Distributed centrality again
Lisa Samuels, 2020

On the surface of our planet, there is no centre: the centre is at every point. The corner, the wave, treetop, the room of earnest conversation, organisms teeming closely, the turn of a wing. I want to consider some implications of this situation, using the ethical value term distributed centrality to think about the equal centrality of every being, place and event.

The idea of distributed centrality arises partly within a paradigm of transplace as location. Transplace keeps in mind the dynamism and contingency of our planetary placement, demonstrated in land shifting with tectonic plates and water movements, and air moving everywhere; demonstrated in the changing locations of creatures who live and die in land, water and air; and demonstrated in theories of relative and coterminous space-time. Which is not even to mention our national inventions. Transplace happens in our ways of living externally and internally – our migrancy and internal shifts.

Distributed centrality is a term for acting so that the centre is everywhere. Such action does not presume or necessitate urges of totality or ubiquity or omniscience. Instead, we can recognise and honour our placements and our displacement from other centralities. We do not need to know about everything, everyone, everyplace in order to make room for them. One consequence of living with distributed centrality is recognising the necessary dis-connect of equally distributed life. Since nothing is everything and no one is everywhere, distributed centrality encourages a questioning of the recurrent idea that a particular cultural value, like the best art or the clearest expression of an idea, is made in some kind of universal accounting. Always bearing in mind the necessity of not being cruel – this is, after all, an ethical theory under consideration – no account of judgement is universal: there is no exclusively best intelligence, object, event or action within all the possibilities of those forces.

In distributed centrality, there are no margins. Everything acts centrality. Replacing centre-to-margin descriptions with distributed centres means to upheave assertions that some anywheres operate as sidelines to some other more main anywheres. Distributed centrality means to undo assertions of rare centralities and occasionally 'rescued' marginalities – assertions that are principally habitual, i.e.

historical – in human attentions to what, where, or who is important. It's a resistance to habitus naturalisation of dominant and subordinate relations.

Distributed centrality contrasts with practices of exclusionary centrality that can distract from the real demands and pleasures of action. Exclusionary centrality proposes that there are certain most important things, people, places; it can emanate from forces like power shoring up borders and neo-colonialism gazing for horizons. If you think the important speaking is happening somewhere else, you might think you are mute or deaf. If you think the important things are happening somewhere else or being done by someone else, you might think your actions and being are invisible or inconsequent – or, for that matter, you might want to go fight for dominance. However much ideologies of power seek to obscure the matter, speaking and action are central everywhere they happen. Imagining distributed centres helps to unsettle a yearning for the power of elsewhere, a yearning that can foster fatalism and a sense of distance from life.

Historically the 'butterfly effect' has described how small motions somewhere else on the planet have an impact on other, distant, events. The description has emphasised the *effect* of the seemingly inconsequential, earlier, and far-away motion on something larger, later, and deemed more important than the butterfly's wing motion. But everything is as far away from everything else as everything else. Rather than tallying its 'effect', distributed centrality centers the actual and conceptual butterfly. The butterfly's movement *is* that event. Every centrality has a potential effect for any other centrality. Hence synergies can be posited as always having, coming with, and performing within, parity. If there are effects, then we are all effects.

Distributed centrality harmonises with 'distributed cognition' ideas that focus on continuing and shared thought-work. In that association, distributed centrality involves an ethical potential of the digitas, the perfusing digital living we make with our habitus, civitas, and the digits of hands and binary numbers. The digitas can be experienced as an additive being-place: in our digital creations and searches, we become something additional and different to our bodies. Recognising distributed centrality in the digitas presents new challenges and opportunities for supporting the voices of everywhere. Like any library, the digitas cannot be or represent totalities. If the digitas encourages exclusionary centrality, in which 'hits' constitute value, then even net neutrality is not enough to make room for all the centralities. In the ontological transit zones of the digitas, how do we listen? And how do we make room for aspects of being that cannot access or co-create the digitas? This is a question both for the digital divide, the difference between having and not having access to online computing, and for the difference between life made inside and life made outside computing.

Certainly these points circulate always back toward persons and intentional bearings – we're speaking, writing, reading human languages. Yet every distributed centre speaks whether with or without what we recognise or allocate as a voice. In planetary being, emanations continually begin everywhere, and how do we listen to the centrality of the other? We can extend guardianship, as with the humans who tend the rights of Te Awa Tupua: the Whanganui River has legal personhood status, and humans are appointed to translate its condition and needs into the languages of those legal rights. Since that 2017 act, more non-human entities are having their own centrality rights recognised in Aotearoa and elsewhere. These are examples of what distributed centrality hopes for.

To adapt an earlier formulation: distributed centrality emphasises how we recognize the stone, how we recognize every being (animate/inanimate), place (named/unnamed), and event (macro/sub-molecular), not how it recognises us. These are human values we write, and their difficult opportunities are our conditions. If you know that everything is equally central, the importance of your own action is clear.[i]

---

[i] I've written briefly about distributed centrality before, in introducing the anthology *A Transpacific Poetics* (Litmus 2017, edited by Lisa Samuels and Sawako Nakayasu), in a *Qui Parle* forum (26.2, 2018), and in a book of eco-ethical terms, *Counter Desecration: a glossary for writing within the anthropocene* (Wesleyan 2018, edited by Linda Russo and Marthe Reed), part of which is paraphrased in this essay's final paragraph. I return to the topic here to be more focused and expansive and, probably, to think about a mode of attention different from that presented in "Luminol historiography" and its ethically-motivated hermeneutics of (however justified) suspicion.

Otherwise, this note performs some dialectical relations with the essay above.

I dream of an end to exemplitude, in which one case is set up to suffice for what are many variant particulars. Maybe I understand wanting to stop thinking about exceptions, other cases, and the unseen in order to join others in preferring one object for attention, but it is an understanding allied with being tired, wanting to rest one's critical attention. That's how canons and the What You're Supposed To Know (among theoretically infinite choices) come across my vision.

Distributed centrality is a resistance to power imbalances generally. There is nothing except power that allows something to be declared central and some other thing less central. The power to traverse, to possess, to enjoy, be overwhelmed by, the fear of being left out (foblo) of such traversal and enjoyment. Even a virus has its right to be, contested by us who wish to be well, to maintain civics of care with each other. The viral moment becomes a new litmus test, a refresher course for how we use our powers.

I dream of an end to hierarchism, an end to the naturalising of hierarchism in how we treat life. An era when hierarchism, an installed notional condition, is understood to be a tricky word, to raise careful eyebrows. We can recognise it in action, for example in systems of governance, and simultaneously stay in a contingent relation with it: understand that the structure does not transmute to infuse or alter the worth of beings enacting it and acting within it.

Yet another thing bears considering: language itself. As a social force, language becomes in part – though connected and relational like anything – independent of its transducers. The centrality of language is also distributed: each lingual event sustains and/or evaporates itself. It is good to give language at least occasional relief from instrumentalisation, and good to continually disentangle it from distortion and falsity. Language is artificial intelligence, and how we treat it becomes how it treats us.

> *I think 'distributed centrality' to test out a disappearance*
> *of the 'margin' (set-aside, far-away, quieted) because a quietude is*
> *also central; it does not have to be experienced or read as*
> *an omission of noise, which itself occupies its own centre.*
> *No more margins at all – there aren't any: both*

inflection and innuendo have their centralities.
Every dialectic is abductive, equipoised.

Distributed centrality is by definition non-totalising: it's not trying to account for every approach to organising attention. It's also an impossible absolute, of course; like love and hope, distributed centrality is a concept meant to gently push our idealism reset buttons. To be anti-colonial and utopian, to value vulnerability and otherness, is to flip value switches every day.

Distributed centrality is part of an attention to earth rights, by which I mean the right of everything, not only humans, to exist and thrive on earth. For many, earth rights are non-controversial: the issue is how to implement and attend them. Relational ecology is what we know to be the case and what is so hard to foster, so we translate, giving conceptual voices to the voiceless and putting voices among non-voicedness. Such translations help us hear.

If everything in an organisation is needful, then each part is equally necessary. Something may be harder to do, something easier to do, yet everything is equally central, is happening as importantly as anything else and simultaneously so.

So that butterfly moves, and this letter is sent,
and diatoms aggregate, and a factory stitches fabric
for furniture, and birds call a swift meeting, and a building
is demolished, and cells push into anaphase, and
a camel is loaded with goods, a cloud rearranges in relation
to air and water, a book is published, lava and stone
encourage each other, a body interprets a concept,
a child draws on a wall, a beloved dies, leaves
are clipped for nourishment, a haptic encounter senses itself,
a missile launches –

yes, so the last one: what of Large Violence? Is that more important? Is that a 'limit case'? One act that impacts so many others.

For the centralities that experience and perform anything, that thing is for that time a distributed centre that is their centre. Any centre has its implications and time. Waving the 'im aussermoralischen Sinne' flag of Nietzsche's 1873 essay 'On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense', distributed centrality is not adjudicating comparative moral questions. It's a theory of equality of *being*, construing being as body, air, place, made things and events, molecular and submolecular, large and small. We might say a bomb that kills us all absorbs all our centres equally. We might say violence and other cruelties always want to obliterate the other's centrality, and of course we have to pay attention to the things we pay attention to, and large bad things like bombs insist.

A limit case like bombs does not disrupt the feasibility of, does not dishabilitate, the reparative conceptual work that distributed centrality can be part of in our need to articulate concepts that can perform in how it feels to be now. It's about equal right to be. Inherent, absolute, only divided by judgements, amorousness, power, and other intersecting drives and forces. We think about such things like Peirce's thousand cables interlinking. I lean into these winds of potential question ongoingly, as with any theory of human attention.