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Stories, contingent materialities, and moral inquiry: Response to Simone, MacLeavy, Kim, and Lake

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Abstract

In response to the thoughtful and generous commentaries of Simone, MacLeavy, Kim and Lake on my paper "Bubble Clash", I lay out three considerations for social inquiry and knowledge production. First, learning from MacIntyre's discussion of Jane Austen, whose stories exemplify an imaginative moral inquiry in which different rationalities and virtues collide, I highlight the role of stories in moral progress in which our sensitivity and responsiveness to peoples and things are increased. Second, I expand on Simone's and MacLeavy's notion of contingent materialities that mandate storytellers' work to be always in progress and "in the middle". I connect this line of thought with Kim's "dreamscapes" of the municipalities in Georgia where the past, present, and future are being spatially materialized, the examples of which include the continuing legacies of institutional anti-Blackness concurrently existing with immigrants' growing physical predominance in "White-fled" areas. Finally, I return to Lake's pragmatism and its emphasis on moral inquiry. No matter how complex, ungraspable, and perturbing the world may seem, the wisdom of pragmatism invites us to start from questioning the purpose of our writing act: why do we write and for whom do we write?

Stories

What do stories have to do with academic research? Stories, as MacIntyre (2007[1981]) writes, are the genesis of our moral inquiries; they remind us that our search for the true, virtuous, and just, in reality, is about navigating "a tragic opposition and conflict of good with good" (ibid.: 190); the competing narratives, justifications, and rationalities where our collective sense of ends and purposes lie. As we have seen in "Bubble Clash", diverse sociocultural bubbles operate through such shared accounts; however, stories, depending on the writer, can also illuminate the relationalities across plural logics and the audiences who follow them—crystallizing their interactions ("clashes") in specific situations rather than reciting each of their theoretical isolation. Stories also travel, across time and space, using imagination as a source of moral progress in which our "sensitivity and responsiveness to a larger and larger variety of people and things" are increased—via enlarging the reader's sense of community, loyalty, and belonging (Lake, 2019; Rorty, 2021).

This becomes evident in MacIntyre's contrast between William Cobbett's and Jane Austen's approach to morality: while Cobbett was preoccupied with writing about the "global trend" towards individualistic economy and marketization in English history (of which description MacIntyre parallels with Karl Polanyi's tale of 'The Great Transformation'), Austen staged a social sphere in which the competition between different virtues and the actors' lived agonies manifest amidst of the rapidly changing economic realities. As opposed to Cobbett who formularized the universal contrast between the "virtuous community" (exemplified by local livelihoods prior to marketization) versus the pursuit of individualistic greed (which became the norm under marketization) to re-establish the virtues that he considered worth guarding, Austen wrote about the conflicted characters caught in between different rationalities (customary virtues such as marriage, survival needs such as economic security, or her version of courage and goodwill that stand against the prior two) to furnish a moral critique appropriate to the socialites of her time. Her stories, while immersed in the

distinctive challenges of a particular era, have garnered a time-defying audience through embedding humanistic topics within specific characters and their detailed backstories in a way that demands engaged imagination from the readers' part.

There are always myriads of different ways of telling a story depending on which interrelationships between human desires, social acknowledgments, and cultural milieu that we get to zero in on; and the works of academic researchers, writers, and narrators are of no exception (Lake, 2014). "Narrative history", in fact, "turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions" (MacIntyre, 2007[1981]: 242); "we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others" (ibid.: 246).

My attempt at redescribing the "environmental justice" problem (waste facilities concentrating in lower-rent suburbs) in Dandenong by "following the seagulls" is perhaps analogous to such thought in that I tried to understand how plural actors, their aspirations, and knowledge programs about what's best for the future of their "city" are mobilized through each of their particular narratives and rationalities—of which the "order" in terms of their moral superiority is not always obvious, especially when taken out of their living context. But what if, as Simone, MacLeavy, Kim, and Lake tell us, to write such a story as an academic—a social role of which is often inseparable from the functioning of the mainstream economic structure, with all its ironies and constraints—is a contradicting act in itself, especially under the increasingly volatile conditions of our contemporary reality where the justifications for "sustainability" have been rendered ever more absurd, and the unfree experiences of spatial segregation only seem to intensify?

Amidst of these turbulences, the wisdom of pragmatism reminds us to start from questioning the *purpose* of our writing act, before jumping into the scene of "doing" research. No matter how complex, ungraspable, and perturbing the world

may seem, the determination to engage in an ameliorative practice will create a community of moral inquirers for whom knowledge-making is a journey towards "satisfactory unrolling of the collective experience of living together in an interdependent world" (Lake in their commentary), rather than simply a "production project" to advance predetermined goals, professional or ideological or otherwise (Lake, 2014, 2016; Newman and DeFilippis, 2021; Jon, 2021a, 2021b).

Contingent materialities

As Simone elucidates in their essay, one may feel futile to pen the world down in any form, as the connections of things that are being speculatively drawn in retrospect seem like a fiction in itself, amongst all the other mainstream fictitious operations of the world in which we often find ourselves playing a part (Ghertner and Lake, 2021)—whether that is unimpeded capitalist accumulation, land commodification, or mass carbonization. What Simone says of the advent of cryptocurrency, "when the value becomes simply 'registering' individual aspirations to constantly reposition themselves in terms of an increasing number of others attempting to do the same thing", may in fact be an adjacent description of how today's economy and politics—under the spell of fluctuations in human attention—are actually in the works of manifesting (Shiller, 2020). Here, a plethora of narratives, hypotheses, redescriptions and rationalizations surface and submerge, in a pattern reminiscent of the chorus of birds and the like. The agitations of contingent materialities, by the virtue of their continuing evolution and change, will not allow a single grand fiction or narrative to be the dominating cultural anchor; navigating different futures of a city's "infrastructural sufficiency" or its population's physical conditions of "inhabitation" would always remain transitory and context-dependent (Simone, 2019, 2022).

But the budding realities themselves, as Kim demonstrates in their commentary, cannot escape the historicity of power politics often articulated and communicated via the mainstream language and its norms. In the messy everyday

materialities of multicultural suburbs, unfamiliar housing landscapes are outcasted as "monstrous" by the dictates of zoning laws and practices; even when "multicultural" existences seem to have blurred the historical color lines of Black/White "American" segregation, the changes in the living realities of lower-income Black people have been marginal, as they are being pushed further down to the south "in a stream of suburbanizing poverty". When sprawling suburbanization offers ample possibilities of solidifying the walls of "bubbles" rather than engendering their "clashes" (meaning, interactions), especially under the context of Georgia's conservative politics, municipalities find themselves caught in the resource fights between the resentments from the historically stigmatized and the "invest-worthy" interests of the newly emerging "potential labor force" (Kim and Bozarth, 2021).

The key question then, as Simone highlights, is really to ask what it's actually like to work "in the middle": boundless, contingent materialities are the living proof of the world that is always in-the-making, evincing the possibilities of living, knowing, and being otherwise (MacLeavy et al., 2021); at the same time, the "larger surrounds", temporally or spatially or imaginatively present, continue to haunt our practices of caring for the things that have come to matter in the given moment. For instance, in the "dreamscapes" of Kim's commentary, the problematic emerges with regard to understanding how the legacies of racism, colonialism, and class politics are infiltrated within the living *present*—unsettling "assumptions of chronological time by making evident how the past is not a bounded earlier phase but is engaged and extended within the present" (MacLeavy in their commentary), while also attending to the generative potentials that daily materialities—blue-tile roofs of Asian Square commercial plaza symbolizing Korean architecture, immigrants taking over the abandoned retail-lots in Jimmy Carter Boulevard, booming commercial centers packed with Latinx and Asian shoppers in the "White-fled" cities like Norcross—continuously feed our imaginations and narratives on "whom we are to become". How can we acknowledge the historicity in our contemporary moral responsibilities (Jon, 2019) while at the same time embracing the contingency of our identities, social

relations, and behaviors attached to the specific "roles" that each of us play in our everyday life in a specific time and place?

Moral inquiry

In the beginning process of writing "Bubble Clash", I was having a conversation with a practicing planner. I was cognizant of several problematic situations emergent in the area, but when I asked about "the seagull problem", their facial expression changed, as if we were about to talk about something difficult, something they may not be able to comment on. "It is becoming too political", was what they said; and "political", for me, was the sign of a particular problematic situation that was worth investigating for, mirroring the realities of "actual life" where pluralities of social bubbles and their clashes demand an attention from, as Rorty noted in his depiction of those who engage in critical activism, "moral entrepreneurs".

If the contingent materialities are an invitation for "adjacent critics" (Lake in their commentary, from Koopman, 2009) to "work in the middle", and subsequently, their contributions would only to be additive and never to be an overarching principle (Simone), the only thing that their writings would have in common would be the determination to search for an adequate moral inquiry (Lake, 2014). Reflecting on ever-changing social practices embedded within many different rationalities that many different communities subscribe to/live by in the everyday, while at the same time articulating historical sensibilities concerning the relationship between those practices and their purported aims, moral entrepreneurs begin their inquiry with a particular purpose and intention, which is "to enrich moral deliberation" via "a shift from representing reality to producing moral knowledge, a concomitant reorientation in the temporality of knowledge production, and a grounding of truth in practice" (Lake, 2014: 661). To a transitionalist pragmatist, for whom the "point" of knowledge production can never be dissected from the question of "what kind of reality we want to create?", the "research methods" that MacLeavy enlightens us of in their

commentary would seem more like “methods of moral inquiry”; creative participatory tasks such as oral history projects and biographical mappings are meaningful because they are the process through which the search for what’s valuable and true becomes a collective moral inquiry. Here, “the production of knowledge through empirical inquiry provides the means for discerning desired moral ends and the means to achieve them, a shift from knowing what is, as an end in itself, to knowing whether, and how well, ‘what is’ realizes our desired moral purposes” (ibid.: 662).

Simone’s poignant proclamation, to “subtract from the world the obsession with maximizing, to subtract the search for status and recognition, and rather live as unrecognized and inoperable”, is one of those desires that a community of social inquirers would hope to nurture through their conversations. When contingency proliferates and stories abound, all we really have are our relayed conversations about the world that surrounds us—be they may “too many” seagulls, “monster” architectures, suburban malls with “unlikely occupiers”, or the role “sprawling suburbs” in spatial segregation. Because, “if philosophy proved anything, it was that things are never fixed, and our conversation never ends”; for “truth may be elusive, but our experience is real, and it forces us to think, to argue—possibly, to change” (Graupera, 2023).

Listening to and yet moving beyond hedgehogs and foxes, the real success of “pragmatic turn” would depend on creating a democratic community of inquirers who hope to together vibrate a contagiously meliorative practice through never-ending conversations. That moral challenge begins not from our “methods” but from examining our intention behind the decision to pen something down. Why do we write and for whom do we write? Is it to propagate a particular paradigm or to challenge it? Is it to further our academic career or to tell a story differently? Is it to end the conversation or to provoke it? I would like to sincerely thank Simone, MacLeavy, Kim, Lake and the editor of this journal for their thoughtful insights, generative criticisms, and the opportunity to be part of a community of conversations.

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