

## Towards Aliveness - WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSE?

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How can we activate more resonant, vibrant, and response-able ways of human and more-than-human relating? Thinking-perceiving differently what and how are qualities of human bodying beneath the skin, together with qualities of ecosystemic vibrancy and adaptive cyclicity, offers a challenging and stimulating contribution to such questions. The term for this intertwining is *Ecosomatically Alive with Tensional Responsiveness*, which is composed of the following four propositions:

1. Perceiving (our) bodyings as vibrant potential for the social, for living in sensitive community with humans and more-than-humans
2. Conceiving the future of work as continuously sharing in the joys of relating
3. Fine-tuning singing and dancing together as practices for activating and circulating bodying gendered power, and maintaining good health and social happiness
4. Attending to relational ecosomatic aliveness and non-violent connectedness as generative qualities for storytelling on future worlds and human survival

Just below human skin, expands fascia, a network of bodily connective tissues. The primary quality of fascia tissues is continuous, ongoing shifting-sliding. This adaptive shaping-shifting-sliding has the quality of *Tensional Responsiveness*, responding for example to shifts in warmth, weight, spaciousness, pulsation, or spontaneous affection. Using the verb *bodying*, rather than the noun *body*, acknowledges the ongoingness of these processes and shifts. Experiencing these physical sensations as much as considering the socio-political and socio-economic implications of such sensations, is tantalisingly exciting. The term *tensional responsiveness*, as a mode of doing so, contains

two parts: *Responsiveness*, which highlights that we as humans do not live our lives as individual islands, but that from habitual daily movements to life-changing decisions, we are always already connected with and responding to information and qualities of (eco)systems as we move-sense the next step. *Tensional* underlines that the interconnectedness can take on many different qualities and intensities. These are not moral or binary (good-bad), and can be perceived as potentials for shaping co-presence. The happy-flower, care-free mode proposed by, for example, capitalism or the esoteric industry, would have people believe that these tensional qualities of relating have somehow gone away. The suggestion made here is to, instead, appreciate the incredible generative potentials in these sensations of tension, and the implications of actively including sensations of tension as a different way of thinking-perceiving social, economic, political, cultural, and ecological issues. Such a shift also re-weaves tensional qualities and ongoingness into futures' storytelling. Joining together *Tensional* with *Responsiveness*, thereby, feeds forward into processes of deepening human *response-ability*. The notion of *response-ability*, as advocated by many critical thinkers such as Donna Haraway, suggests that to appreciate, disentangle and shape-shift contemporary challenges, for example around climate issues, humans need to develop a different capacity and ability to respond to what is happening on planet Earth. The four propositions above aim to contribute to this transformation, by emphasising in novel ways the relevance and potential of the physiology of (human) nested bodyings as the qualities from which to generate and maintain deeper, tensionally responsive response-abilities.

Bodying tensional responsiveness and novel response-abilities in generative ways, demands a different level of awareness and sensitivity, especially as these processes are intricately interwoven with the ecological systems we form part of. In this book, you have been able to meet the *Ivindo Baka*, a cultural group living in the tropical forests along the River Ivindo in Gabon in Central Africa. What is special and unique about Ivindo Baka is their egalitarian social organisation. This egalitarian mode emphasises ongoingness as primary quality; both when it comes to socio-economic practices such as sharing, and in generating and maintaining socio-political practices which simply do not allow people to stand out, or dominate each other. Life as continuity is about enchanting each other. Joy and enchantment inspire communicating with humans and surrounding forests through music and dance, through beautiful, powerful, erotic polyphonic sounds. Polyphonies generate and enable independence within interdependence, and are socio-somatic, so both

a mode of enjoyment and equally a mode of social organisation. Singing-dancing as ways of relating together in *socio-somatic resonance*, not only generates and maintains Baka egalitarian practices for the group, but underlies also the ritualised continuous balancing of male-female energies and group health. Baka lives are lived as alive aspects of the reverberating complexities of Central African tropical forest ecosystems. Ivindo Baka response-abilities to human and more-than-human are grounded in *ecosomatic aliveness*, in co-presence and sensitively organising in relation to all fellow beings and qualities. What makes Ivindo Baka and similar groups extraordinary in comparison with capitalist consumerism, are the wisdom and capacities for managing this aliveness not through dominance and control, but through empowering sensitive tensional responses to the intensity of that occasion.

The aliveness and humming power potential of egalitarian social dynamics and bodying, together with other research I have conducted, shifted and intensified the ways I think-perceive how we talk about the 'social' and current global challenges. From this, emerges the core proposition to learn to perceive (our) bodyings as vibrant potentials for being social, and for living in sensitive, interwoven community with humans and more-than-humans. Appreciating more clearly the permanent changes of (human) microbiomes or fascias, enables to experience and understand 'body' as process, as *bodying*. In this relational bodying, 'I' becomes 'us', becomes *nested ecosystem*. Attuning to, rather than side-lining, the nested physiology, materiality, and potentiality of bodyings from which emerge our daily lives and ongoing activities, can shift how we think-perceive, for example, the future of 'work' as pure relating. As humans, we have the power and the response-ability to start weaving and singing-dancing into existence novel stories that enable generating and maintaining novel ways of relating and organising socialities with human and more-than-human. We can deepen the generative qualities and powers of this process, by shaping-shifting-sliding from an awareness, which actively includes how human physiology is always already moving-sensing and world-shaping in tensional responsiveness with the more-than-human.

The notion of becoming alive with tensional responsiveness deepens how (egalitarian) qualities of ongoingness and aliveness can creatively feed forward into topics such as socio-economic inequalities, neo-populisms, flawed legal systems, or climate issues. This is accentuated by the *institutional plasticity* of the social organisations of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. From our palaeolithic relatives, we learn that things have never 'always been this way'. Shapes and ways of social organisation have always been changing, includ-

ing and honouring the more-than-human, adapting to what fitted best for that seasonal period or occasion, sometimes rapidly and at other times more slowly. From the perspective of bodying as social potential, human groups can once again activate institutional plasticity in ways coherent with a healthy shaping in tensional response to contemporary issues. Humans do not only need food and accommodation to survive, humans need creativeness, joy, and play to develop and maintain response-abilities. Living a good life comes more through sharing life erotically, whereby erotic is understood as shared perception and participation, and less through material goods. (Re)learning to relate in more sensitively attuned and enchanting ways, music and dance activities may counteract current epidemics of fear and eco-anxiety. With regard to the rising mental health issues gripping many parts of the world, awareness of shaping-shifting-sliding in tensional responsiveness may help recognising that often fellow human or more-than-human beings provide exactly the kind of connection, touch, or healing needed in that particular moment. Such complexities and potentials of life are untimely. They defy mind-body dichotomies and being bracketed into conceptual straight-jackets such as that of *homo economicus*. To the contrary, our most 'rational' decision with regard to human survival may be the choice to simply concentrate on the tensionally responsive qualities of our ways of relating, to be playful, to sing, dance and tell stories about the continuously adaptive cycles of scarcity-abundance, and the enchanting beauty of the ongoingness shaping our worlds.

Maintaining the distinction between 'indigenous people' and other human groups, is a serious obstacle to novel relational aliveness. We are all "indigenous" to Earth, and the sooner we start tackling water pollution and mental illnesses from that perspective, the better. There is an urgency to (re)figuring different modes and intensities of relating, either beyond material, consumerist values, or at least in ways which do not centralise it. The material will always matter, but it can only make life easier and aid in surviving long-term. It cannot actually make humans happy, although advertising would of course have us believe that. Clearly, I am neither the first to ponder these issues, nor the last to have dreams about the world being a more alive place for everyone. For 50 years of what makes up current German history, two opposed versions of ideals worth striving for existed on either side of a long wall: The Capitalist West and the Communist East. In 1989, the existential lures of personal autonomy caused the Communist wall to crumble and collapse. 30 years on, late capitalist extraction practices resulting in climate change phenomena have diminished any remaining notions of individual freedoms in the West.

We are all caught in a big, messy socio-environmental melting pot, which necessitates (re)learning to relate differently to the microbial or fascial alien inside, to co-present bodyings with fellow organisms, and to the cyclicities of ecosystems. This shifting towards independence within interdependence is a process which comes not through ideology, but through deeper sensorial awareness of being indigenous, of forming part of literally trillions of nested bodying ecosystems on Earth.

Bodily perception and awareness ground knowledge, wisdom, self-awareness and self-security as much as potentials for aliveness and co-presence. Human futures are closely interlinked with artificial intelligence, which raises questions about whether or how to generate aliveness and co-presence in novel ways also with these influential virtual presences. Whilst humans co-exist in this bizarre togetherness with machines that may soon outsmart human intelligence, we could focus on having the best time, and on making our ways of relating as enchanting as humanly possible. To paraphrase Gandhi's famous saying, can you be the change you want to see in the world *and* move-sense an enchanting, tensionally responsive bodying process following honey towards joyful ecosomatic aliveness with fellow beings? How might be your response?

## Four Sparks of Enchantment

*Chispa* meaning spark, is my favourite Spanish word. Below are some *chispas* to inspire bodying with deeper awareness, and for moving-sensing, shaping-shifting-sliding with qualities of ongoing tensional responsiveness. These are four potential sparks to light up independence within interdependence, and individual autonomy as always already embedded and co-composing with human and more-than-human ecosomatic aliveness.

- a. New vocabularies: From Body to Bodying
- b. Human and More-than-human Matrices: Continuously Spiralling and Shifting-Sliding
- c. Changing the system: Changing the way we relate and organise to sensitive mode
- d. A Somatic Prompt: Dancing with the Unknown of Indigenous

### a. New vocabularies: From Body to Bodying

A practical way of playing with Proposition One is to use different words to describe what is your volume 'body'. To start with, the easiest thing to do, is to use the verb bodying instead of the noun body. This emphasises process and potential. You can experiment with what happens, if each time you want to say body or something with a similar meaning, you replace it instead with verb forms, like bodying. This applies also to saying *my* body or bodying. Each time you want to make a proprietary claim, and say 'my', recall how 'your' gut microbiome or your fascia tissue-system are active aliens co-composing this 'my body'. Try and attune to how these small shifts in the vocabularies you use, impact your thinking-perceiving and sensations. After a period of first one, and then two years, take a moment to see whether or how perceptions of 'I', 'self', 'body' and the world in general have, or have not, changed by using verb forms. If possible, take some notes in writing, so that you can reflect on the changes that you notice, or how things stay the same, over time.

The second way to play is simply to co-invent new words. In particular, how can we say differently *sensitive resonance*, *organising sensitively in relation to what others are doing*, *independence within interdependence*, *sensations of tension*, or *non-violence*? In co-generating such novel vocabularies, we can draw on how Baka terminologies emphasise the interrelatedness of space, time and sociality. Maybe, just as Eskimos have many words for different types of water, ice, or snow, we can invent novel words and process-oriented verbs for expressing the diverse types of tension that emerge with relational aliveness. If possible, play this game with others, in order to activate co-inventing coherently with deeper collective wisdom.

## b. Human and More-than Co-Presence: Integrating Awareness with Trees and Fascias

The following is an awareness practice on trees and fascias. The practice is a way to play with how your body does not end with your skin and how your imagination can activate multi-sensorial co-presences. This involves using the image on the front cover of the book,<sup>1</sup> and the images of fascia in the description in Proposition Once and/or whatever you may have found online. Fascia tissue-systems absorb and respond to imagination, as do muscles and other senses, shaping and re-shaping (your) bodily presence. By imagining *what else*, and telling different stories, you can open up to novel sensitive and eco-somatically alive awareness.<sup>2</sup> What you once thought were fixed boundaries between bodyings, or human bodies and trees, may start to break down. You may want to read the meditation first, and then do and enjoy the practice.

Look at the title page of this book. It shows the crown of one of the trees near the Baka village of Adjab in North-Eastern Gabon, overlayed by an image of the fascia tissue-system. At molecular level, both human and vegetal forms are shaped by multi-directional connections, or spirals, which allow for ongoing movement, and absorbing and responding to tensions.

Shift your attention to the crown of the tree on the title page, and the sky beyond. Allow your breathing and your imagination to reside in the crown for a while. Sense and hear the sounds of the crown leaves moving with the winds. Become aware of the tree trunk which is holding this crown. Imagine the different layers of the trunk, one of which is the sapwood, the network of living cells bringing up water and nutrients from the roots to the branches and leaves. Can you hear these nutritious fluids pulsing through the sapwood? Allow the fluids to draw you underneath the bark of the tree, into the trunk and down to the tree roots. Sense how the roots extend into the underground mycelium web, connecting this one tree with its seedlings and the other forest plants.

Now look at the images of the fascia tissue-system on pages 48-49. Also, if you haven't already, try and find the documentary *Strolling Under Your Skin*,

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1 I would like to thank Xander van der Burgt from the Royal Botanical Gardens Kew (UK), who helped in the selection of the tree image with his specialist botanical knowledge on tropical plants.

2 This practice is also inspired by Natascha Myers' Plant Kriya: <https://imaginative-ethnography.com/imaginings/affect/sensing-botanical-sensoria/>

or other professionally captured video images of the fascia tissue-system. Really look at and appreciate these still or moving images of fascias. Try and truly attune to the textural micromovements of these tissues. This is going on just beneath your skin, as you are reading these words, or watching the moving images of fascias. This amazing tissue-system is key to moving-sensing where and how you are in the world. Fascias anchor your bodily awareness in relational movement with gravity, and in processes of always already interweaving co-presences.

Shift your attention again to the title page, and attune to the fine details of the interwoven image of tree crown and fascias. Re-aliven the awareness of the dynamic expansiveness of trees, from the sky, to the crown leaves, to trunk sapwood, to roots, to mycelium network, to the ground you are standing on, becoming with the ongoing micro-movements of (your) fascia tissue-system. Allow yourself to sense into and appreciate the qualities which connect (your) bodying to that of the trees and other plant life in the place where you live.



### c. Changing the system:

#### Changing the way we relate and organise to sensitive mode

The capacity to move-sense - the capacity to experience – the capacity to relate: The challenge of the 21st century, is not only to be able to fly to Mars, but to engage with one another in ways beyond male-female or human-beyond-human binaries, and beyond populist stereotypes of self-other and national citizen-immigrant. Can we learn to move-sense with such potential diversities we might not even be imagining yet? Can we change the system, by changing the way we move and think-perceive with each other, by organising and relating sensitively? Such potentials and capacities are shaped by and shape the local and global systems we are nested with. These potentials are also shaped by rhythms of breathing and moving-sensing, which are both beautifully unique and at the same time intimately and inextricably embedded with qualities of, not fitness, but joy and aliveness of ecosystems.

Interweaving Donella Meadows 14 points of *Dancing with Systems*<sup>3</sup>, with Ivindo Baka egalitarian socio-somatic resonance and independence within interdependence, can you...

- 1) Pay attention to sensations of tension, not just to what is visible, quantifiable or controllable in your world
- 2) Expose your mental models to the wisdom of the socio-somatic system
- 3) Sense the polyphonic beat
- 4) Become a response-able, lifelong learner
- 5) Stay humble at all times
- 6) Attune to the enchanting potential of organising in sensitive, non-violent, coherent relation
- 7) Go for the ongoing joy of the whole
- 8) Celebrate non-binary complexity
- 9) Honour sharing ecosomatic aliveness together with more-than-human

Find a way to have these 9 points visible to you (for example on a screen or in printed form). For yourself or together with others, first read them out loud. Then, put on your favourite music, and dance-sing out your responses. Enjoy how these responses develop and shape-shift-slide with different qualities and intensities. Relish the aliveness of this process.

3 <http://donellameadows.org/archives/dancing-with-systems/>

#### **d. Somatic Prompt: Dancing with the Unknown of Indigenous**

This is a somatic prompt, an invitation to sense, perceive, meditate, reflect. The prompt is adapted from a workshop I offered for the fugitive summit ‘The Wilds Beyond Climate Justice’, hosted by *The Emergence Network* and Bayo Akomolafe, from May 31 - June 4, 2020. If you can, have somebody else read this to you, whilst you are standing, sitting or lying in a relaxed and receptive way. Alternatively, you can make a recording, and then become enchanted by your own voice.

Environments and landscapes where past generations have lived and in which we continue to live today, are alive with more-than human qualities and beings. Imagine you are among people, maybe your ancestors. You are all aware of how patterns of light, sounds of birdsong or rainfall, scents of forest plants or animals, shapes of orchids or mountains, cycles of seasons and of generations – how all these qualities and intensities are always shape-shifting into one another, creating and telling about place and community, about life forces and life changes.

Imagine feeling these continuities and changes of stories and places in your body. Resonating with your bodily elements, with water, gases, proteins, blood, connective tissues and bones. You are made of the shape-shifting of all the places, where people have lived and travelled, the migration stories of love, discovery, unspeakable pain, forgiveness; you carry them with and within you. How did and do these qualities become your bodily systems? Then and now? Feel deeply the sensations, imagery, voices informing you.

Now imagine these signals and stories deeply shifting and changing. What is it that changes? How do the changes feel in your body? What binds you to the places and stories of what for you is indigenous? Are you bound to stories centred on humans? Or how are the more-than-human relations – with trees, humming-birds, coral reefs, or whichever beings you resonate with most? What connects you? What separates you? What will the generations after you know about this quality we call “indigenous”? How will they resonate and create with places and stories?