that which we have willed so hard to manifest, might we finally become able to make that jump, or open that line of flight to de-territorialize towards an as of yet unknown becoming. It is not enough to dare to know, for what is of even greater importance is to dare to let go of knowledge... No amount of deconstruction—necessary and valid as it may be—will by itself be able to make that one twisting (verwindenen) step further. Only by giving those rational elements of critique their time and place, but finally distorting them in an experiential field might this step finally occur (Koppensteiner 2009, 77).

In this chapter I try to take the next step into the experiential field, allowing embodied experience to guide us. I want to attempt to facilitate a conversation within my self, with you, and invite you to explore within yourself through engaging different ways of knowing the world (epistemologies) in order to open up new avenues toward imagining co-existence. I want to explore the possibility of a shift in thinking about the body, by thinking from the body, and by extension invite a shift into the way we imagine bigger bodies and political bodies and allow for their sensual and ethical navigation of these paradoxes of belonging: grounded connectedness/grounded groundlessness (roots and wings), dynamic permeability (open boundedness), depth and correspondence (a continuum of near and far, inside and outside), whole and multitude (integration and differentiation). Diving as we are into this terrain of sensual experience, I will also explore what sort of response-ability, ethics and politics emerge when we listen to the breathing body’s wisdom of what’s possible. So, I ask: How would an embodied, more-than-rational, sense of self, shift our conceptions of borders, roots, insides and outsides, and thus our modern political ideations of home? And What kind of political homes, and ethical relations could our breathing bodies inspire?

8.1 Grounding in Groundlessness
“The rhizome is not nomadic, it roots itself, even in the air.” – Edouard Glissant

One of the primary dichotomies that has become apparent in the politics of home and belonging, across centuries of philosophical and lived conflict, is the dichotomy between home as emplaced, rooted, fixed, permanent and home as wandering, exile, moving and impermanent. It is a philosophical dichotomy between a notion of the ground of being and that of the groundlessness of being—being and becoming. And it is a political question that erupts in disputes over globalization, gentrification, nativism and comes to the fore in manifold forms in the emotional landscape around the ‘refugee crisis’.

As we saw in the “Question of Roots” chapter, this dichotomy has resulted in suspicion, bitter prejudice and violent exclusion—the construction of the native and the stranger. Those too connected to the land are regressive and backward, while those that move about too freely are suspiciously ‘foot loose,’ with questionable moral ‘ground’ (Malkki 1992). The
dichotomization of ground and groundlessness can result in a bounded territoriality of identity, place and belonging on the one hand or a call for total deterritorialization, globalization and universalism on the other. The artificial duality created between these two understandings of being at home in the world creates tensions and contradictions on both sides.

Many cosmopolitan beneficiaries of globalization, mostly white, upper middle class and educated, like myself, with innumerable options and unprecedented mobility have forgotten or underestimated the power of rooted connection, emplaced community and staying put. With so much privilege and so many options, we are often unaware of the human need for security and ground, particularly when ground has been pulled out from under you, no choice of your own. Often to our own detriment we feel invulnerable and unattached.

Butler and Athanasiou (2013) explore this tension in their treatment of dispossession, noting the dangerous presumptuousness of a wholehearted celebration of such groundlessness. To put it simply, when your existence has been questioned, discredited, or even disallowed, reclamation of the territory of identity becomes crucial (ibid). When you have been raped, affirmation of possession over your body is a matter of life and death. When you have been ripped and thrown from your home violently, losing connection to generations of memory, practice, and culture, asserting native connection to place can be necessary. Yet, as Judith Butler (2013) wonders, how can this reclamation and reassertion of identity, possession and nativeness be mobilized for healing and empowerment without strengthening the power of the neo-liberal, autonomous, individual subject and possession that enabled and justified these situations of dispossession in the first place? (ibid)

Lederach, in his exploration of metaphors for social healing, talks about the need for place, both literal and metaphorical, in the wake of violence. He describes how "... violence and response to violence creates the need for people to locate themselves and name the realities that surround them" (Lederach and Lederach 2011b, 13). When bodily integrity has been so violently breached, some degree of solid ground is crucial for healing. Trauma psychologist and founder of Somatic Experiencing, Peter Levine, describes how trauma disconnects people from their bodies and takes the ground out from under them.

In love, we are “swept off our feet.” In trauma, our legs are pulled out from under us. Grounding and centering, as you shall see, reconnects you directly with resources naturally available in your own body. It is important to re-establish your relationship to both the ground and to your body’s center of gravity, the place where action and feeling originate. These functions are compromised in trauma. In trauma, people lose their ground, so an important part of healing is learning to reestablish ground (P. A. Levine 2008, 142).

Yet, ultimately ground will never be stable, place will never stay the same, since nature is as dynamic as we are, and certainties will always be ruptured. There is a truth to the saying, ‘You Can’t Go Home Again’ (Wolfe 1940). Surrendering to the precarity of vulnerability, of dispossession, of deterritorialization can lead to a bigger sense of home and interconnected belonging in the elemental, the energetic, formless undercurrent of life.

[The element] lies escheat, a common fund or terrain, ... non-possessable, “nobody’s”: earth, sea, light, city. The element has no forms containing it; it is content without form... It has [only] a side: the surface of the sea and of the field, the edge of the wind... It unfolds in its own dimension: depth which is inconvertible into the breadth and length in which the side of the element extend. The depth of the element prolongs it until it is lost in earth [or sky] (Levinas 1969b, 131).

This the Hindu Brahman, the home plateau of emergent becoming in which bodies are without organs, energy without form. It is the expansive space of non-duality. It is the groundlessness that belies all formation. Though I long for this space, crave endless, dark, illuminated nothingness/everythingness into which I melt, I must daily contend with the reality that I am also form, and all action emerges out of this milieu. I cannot live in this world in the milieu, only access it, know it is there, trust in its spaciousness. Even Deleuze