

## **“If I were you I’d call me us”**

— Ogden Nash

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A. Laurie Palmer

A recent article in the NY Times magazine discussed in layperson’s terms a radical evolutionary theory developed by the biologist, Lynn Margulis. The structure of her research suggests that key elements of the human brain and sense organs developed not from the parent organism gradually evolving more and more complex parts - a single body splitting its oneness into many - but from groups of independently living organisms, visiting bacteria (spirochetes) that decided to move in and set up symbiotic shop in concert within a collective body. The rod and cone light receptors in our eyes, parts of the inner ear, cilia in our lungs and trachea, sperm cells, and the axons and dendrites that allow communication between brain cells, she suggests, are descendants of (visiting) spirochetes. As the writer (Elizabeth Royte) put it, “perception, thought, speculation and memory... may be large-scale manifestations of bacterial remnants trying to grow, feed, and reproduce in our brains.”

Rather than causing disgust along the lines of contagion (germs!) or the thrill of sci fi (aliens occupy host), this theory calms and interests me. I imagine my body as a collective, my senses and thoughts not “my own” but ours. It relaxes me to imagine my eyes as pools of independent workers, communicating with a brain that is a hive, with certain nests engaged with specific pieces of information -- like the sound of the neighbors’ fighting downstairs, or a particular blue-green surface, and how it gets ruffled in the wind -- receiving, encoding, and archiving this information - (choosing where to put it and even how it will have meaning when called up in connection to something else) - all this work not because they/we are told to do it, by a dominant patriarchal CEO brain but because we/they want to, because they/we need and love to do it, its our business. (Any wonder our blood is Red?)

The title of this talk comes from an Ogden Nash poem about an octopus - Seeing the independent-minded legs of the octopus as a group of “I”s moving consensually and unpredictably through the water rather than as parts of a single individual subordinated under a head seemed like a useful trope. The image of a “self” as a COLLECTIVE, loosely organized through conflict, discussion, resolution, truce, compromise and degrees of

freedom - feels like a more productive model for my lived experience than the single whole and solo soul that this "I", anyway, and most of US, grew up assuming we would eventually become. It also seems more productive for envisioning participation in larger collectivities - (political, cultural, social) - potentially offering more points or lines for connectivity across difference - though this remains a utopian dream at this point. But as much as ideas about fractured, multiple, split and cloudy selves have been discussed and elaborated in theoretical contexts for decades, products of deconstruction, the imperative for wholeness - which also means clearly defined identity articulated through difference - has a nagging and persistent voice (personally, culturally, empirically). And a purpose - Sometimes boundaries need to congeal and be defended. How can we imagine both continuity and definition within a social field? What images are useful and when and how can they shift back and forth?

Biological metaphors have for the most part been left to bite the dust in favor of technology and genetic engineering. Donna Haraway's image of the cyborg to describe the intimate dependency between human and computer presents a model for relational consciousness (self defined through relationship) that is compelling in part because of the radical leap it takes bridging the difference between animate and inanimate bodies (resuscitating the fantasy of eternal life). Biology and "the miracle of life" no longer constitute a privileged and sacred signifying realm when technological progress seems to have brought us to the brink of controlling even this, if not exactly in ways that we thought we wanted or predicted. The weight of reference has shifted - from nature - exposed as a culturally constructed idea - to the technological, which we know as constructed but to which we begin to ascribe a certain degree of the mystification and sacredness - the unknown and uncontrollable - previously thrown onto nature.

Haraway's cyborg provides a fascinating and useful image for looking at the present and towards the future; this Margulis idea - the mind and sense organs as a collective of swimming symbiotic spirochetes, or at least derived from this - suggests a different way to tell the story of our past - a different kind of origin, - one that can, if run with, contribute to the unsettling of entrenched beliefs in unity, oneness, hierarchy, and order. Because, as a story, it is differently structured. Borrowing Deleuze's comparison of Rhizome versus Trees, you could say that Margulis' story (by implication) does not reproduce the genealogy of the Tree, beginning at point S and proceeding by dichotomy, split/split/splitting into branches (or cells), but is rhizomatic. Deleuze trashes the tree structure as based on and reproducing binary logic, a path that begins with, and always reverts back to One. Instead,

with this spirochete story, in the beginning there were many. What does rhizomatic mean? When Deleuze borrows from botany to talk about narrative, language and the book, he contrasts rhizomes to the tree structure. What does rhizomatic mean? By definition, a rhizome is “a horizontal subterranean plant stem thickened by deposits of reserve food material, producing shoots above and roots below - distinguished from a true root in possessing buds, nodes, and scalelike leaves.” I don’t pretend to fully understand Deleuze’s delirious thinking -- I read his work looking for ways to think about how to live in the same way that I look in a myriad of less dense or abstract places - and I find things there that I can use. When Deleuze uses the image of a rhizome to talk about multiplicity he sees its independent nature as creating the possibility for increased connectivity across codes and categories(identities too) - a connectivity across difference that the genealogical tree - based on oneness, inheritance, and family resemblance - does not allow for. “The rhizome,” he says “is an antigenealogy.” To quote further: “Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be....This is different from a tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order.... (Within the rhizomatic system) semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding ... that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status.” (For instance, he says that the book is not an image of the world, it forms a rhizome with the world; or, the crocodile does not reproduce a tree trunk but together they form a rhizome.)

“A rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model... The rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight.”

This complex quoting may seem to take us far away from Margulis and evolutionary theory - as she is, it seems to me, still trying to tell a story and a story of genealogy, and doing so within the strictures of traditional science. But it is easy to imagine room for new connections, unexpected cross-references, and heterogeneous thought with Margulis’ model of a collective body in mind - in which the processes of “perception, thought, speculation, and memory” are carried out by a myriad of semi-autonomous and heterogeneous organisms. Without getting too literal, or wringing my brief encounter with this idea via a short story on science in the NY Times to a pulp - the image of these heterogeneous organisms as bacteria, highly mobile bacteria no less (spirochetes with tails) also implies that they are free to leave - which is really what I want to talk about, in the context of relational consciousness or relational selves - to imagine multiplicity as

what does not stay hunkered down around the one (individual) but as what has edges in motion, in processes of definition and de-definition, relation, and exchange.

The contexts in which these issues become more concrete for me is in my work, as an artist, and a teacher. Artmaking is often described more blatantly than other disciplines as a process of self-making - the most recent school of the art institute of Chicago promotional brochure reads: "Yourself: a work in progress". This sort of rhetoric tends to contribute to the notion of artmaking as narcissistic, excessively individualistic, with the goal being to define oneself as unique and special against the rest. Perhaps because there are so many people now circulating through this art school where I teach, or because I have been teaching now for x number of years, that I understand special and unique and different as not inhering in the artist himself but in a given configuration of relationships she makes at a particular point in time and space. And then makes differently, and then differently again. In this sense I suppose "Yourself: a work in progress" could make sense - if ultimately finishing that project is never the intended goal. Neither is each configuration of relationships that is constructed finished, in the sense of fixed -- though it may have material form in wood, rubber, video, or photographic image - the edges are kept in motion (boundaries open) engaged and changed by how, where, and when each viewer or reader interacts with it. But what about issues of ownership? intellectual property? Stealing ideas?

I read in Harper's a letter from a poet in Minnesota accusing Maya Angelou, poet laureate, of ripping off his poem. According to him, image for image, it contained (enwrapped; packaged; held at gunpoint) the same ideas: flowers, trees, water, mountains - as his poem. What's more, the poem had been publicly displayed on the wall of the Minnesota Audobon Society gun club, in plain view, for decades. So (he asked). You be the judge. Who deserves credit? Who in fact deserves to be named poet laureate?

In Chicago, a writer is finishing her book. She is in the final throes of the final draft, and a new book appears in Barnes and Noble, the movie of which is released simultaneously. All this quickness is because the story, like the story the Chicago writer is writing, is about a man with AIDS and unlike the Chicago writer's story, it is autobiographical; the author lived just long enough to get both book and movie finished, but not quite long enough to see them come out. The published story concerns an older man and a young boy; they travel; there is the threat of AIDS and then AIDS, all of which are also in the not-quite-finished writer's story. But what's really odd is that there is a scene in both books that takes place

in the parents' bedroom in which a dog pulls a syringe out of the toilet kit; and even uncannier, both stories include exactly the same quote from Stendhal.

The writers have never crossed paths. This repetition is not a result of intercepted internet messages, plundered notes, or even an excerpt posted in the public, or semi-public realm (the minnesota gun club). They simply wrote themselves' to the same place, or, while writing, passed the same road marker - .

The poet laureate story is simpler to think about - a flower, a mountain, a tree - my first response is to marvel at the irony involved in attempting to own a collection of empty signs independent of the relationships that make a poem. The idea of a corkboard in the gun club emanating molecules into the air that travel and re-cohere in the air around Maya Angelou's head has Deleuzian possibilities, and could be interesting to entertain -- we just don't know enough yet to take it to court. But what if the poems were very close, or exactly the same? Which would be more like the second example. How can we think about the second example?

There are possibilities in the notion of the construction of self through language and experience, which is shared; of the author being spoken through; of mass culture permeating and homogenizing our consciousnesses to the point of creating twins; there is also the story of the orchid and the wasp. (more botany). In Darwinian evolution, the angraecum sesquipedale orchid evolved to accomodate only the very long proboscis of one particular wasp (from Madagascar) as pollinator - a story billed as one of mimicry, form following form, through survival of the fittest. Deleuze however reads the wasp and orchid differently - "the aparallel evolution of two beings that have absolutely nothing to do with each other." They do however form a rhizome together - a connectivity that can connect at any point (without genealogy, evolution). "Mimicry" (says Deleuze) "is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature."

I don't know that this orchid/wasp idea helps the Chicago writer, given the competitive nature of publishing, and our toughly residual notions of uniqueness and originality. Nor does it really help me understand how it could happen. Perhaps the best I can offer is that the story itself forms a rhizome with Deleuzes's theory - a nodule of connectivity. But what if Maya Angelou did visit the gun club, or someone she knew did, saw the poem, wrote it down, and sent it to her? What if she consciously used it, hook, line, and sinker? It would still mean differently. What remains (even if all the identical words in the poem are

removed) are the relational lines between it and her other work, it and all the people who read it, it and the rest of her life as a poet, as a black woman, as a witness in the world - an uncountable number of relationships in time and space that affect how her poem means -- not that these make it any "better" necessarily than the poem from Minnesota, the meaning of which is also created through its own system of relational and contextual lines -- but they do make it different. "There is nothing in the world but uniqueness," says Brian Massumi, writing about Deleuze's ideas of lines of connectivity.

If you think relationally, influence is inevitable. necessary, And desired. one person rubs off on another. It is as erotic and terrifying as the fear of losing one's self or of exchanging bodily fluids. Influence is about the instability of things and selves, the word connected, by root or rhizome, to influ-enza. it is contagious. you can't ward it off, you can't help it. Too easily influenced suggests that influence is something that hinders us, something we should develop an immunity against - but it is no more possible to lock the door than to invite influence in - Spirochetes busy with the blue green ruffled surface of the water free to leave one body enter another. How would you see, hear, remember if you locked them out?

As an art teacher I have the peculiar privilege of visiting with graduate students in their studios while their work is in the process of becoming. "Make it more your own" a former teacher of mine always said. Now I use that phrase when I teach, but I don't really know what I mean. The implication is that the more you think about it, stew on it, work it, fuss, the more it will begin to resemble you and therefore no one else. What this suggests is that the perfection of difference and individuation is the goal. But when I move from graduate studio to graduate studio I am struck by and find myself interested in something else - in the shared territory of ideas. Perhaps it could be called something banal like creative empathy - but in that intimate setting - what amazes me is how much I feel that I know what this person is talking about, or how I feel that I have been there too - or more accurately, not been there in the past tense (as if first) but also live there, on a regular basis, and yet haven't chosen to hang out for very long, only drop in - yet I can be there with them - and get excited about the ideas bounding around, their particular elasticity and dimension and rhythm and color - as if they were my own. It is not about my having a particularly large repertoire of ideas, or of having thought through them all before, or of being particularly susceptible to another person's influence, though if anything it could be closer to the latter. It seems to have something to do with Deleuze again, this time when he borrows from chemistry. When he uses the terms molecular and molar as different modes

of becoming, I understand him to mean that, on the molecular level the edges of our selves or bodies are constantly in motion, a dense mist exchanging molecules willy nilly with whoever might be close - a blurring and exchange of selves. On the molar level, however- a mole being a very large number of molecules, a way to describe this mist in crasser quantitative terms- edges take on meaning, identities get defined. In the process of making art, the pre-processes, this molecular activity seems to be particularly active, particularly charged. Later, the edges get sharp.

I began to work collaboratively out of the dialogue begun in art school where ideas were actively shared - friends would visit each other's studios and we would talk about the work before it was made. Haha, the group I work with, continued to carry that exchange into our working lives after school - when the edges normally would get honed and sharp. In periods of particularly intense collaboration, like during one project that engaged us for three years, this misty molecular blurring of edges even becomes visible to objective observers. I would be walking down the street by myself and people would come up to me and ask, how are you all doing?

I wonder if as Americans our idea of collaboration immediately implies compromise and erasure because we are focused so on individualism and the American Dream, weaned to understand our selves as defined through competition and the free market, survival of the fittest. It is harder, to imagine working an idea of working in concert and also maintaining identity, rather than losing it, identity that is created through relation.

I am aware of the biggest pitfall with this emphasis on relational identities as being its seeming to focus on sameness rather than difference. Who cares what kind of relationships are possible in art school when the majority of students come from similar economic and cultural backgrounds? And is there a motivation in talking about shared selves to pretend that difference doesn't exist? Whose interest is served by this elision if not those in power, the teacher for instance (though this is a relative position of power) - or someone else who has an agenda and wants to believe that the rest of the group is right there with them. It is absolutely crucial to recognize difference - but to understand difference in a non-totalizing way. Some of our selves are different. I don't feel comfortable speaking in such abstractions, without images to locate them - but I do want to emphasize that all this talk about collective selves is part of the attempt to get beyond them, or through them, to an understanding of making and living in larger collective communities. Because I don't feel

comfortable in such abstractions, I will end with an image from Deleuze: “A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines. You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound again after most of it has been destroyed.”

All quotes from “Rhizome Versus Trees,” Giles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1987, University of Minnesota Press, except Massumi, Brian, from *A Users Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, MIT Press, 1992.