Traversing webs: Reflections on relational theory and international relations

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Abstract
Relational theories challenge, in a multitude of ways, how we understand and work with relations in International Relations (IR) scholarship. It invites engagement with thought and practice of relationality from different parts of the world and invites a rethinking of the boundaries between states and individuals but also between humans and non-humans. This essay considers the role of relational theory in and around IR by way of a series of short inter-related reflections, drawing on 'IR' but also author's experiences of relational shifts in everyday life. The experiences of 'traversing the webs' of relationality at home and at work, with humans and non-humans, in IR scholarship and beyond it, demonstrate the ways in which relational thought and practice is much more than 'theory', travels well beyond 'IR', and yet also poses important questions to how we think and do IR.

Keywords
Relational theory, international relations theory, climate change, posthumanism, intervention, ethics, community

Introductory notes

This essay consists of short segments reflecting on relational thought and becoming, lockdowns and community, spiders and flies, intervention and ethics, COP and climate change, 'International Relations (IR)' and planetary politics, somewhat in that order, but also all jumbled up. Indeed, the reader is invited to think on such thematics as potentially all quite jumbled up.

This essay does not proceed through an analytical exposition of, or even a descriptive engagement with, relational theory, although I have written on relational theory elsewhere in a more traditional analytical register should the reader wish to turn to such expositions (see e.g. Kurki 2020, Kurki 2021). Rather, in this piece, in line with the editors' invitation to write in a different, more open-ended style – and since I think such an exercise might be productive for understanding and

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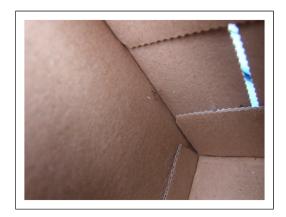Email: mlk@aber.ac.uk

Figure 1. One member of kin, inhabiting an empty Felix cat food box.

engaging with relational theory – this essay presents a series of short reflections around relational encounters in the author's everyday life but also, all at once, in IR scholarship.

The aim here is to give the reader a sense of some relational encounters, how they cross over, change and shift our bodies, spaces, thoughts and 'worlds' that emerge. The aim is also to show that these encounters in their own way also speak to the current efforts in IR – and across the sciences – to build new types of communities and politics. In line with relational theory, as I interpret it, the aim here is to present an open-ended 'web' of encounters via short vignettes – not an ontology or a methodology. I hope such an account will be helpful in opening up to readers a 'sense' of relational theoretical thought and practice as well as questions that arise from encounter with it for IR.

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I am trying to think about how communities are created; or rather how they arise. I am thinking in a sense about how kin-bonds are forged, how they emerge and about the temporalities involved. I am thinking this partly as part of a work task I have been allocated: I have been asked to think on communities in Covid and post-Covid scenarios. For universities to respond 'responsibly' to Covid, it has been suggested that we, academics, might have a role in helping reconfigure communities thrown into disarray by the isolation and confusion associated with pandemic responses.

But as I reflect on this I am also thinking about my own evolving communities.

I do not have children, and like many I have not seen my parents or siblings for two years due to the pandemic. And like many I feel separated from the few friends I have. I am lucky, I suppose, to be stuck at home with my partner.

And yet it is not just 'us', me and him, at home. Preceding the pandemic and during the pandemic we have also been growing and developing kin-bonds of various kind close to home. Family, community, 'kins that matter' have multiplied during the pandemic.

One of the expanded communities is the community of spiders in and around the house. They form a key part of everyday life, ethical traversing and dialog for us. We face each other daily, from different perspectives, but also very differently from how we used to. I say this because we have shifted, or I have, shifted relationally traversing in and around their webs.Figure 1

The starting point – and the long-term history of our relations, I am ashamed to admit – is one of murder. And I am the one that is in the dock, deservedly, for the shameless actions, and allowances for, the massacres, intentional and unintentional, that have preceded our community-building.

Let us put it this way: I remember, almost 8 years ago exactly, arriving at our newly acquired house and sitting outside – ironically proud (for a supposed 'leftie') of our 'achievement' of finally making just enough money to be able to finally get a mortgage and purchase a house. Scared to be taking this step but proud all at the same time, I was learning to negotiate this new space in a Cwm in mid-Wales. As I was 'settling' in, one of the first acts was a thoughtless and yet quite intended massacre.

Across our front porch ran a small spider: enjoying the warmth of the spring sun, darting across the warm tarmac, the spider was heading into the bushes across. The mistake the spider made was not to spot my camping chair; the new proud 'manager of the porch'. Panicked by the sudden spiderly incursion, without much of a thought, I stuck my leg out and stepped on the spider. Just like that – splat.

My heart was beating; as it does on such occasions. I think I was upset, in a way, by the senseless sudden killing. But I was I think also proud, in a kind of apologetic way, of the quickness of my reactions, the unthinking speed of the murder, and the 'settlement' of order; 'no more worry', 'no more encroachment' from this unruly cohabitant.

My partner saw what happened and, horrified, said: 'why on earth did you do that?' I said something like, 'I don't like spiders, they scare me'. He left, mad, angered and disappointed. That disappointment never waned; but I have come to understand it better.

I cannot say I have not exterminated others since; but in the last few years, with a different set of ethical negotiations than were present at the mindless assassination that spring afternoon.

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During the same period in 2014 I entered a period of medical leave, prompted by a burnout (an unfortunate and increasingly frequent condition for academics). On doctor's orders, I was dis-allowed from engaging with any academic colleagues, email or even books. In the boredom and restlessness of the forced escape from a university job – which paradoxically keeps you running so fast it prevents you from ever really thinking – I was forced to sit in the new jungle of cohabitants we had joined in the Cwm and to 'think'.

With time (it took many months), I started to think on myself less and what I thought less and started listen and to observe, and also to care and not try to control. And this experience led me also to start to gently read very different things from what I had so far: Donna Haraway perhaps most significantly.

From the massacre, the loss of control of my own mind and body, and from loss of a control space ('work') I also started to let go a little; a process which was deeply uncomfortable but led me not only to relational theory but also to quite a different set of communities, ethical encounters and academic trajectories too.

I do now share my living space with a series of spider communities; and we are a community of a kind; not just in the sense that 'I don't kill them' or that they 'love me'– *neither* extreme of feeling is required for a community. What we live is a kind of traversing together, facing each other ethically, practically; and negotiating our use of space and habits with some care, no, I think more like with what Haraway (2016) calls 'response-ability', a sense of recognition and reciprocal responsiveness.

For me, our relations are also meaningful; and not just because my human community has dwindled in size; but because in these encounters I have learned lot about the 'ethical' difficulties of living together, perhaps even more I have learned about this from 20 years of studying IR.

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In June 2021, I am running around upstairs in the house trying to get ready for an Open University mathematics exam. I must perform, or all my efforts over the last year – a difficult year – will be wasted.

An inconvenient addition to this rushing is a fly who has flown in, probably attracted by the very smelly kitchen garbage bag downstairs; the access to which is nevertheless annoyingly denied by a dirty plastic lid. So the fly flew upstairs seeking for sustenance or a get-away exit.

I acknowledged the fly's trouble and amidst my rushing did open a few windows to allow for a safe escape.

But I did not open the window in my bedroom: this window is not opened now because in the old partially rotted woodwork of the window lives a local spider community with their webs and interweaved efforts to sustain themselves and their offspring. I try not to disturb them if I can help it; so I opened other windows, offering exits into the warm summer sun for the lost fly.

Then a disaster struck for the fly. In the rush to find an exit, the fly flew into the spider web in the bottom corner of the window. Delighted, a spider hidden in the crack of the window popped its head up and started ensuring that the fly stay snared. The fly struggled, buzzed, tried to roll and extricate themself.

I stood there, a full 2 min or so, watching this slow-paced murder-in-the-making unfold.

I also considered: is this an occasion for an intervention, a kind of a 'humanitarian intervention', by this silent observer? But whose side would I intervene on? Do I try to save the fly or does my spider friend get to win this one? What should be my role? Do I have an ethical responsibility and what on earth would it be? Do I have stakes here; should I have a role in egging on 'my' spider community or not? I did not do anything. I just watched the panicked buzzing of the fly as it embedded itself deeper into the webbing. The spider was very pleased; I could tell.

And then a kind of a 'miracle' happened, full 2 min into things, when all I had acknowledged, was lost for the fly I had failed to help. Against all odds, the fly wriggled free and flew off. I was delighted for it and felt a little sorry for the spider. But I did take an extra 5 min to now concertedly usher the fly to an exit: saying out loud: 'You're so lucky, mate. Well done! Have a nice day!'

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We are all just trying to get by, to exist, to negotiate surroundings. Our visiting fly is, and my cohabitor in the spider corner is; and I am too. We have different struggles, and yet they are also tied up together. We are trying to cohabit, and survive together in a world where, as Anna Tsing (2015) emphasizes so well, nobody survives alone.

That said, a lot of the times I think I try to do a lot more than survive with others.

Believe it or not, along with some other academics on this planet I am also trying to boldly 'theorise' how we might find ways of better cohabiting on the planet. I am thinking about what I should do 'to make the world a better place'. I am an IR scholar after all: that is what we are taught to do! We come to the field as good liberals, good Marxists, good humanists – trying to save the world, possibly from those others trying to save the world – and we are thought to 'do better' in so doing. What else would we do? Why else would we do IR?

Think harder, study more deeply, capture the whole – *capture the whole and save lives, save the planet!*

This is a lot more ambitious, and at the same time somehow a lot more silly and also much more dangerous, than cohabiting. Cohabiting is hard enough: it is hard to recognize, across difference, the right of others to exist, to survive, to kill, to not be killed; it is hard to provide space, to listen, to negotiate complex interests and resources, to not make others so easily 'killable', in Haraway's terms. That's *really* hard when everyone is in some sense food, resource, compost for everyone else, the ultimate origin and nub of ethics as Dorion Sagan (2013) has suggested.

And yet on top of this some of us – like me, but I know there are others (perhaps even you reading this) – also think that we can 'theorise IR' and solve the problems on the planet. Wow!

All that, when co-existing with a spider is so difficult?

The contradictions and the tensions between my 'human' 'working' 'academic' life and my 'real world' communities and negotiations are stark. And yet they are important tensions and relations – webs if you like – to think through, to traverse through.

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COP is coming; be ready.[1] Why? Not least because it is a chance for the UK – the country whose residency requirements I need to live by, and in some regards also a community of fate – to shine on the 'world stage'.

Big important (mostly) men in suits sit in big wide rooms negotiating over the future of the planet, with Boris Johnson at the helm of the process. Can there be a more important event!

For a moment the colonial history of Britain's trade and military missions is forgotten as the UK steps in to climate politics as a 'unifier' of the world. UK once more can show it can lead; show it can unite humanity. And should this be doubted, the UK has stepped in to help those developing country others unable or unwilling to 'pay' their way into full equality of responsibility for climate change.

If a negotiation settlement is reached, humans, states, the 'international community' can tell themselves that they were good responsible humans; they 'did something' to 'save' the planet, to save the animals, to save ourselves. Much is at stake then at the COP – not just for the world, the planet but actually perhaps more for 'us', our sense of importance, agency, capacity in the face of an otherwise scary 'hyperobject' (Morton, 2013).

But so much more is at stake in climate change – and the COP – than the negotiating solution, which no doubt is not insignificant for our personal lives and community bonds on the planet. The real challenge of climate change is facing the assumptions many of us embrace when we come to climate as an 'external' event to be 'controlled'.

Here, an inherent need to manage, to unify, to make orderly a world of many, so many, others, is revealed. The Anthropos of the Anthropocene trots confidently on the 'world stage' created by COP. The COP if you like 'creates' a world for us to pretend we can sit on and control, out of a multiplicity of many worlds and the tangled webs of them which we actually inhabit.

How can the pluri-worlds exist in the world of the COP? Is 'the international' bound to win, like a totalitarian vision of universal truth, ethics and action? Probably, Yousef's (2018) 'Black Anthropocenes' have little place here. COP is human, it is in charge, and yes, it is pretty white and pretty male. On this stage, the radical feminists, the postcolonial protests, Black Lives Matter, even environmentalists are bit part actors; and on this stage they mostly are allowed to speak only on the *other* side of the security fences, which secure the existing 'state order' and its representatives.

I *am* to be part of the COP: as an academic working on climate change and an IR theorist no less! I *am* to contribute, to show my relevance to the COP.

Will I speak for the planet, the humans, and the spider communities too? I will be their voice; me, Greta and Boris.

But what if COP is a problem of the not-so-very-relational IR? What if COP is not a self-evident solution if we actually try to traverse webs, instead of managing them like battery farms, zoos or fish tanks?

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One of the things COP and related discussions has raised is the question of cross-generational response. What responsibilities do we have for others in the future?

But I am also thinking on a related, but seemingly perhaps even more difficult question: how do we think temporality when we think of community? Do we need to be born together and live together and for how long? Do we need a history of a 'nation' to build a community? How long do we need for a community? And is the definition of a community not the 'whole' but also how the 'self' is changed or webbed into the fabric around it? Is it shifts in these temporal relationalities that matter? How do we traverse relationally in a temporal horizon, not just spatial one? Undoing the 'globe', the (one-world) 'world' may be possible; but how does one undo the temporalities of states and nuclear families as 'communities of fate'?

How long did it take me to form a community with the spiders in the bedroom? When did it become a community?

Rafi Youatt (2020: 92) powerfully, and rightly, asks: 'Do we have the political imagination to see sovereign communities – wolf packs – that exist on a different temporal scale than ours? And can we engage with the conditions of their self-dissolution–even under conditions that are partly externally driven – without taking up the impulse to intervene and save them in the name of their own sovereignty?'

These are important questions – and not just theoretical questions. They are very concrete for the spiders and me; and important it seems for all families, communities of fate, for communities of cohabitation.

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What is important is not where we end up but also where we start. We think a lot on endpoints in IR – peace, co-operation, development – or the steps to take us to the endpoints. And yet, it is recognizing the skewed nature of a lot of our 'starting points' that is key.

I this this having spent a partly sleepless night thinking on ghosts and spirits. Amaya Querejazu, an exciting relational theorist currently at Aberystwyth, though locked down on the other side of town, has got me thinking, again. She has written an important article draft on animacy, animism and re-enchantment. It has got me thinking, not just about spiders and cats but also, strangely, about planetary democracy.

The reason is not that it has given me answers to how we might converse with plants and animals and spiders and flies politically – a project I am currently getting off the ground – but because I think it has given me an important insight as to what questions *not* to ask about planetary democracy.

We start, or I start, discussions on what it would mean to do politics with non-humans from the assumptions that the difficulty here is one of communication, representation, and ethical frameworks. That is, I tend to assume that the challenge with planetary democracy is that we tend to assume that people are conscious beings who use human language to communicate, which animals and plants, and rocks do not. Communication, politics then must be tricky somehow, and my project is to resolve those trickinesses. I tend to assume that the issue is of finding new ways of representing,

that is, that instead of representing interests via liberal democratic modalities, we find new ways of conversing, listening as well as representation. Earth Systems Councils or Embassies of the North Sea, the challenge is new forms of representation; what we need is liberal democracy 3.0!

And we tend to assume that the difficulty is also in part one of how non-humans fit in with our 'ethical frameworks', that is, that we have ethical codes whose extension to 'others' or modification of which to fit in others is what we should be focused on. This is all very tricky, it seems to us. Tricky. Tricky! Impossible?

But perhaps all these questions which I keep circling around are the wrong starting points, unhelpful starting points.

Why cannot we communicate with plants and animals and inanimate objects, when we do, daily, do precisely that? Whether it is Noodles the cat in our house needing get outside for a pee, tomato plants screaming for water, or even my PC, my 'lifeline', heating up, I have *little difficulty* in my relational webs in 'knowing' something about their needs, all without 'human-like' voice.

This is quite similar to how I know my partner of 12 years: he can say a million things but I still do not know what he thinks; and yet I can still tell when something is wrong, without any words.

Philosophers of social science have for years argued that the 'other minds problem' is the most intractable problem of the social world and social sciences; but while I do not know all of what others think or where their whims might take them, I do not need to and they do not either.

Uncertainty, quantum theorists call it; spirits Amaya calls it; whimsicalness I think I would call it. Whatever you call 'it' there is both much more and much less to the problem of other minds: more in the sense that other minds are more than other minds (brains in vats in Latour's sense (Latour, 1999)) – they are relationally bound – and much less in the sense that they really are not so 'other' in relational webs.

To start our inquiry into non-human democracy from separation, from flat relationalities without spirit, from representation of 'another', is the problem.

Where we start needs to be a point of serious reflection, not just where we end up. And perhaps, starts and ends – a certain kind of linearity of logic – is the problem in the first place.

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Relational theory has a 'form' which is difficult and attractive all at once. It is not a uniform form; but there is a kind of a stretching 'out' of self and stretching 'in' of others; there is a kind of incredulity in the face of borders and dichotomies; and there is certainly an interest in finding other worlds, not only in different parts of the world but in the very worlds we live, even in 'the west'.

What do we do with relational theory? Well, we can write books and articles that call into question modernist, humanist, western-centric narratives. Or we can create new synergies of theorists across different parts of the planet and disciplines, to challenge dominance of 'thing'-thinking. I have been part of exploring some of these options and so have many others.

And yet, the most interesting, powerful and meaningful relational shift has been the non-analytical, the intuitive reorientation to relational flows and response-abilities, redrawing communities and care relations. Relational theory then is much more than relational theory; or indeed relational practice. It is a kind of a dance, as Kavalski (2018) has called it; difficult, and not always rhythmic or co-ordinated. It is a kind of invitation to learn to move differently with some but incomplete sense of others.

The task we were given for this essay is to reflect on: *what do you think relational theories of IR offer to the field and add to the debate about IR? What are the promises or limits of relational approaches, and how can or should discussion proceed?*

These questions, while reasonable in many regards, may not be the right place to start, or to end. Such questions seek to understand what a particular set of actors or theorists can give to the wider web of the 'whole' of IR.

But the whole of IR theory is also part of the much wider webs we traverse. And our daily actions – from the murderous tick to wish to 'save the planet', which co-habit in many of us so easily – are also ways of traversing the webs, which also help structure 'IR'. We are traversing in all kinds of ways – with spiders and states and technologies – but how we traverse can also shift and reorient to reveal different webs, different layers, different lives, different response-abilities.

It is a little weird traversing in webs, facing and negotiating with others, without full 'knowledge' or 'control' but also with *some* sense of others; without clear ethical compass but yet with *some* sense of care, *some* responsibility. Relational theory and relational life feel a little weird, to be honest, for me and I know for others too (is it throwing away modernity, the state, morality and ethics as we know them?); and yet relational theory and life also feel weird 'in a good way'; not necessarily as ethically 'good', but more in the sense of 'facing the world' good. That may not be much of a justification, perhaps, for us or IR to turn to it, but, for me, there are worse ways of traversing.

Short postscript

Academic writing is a weird way of connecting with others. We enter it normally with a great sense of pressure to 'convince' others, to justify arguments, logics, suppositions. That is how and why we write – at least I do – for publication. This kind of writing is quite different. To be honest, I did not think I could develop such. It feels alien. I am no artist, I have very little creative skills, and zero training in such. I do not even have an urge to express in alternative ways. I am a very box-standard writer and academic.

But when Joe, having read the paper, asked me: but tell us, also in the paper, 'what did it feel like to write just ideas, without arguing?' he got me thinking: this way of writing is not only more enjoyable but also richer, somehow, with ideas, even as it is short on justification; ideas that travel, traverse, jump and connect; ideas that are not justified *just* by justification.

But, Milja, does it mean anything goes? Does it mean academic rigor is out of the window? Does it mean this is just another kind of postmodernism or something? Yeah, I hear you asking that – because I hear these questions in my head too, all the time, like an annoying bell that will not be quiet. Where is the argument? How is it justified? Is it contextualized? What is the conclusion? What is the originality and the significance? A well-trained REF-manager cannot but ask: but what is the *originality, the rigour and the significance*?!

And yet, in response, I am just going to say; it was enjoyable, meaningful, and weird writing like this. And it has been good to talk with readers of the paper about how and what they connected with – rats in their own lockdown backyards, semiotics of posthumanism, spiders in their kitchen windows, web-working. These were scholarly chats, for sure, but also much more than that, relational theory in practice, in life. That too.

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Note

1. This vignette was written in October 2021.

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