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Wondering Through Our Outlines

Abstract: Moving through a series of encounters, some with animals other than humans, some with other philosophers, this paper explores how Earth others can and do call humans to transformative and ethical attention. By creating a flow between creative non-fiction, and more discursive explorations of the process of encounter, it both considers and seeks to evoke the ways in which wonder transforms the outlines between humans and other animals. Whereas the ways of knowing that Val Plumwood called “master rationality” reduce the otherness of other animals to the negative outside of the moral human, they are always there to be apprehended as their own, positive presence. When one attends with what Simone Weil calls “passive activity,” the truth of others as themselves or in their world can appear, and a type of ethical responsibility follows.

Keywords: Wonder, attention, animal ethics, Simone Weil, responsibility

1. Outlines

In her novel *Outline*, Rachel Cusk narrates ten conversations that her protagonist, an unnamed writer, has during a trip from her home in the UK to Greece, where she has travelled to teach writing workshops.¹ At no point does the narrative gaze fall directly on the writing teacher herself except insofar as she is affected by or affects those with whom she is interacting. These others are, however, portrayed in the closest of detail. To the extent that she emerges as a character with substance at all, it is as the silhouette brought into relief by the contours of those who move into and out of her life.

¹ R. Cusk, *Outline*, London 2014.

This absence is not made explicit, but Cusk does articulate the conceit through the words of another character, a woman whose life had been derailed by what she refers to as “an incident” that occurred some time before the two met, when this (second) woman was mugged and assaulted. During a conversation with the narrator, whom she meets immediately upon her arrival in Greece, also to teach into the writing workshops, the woman is reflecting on an encounter she had shortly before with the man who had been sitting beside her on the plane.

[T]he longer she listened to his answers, the more she felt that something fundamental was being delineated, something not about him but about her. He was describing, she realized, a distinction that seemed to grow clearer and clearer the more he talked, a distinction he stood on one side of while she, it became increasingly apparent, stood on the other. He was describing, in other words, what she herself was not: in everything he said about himself she found in her own nature a corresponding negative. This anti-description, for want of a better way of putting it, had made something clear to her by a reverse kind of exposition: while he talked, she began to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident a sense of who she now was.²

The metaphor of the outline as it is fleshed out here is essentially ambiguous. An outline, it seems, comprises a continuous line with no breaks, containing what is inside and excluding what is outside. It would seem to be both hard and impermeable. Yet when beings converse with each other in words, through movements, or by touch, what seemed static and impermeable turns out to be otherwise. Outline becomes interface, even flow of becoming. Deborah Bird Rose captures the permeable outline at its apotheosis in the form of the kiss between the tongue of the flying fox and the nectar. Just there, she writes, “life happens ... the entanglement of response and reaction without dissolving those who kiss into a pool of sameness: kissing is of the edges, of contiguity, not continuity ... The kiss ... finds it difficult to specify who is the giver and who is the receiver.”³

2. Yes!

Sitting on the deck, the wind touches my cheek to beckon the slight turn of my head, and now I am caught by countless orange leaves quavering diagonal; from the forest above, towards the pond below. And towards us. The effect is arresting, I’d even say transcendent, but lest I fall for the temptation of locating it in that there-less there, a leaf lands on Simon’s golden coat (as he lies near my feet), and instead, a smile takes me.

Being caught in the flight of orange against blue and green opens me up to the impossible intensity of the Ginkgo tree’s yellow against the red of the maple that grows beside it. Now the swoosh of air that the wild ducks make as they land on the pond. Now the undulation of the chestnut trees, huge, fully possessed as the wind transforms them.

² Ibidem, pp. 239–240.

³ D.B. Rose, *Shimmer; Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*, Edinburgh 2021, p. 223.

E.E. Cummings⁴ commiserated with the trials of “sweet spontaneous earth,”
“pinched

and
poked” by the
“fingers of
prurient philosophers.”

His words perhaps sought to console earth’s beauty “prodded” by the

“naughty thumb
of science.”

I am guessing that his heart had already been beckoned by what (who?) those
fingers and thumbs could never reach, and so, he was (still and again) able to hear
earth

answerest
them only with
spring).

Having spent the last years of her life thinking, writing about and mourning the
extinction of many of the Earth others with whom humans have shared the plan-
et,⁵ in her final months, Deborah Bird Rose was working on a book that would be
both lamentation and celebration. Certainly, it was from the time she had spent
with Aboriginal people, and on the basis of what she had learned from them as
they brought her into their worlds that Bird Rose assumed her kinship relationship
with Earth others, and in particular with flying foxes. Yet in *Shimmer*, she docu-
ments her encounters with the many non-Indigenous people who had come to live
and dedicate their lives to flying foxes, and for whom these creatures were also kin.
I too have met some of these people, who recounted to me what it was like to try
to save these creatures during days upon days of soaring temperatures they cannot
survive, and then to collect thousands upon thousands of their small dead bodies
as they lay on the ground where they had fallen.

At their best, Rose wrote, our (human) lives are “embedded in generosity,
responsibility, beauty and goodness that we ourselves did not make.”⁶ As with Si-
mone Weil, for Bird Rose this engagement with “the ongoing-ness of life” is an eth-
ical matter and carries responsibilities. It is hard to read her words about the moral
responsibilities that accompany “becoming ancestral”⁷ without acknowledging that

⁴ E.E. Cummings, “La Guerre (part V),” [in:] *Cummings Complete Poems 1904–1962*, G. F. Firmage (ed.), New York–London 2015, p. 63.

⁵ D.B. Rose, T. Van Dooren, M. Chrulow, *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death and Generations*, New York 2017.

⁶ D.B. Rose, *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*, Edinburgh 2021, p. 16.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

she was writing a text that she knew would be her last. From her hospital bed, she tells us she can see “the busyness of city life,” but as she experiences herself in dying’s transition zone, it is her responsibility as one who has borne and still bears witness to write: “We don’t know what may yet happen, we still must act.” Onerous words, as she herself acknowledges, followed immediately by the exclamation, “*Yes!* Here is the great powerhouse of life on Earth.”⁸

3. Sky Calls

The carpet of birdsong has a tendency to recede into the background—at least into my background when I am preoccupied. But when the black cockatoos are shouting at each other as they enter the valley, there is no ignoring them. No mistaking their insistence that they have something to say about what is happening, although probably not to me. Even when the cockatoos are way beyond my sight, their conversation (which so often sounds to me like a robust argument), their pronouncements or their announcements demand attention. When they do come into my field of vision, they are as impressive as you’d expect them to be from what you have been hearing. More like fighter pilots than gliders, they head for some trees. When I look up, I can barely discern them, huge and incontestable in the upper branches, bird and branch dark in relief against the searing light of the Australian sun. Just as I have managed to make out their shape and the yellow on their tail feathers and to feel that extraordinary satisfaction in catching them in my sight, they are off again. And I after them, only earthbound!

I walk down here following their path north because now they have me intrigued and seduced. Three and then another four and then six or seven, ten, fourteen, more—a big mob. Perhaps there are grubs in the trunks or fruit on the branches they’ve decided will make a tasty meal. Perhaps they are just out for the lark of it. They certainly look like they’re having a blast.

Now I need to crane my neck to see them because they have landed on the very upper branches of the two she-oaks standing beside the house where the chickens sleep overnight. I look up, and they definitely seem to be looking down at me, although, unlike me who has to squint intently and still can’t see much, they have no trouble making me out. And it’s surely not the impressiveness of my cries or the brilliance of my movement across the ground that has brought them here. They know that this is where I throw seeds every morning and every evening for the wild ducks, and they have come to check out if there is anything in it for them. And although they likely don’t give a toss about me, that doesn’t stop them offering me the most extraordinary gift of gaining a perspective on myself as nothing more (and nothing less) than a seed tosser.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 16.

4. Un-Mastering Identity

In theorizing the production of identity, and of experience, ecofeminists (amongst others) identified what Val Plumwood called “master rationality,” whereby the world and the beings who occupy it are constituted according to a series of binaries that function through a dynamic of negation and domination.⁹ Plumwood sets out some of the effects this schema has on those that (for this rationality precludes their being who’s) fall on the inverse side of the (ontologically and morally) positive beings. Specifically, they are backgrounded, radically excluded, defined entirely through their relationship with the positive term, reduced to their instrumental value (to the positive term), and homogenized.¹⁰

By exposing the hierarchical nature of the binary logic at work in master rationality, critical theories of justice have, for the most part, focused their effort on shedding light on the damage the application of “master rationality” causes for those on what we might call “the inverse side.” Take, for example, the vast chasm that lies between the ideal of the human individual as the bearer of rights in contemporary liberal democracies, and farmed animals. “Livestock,” as we call the billions of pigs, cows, chickens, sheep and goats who today constitute 60% of the total mammalian biomass on the planet,¹¹ are positioned in contemporary societies as a massive resource for human consumption and capital and are subjected, in every aspect of their lives, to the impacts of human decisions, laws and policies, but remain completely excluded as subjects of justice, or rights holders from all legal and political institutions.¹² That farmed animals are so positioned is thus not merely a matter of avowed injustice for the sake of convenience or profit, but an effect of the master rationality. Insofar as humans are held as being uniquely endowed with a moral status defined in terms of its transcendence of animal status, and hence the moral right to both certain protections and to a guaranteed right to demand a say over their collective lives, other animals are condemned to show up as, and occupy the negative space left by, the outline of this human figure.

⁹ See V. Plumwood, “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism,” *Hypatia* 6 [1] (1991), pp. 3–27.

¹⁰ V. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, London 2002, pp. 106–109. One sees the operation of this master rationality and its impacts with particular poignancy in the continuity between the dichotomisation of the “animal” and the “moral” in Immanuel Kant’s articulation of the emergence of the life of the “moral human” “independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world” (I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. and transl. L. White Beck, 3rd ed., New York 1993, pp. 169–170). For a further discussion see D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago 2021 and D. Celermajer, C.J. Winter, “Fables for the Anthropocene: Illuminating Other Stories for Being Human in an Age of Planetary Turmoil,” *Environmental Philosophy* 19 [2] (2022), pp. 163–190.

¹¹ Y.N. Bar-On, R. Phillips, R. Milo, “The Biomass Distribution on Earth,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 [25] (2018), pp. 6506–6511.

¹² A range of projects seeking to challenge this systematic exclusion are being mounted, including the Non-Human Rights Project, which has mounted a series of cases seeking recognition of the personhood of individual animals before US courts, and more recently, and in line with the shift in nomenclature, the More-than-human Rights Project, see <https://mothrights.org/>.

The fact that it is other animals and not humans who spend their entire lives in legalized confinement, have their offspring forcibly removed, and are killed at the point where maximum profit can be reaped makes clear who is on the downside. So long as the conditions distributed on either side are thus defined, no one would want to fall on the animal side. Nevertheless, insofar as the system of classification produces all and any identity through this dichotomous dynamic, the ideal characteristics of humans (or those humans who are permitted to count as fully human) are also constrained. True, the possibility of assuming the characteristics of the dominant side is logically foreclosed for those on the inverse; but also for those on the “best side,” straying onto the “wrong side” counts as transgression. As David Gilmour and Roger Waters (of Pink Floyd) wrote and (even better) sang, a lead part in a cage.¹³

What particularly intrigues me is the phenomenology of this split identity. Is there longing for what lies on the other side, coded both as another type of being, and as “cannot be me”? Do some humans sense their own connection to what is defined as their lack, and hence their own alienation? And if they do, how do differently located and constituted people respond to this sense? Some double down to thicken the (out)line, heighten the wall, fortify the distinctions, and even kill the reminder. Others, it seems, find ways of straying. These impulses and differences seem particularly acute in this age of many names, including E.O. Wilson’s term, Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness, derived from the Greek *eremo*, meaning not only lonely, but *bereft*.¹⁴

5. Attention

Iris Murdoch famously described a moment when gazing out the window “in an anxious and resentful frame of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige” she observed a kestrel hovering. She describes the shift thus: “In a moment everything is altered ... There is nothing now but kestrel.”¹⁵ The attention she described has a distinctive character involving not merely a shift to another as the object of perception, but a type of revelation. Where-

¹³ The reference is to the Pink Floyd song, “Wish You Were Here.”

¹⁴ I’m reminded of a poem by R.K. Fauth, “Playing with Bees,” which includes the lines,

So the world turned
its one good eye
to watch the bees
take most of metaphor
with them.
Swarms—
in all their airborne
pointillism—
shifted on the breeze
for the last time.

R.K. Fauth, “Playing with Bees,” [in:] *A Dream in Which I Am Playing with Bees*, Texas 2024.

¹⁵ I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, London 1970, p. 82.

as before, one perceives the world around one through lenses of sense-making that reduce the otherness of another to what is available within the lexicon of rehearsed knowledge, when one attends in a way Murdoch is evoking, the truth of another as themselves or in their world can appear.

The remarkable way in which the sight of the kestrel captured her attention is not for Murdoch merely an aesthetic phenomenon. It is also an ethical one. The displacement of the inward gaze—which she called “unselfing”—coincides with the world as it is coming into view. For a moral realist like Murdoch, this appearance, this lifting of the mystifications cast by the self’s preconceptions, occasions an understanding of the right way to be and to act. The possibility of goodness is not, as in utilitarian and deontological ethics, achieved through the abstract discernment of the correct rule and its subsequent application to the matter at hand. Rather apprehending what is morally right and then acting on it requires a radical outward turning, a suspension of the conceptual apparatus that egotism has produced through a process of acquiring knowledge of laws or norms that it can reproduce or adapt. Morality requires attention. It requires presence.

Murdoch’s assertion that attention can give rise to an appreciation of the right response rests on her view that what impedes one accurately apprehending another in the first place is the shadow of ourselves, with all of our categories and preconceived expectations, as well as our ultimate concern for ourselves. The reason the kestrel can break through what would otherwise seem impermeable is that in its sheer magnificence, it displaces the machinations of the ego, even the ego’s manoeuvres to displace itself. This does not mean there is no activity on the part of the self, for the very possibility of apprehending “nothing but kestrel” requires an open-minded attention. The revelation occurs at a meeting place, where otherness touches upon openness, drawing the human who is attending beyond the boundaries of knowing and being it had been occupying.

For Murdoch’s contemporary, Simone Weil, attention was also an explicitly ethical practice. Weil, like Murdoch, recognized the role attention played in overcoming the difficulties posed by the task of “unselfing,” given the impossibility of deploying will to lift our own shadow. As she puts it,

In such a work all that I call “I” has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the “I” disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call “I” of the light of my attention and turn it to that which cannot be conceived.¹⁶

Weil contrasts the practice of “waiting, attention, silence, immobility,” a type of “passive activity,”¹⁷ a “negative effort,”¹⁸ with striving “after goodness of our will”—the latter being “one of the lies invented by the mediocre part of ourselves in its fear of being destroyed.”¹⁹ Attention “consists of suspending our thought.” The thought

¹⁶ S. Weil, “Attention and Will,” [in:] S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, transl. E. Crawford, M. van der Ruhr, London 2002, p. 118.

¹⁷ S. Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” [in:] S. Weil, *Waiting for God*, London–New York 2021, p. 137.

¹⁸ S. Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies,” [in:] S. Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 66.

¹⁹ S. Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love,” p. 137.

involved in attention should above all “be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive the naked truth of the object which is to penetrate it.”²⁰ So potent is this type of attention that in the rare instances when it can be brought (for it is a “rare and difficult thing”), “those who are unhappy in this world” have “no need for anything else.”²¹

Though Freud might seem an odd addition to this exploration of the practice and significance of this quality of attention, in his little-known text, “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-Analysis,” the depiction and explanation of the importance of “evenly-suspended attention” provides a useful compliment to Weil’s injunction against thought that has “seized upon some idea too hastily” and is thereby “not open to the truth.”²² Evenly-suspended attention might be best approached via its better-known counterpart, free association; though in this case, the attention is a practice of the listener (the analyst) and not of the speaker (the analysand).

The logic motivating Freud’s advice that analysands should free associate was that by giving over their desire to narrate their lives or to describe their troubles, the selectivity and correlative exclusions that would follow from such deliberate or directed forms of speech would be bypassed; here would be space for the unconscious to speak. Correlatively, through the practice of evenly-suspended attention, the listener might avoid the corresponding dangers. As Freud put it, “as soon as anyone deliberately concentrates his attention to a certain degree, he begins to select from the material before him; one point will be fixed in his mind with particular clearness and some other will be correspondingly disregarded, and in making this selection he will be following his expectations or inclinations.”²³

When it comes to other animals, and the more-than-human world more generally, I have been struck by the possibilities that this type of softened, disarmed attention affords in smoothing a passage between selection and categorization, and the experience of wonder. Upon meeting the pigs with whom I live, visitors frequently comment on their dirtiness, and when we stroll to the donkeys, conversation turns to their stubbornness. I see the filters of expectation in the inclination of visitors’ bodies; their approach to these animal others mediated through what they already seem to know. Were the encounters to end there, I would be left lamenting the extent to which their engrained orientations to the world and to Earth others deprive them of who is there. But quite often, after some time wandering the land, after we have sat and watched the light move across donkeys playing as evening falls, after their hands or perhaps the side of their faces have been touched by the grass-scented muzzle of a horse, my visitors’ words, their bodies, their curiosity tell me that the lines have started to dissolve.

²⁰ S. Weil, “Reflections on the Rights Use,” p. 67.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 68.

²² Ibidem, p. 67.

²³ S. Freud, “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-Analysis,” [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, J. Strachey (transl. and ed.), Volume 12, 1912, pp. 111–120.

6. Their Gazes

It is evening, and he and I have been giving everyone their dinner, cleaning the pastures, filling large chaff bags with straw for tomorrow. Wookie, who is old and blind but still so fierce that he remains the alpha horse, has his warm rug on for the night, and the chickens are nodding off behind the door that I have just closed and locked. The light is fading.

Because it is winter and she is bored, Penny has sauntered over to find a little entertainment before she goes to bed. First, she goes into Wookie's stable because she knows there will be food she can vacuum from the floor where it has fallen through his old teeth. Then she tosses over the buckets of water and digs the field just around it. I walk up to her huge low bronze-coloured body, she snorts *hello*, and I say, *let's go home*. Slightly disgruntled, she nevertheless walks with me, pausing at the chicken house to see if she might snack on any remnants of grain the chickens have left on the ground outside, over to the barn to check if the garage door is open, and then stops on the grass that slopes down towards where she lives. She drops onto her side and tells me she'd like a belly rub. She closes her eyes and seems to enter some type of blissful state interrupted only when I declare that I have had enough, lift myself off the ground and ask her if we can please go home now. When we get to her run, I open the gate, say *goodnight*, and watch as she wanders over to the house where Badger, the old pig who spends most of his time resting, is already fast asleep.

When I wander back, he is standing looking north across the pasture where the horses and the donkeys are grazing. He is completely still. There is a planet in the sky above them. I come to stand by his side. Just over the four-rope gate, three donkeys are facing and watching us. I have so many stories about them, a compendium of nicknames that reveal their quirks and distinctive personalities, and at first, when one of them makes a low bray, all I can see is their not-so-subtle request for us to open the gate so they can play havoc in the garden, eat the new trees and cavort up and down the driveway. But the evening is gentle, and they are arresting. I say aloud, *What if we put aside everything we think we already know about them?*

And who shows up are three beings whose breath is soft and whose time is long and who are here with us under the planet. I am drawn into their gazes out onto worlds through which they move day and night, feet on the soft earth, muzzle into the grass, sounds now of each other, now unfamiliar caught in those large antennae ears, catching the scent of me as I come in and out of their worlds. Only now she is as unrecognizable as they are.

Now it is now.²⁴

²⁴ This allusion to the temporality of the encounter should not be confused with claims that other animals live in the eternal present, claims that have been deployed to deny them moral personhood on the basis that they do not have a conception of the past or future and hence of their own lives. My point is rather about the capacity of other animals to bring humans into the absolute present. On the erroneous nature of temporal claims about other animals, see F. De Waal, *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves*, 2019 and C. Kabadayi, M. Osvath, "Ravens Par-

7. Lonely, Not Lonely

Amongst the many names that humans have given to these times, struggling as we are to gain some nominative hold to still the terror of disorientation²⁵ is the Eremocene, the age of loneliness. The kicker is that in its haunting quality and its affective pitch, the name undoes whatever stabilization the act of naming might have sought to achieve. When I sit with the reality of loneliness, the spectres of the banished others (the longed-for others) are more, not less, present. Reading a word can also be an encounter.

Loneliness isn't an accidental feature of contemporary life on Earth in accelerating ecological collapse. Although the manifestations of an increasingly desiccated world are likely to provoke the experience of loneliness, the existential loneliness of the Eremocene is neither a by-product of extinction or deforestation nor an effect of no longer hearing the birds of our childhoods or being cooled by the shade of trees on hot summer days. It is a way of being concomitant with the disenchantment that Weber claimed was the character of modernity. In his exploration of the possibility of wonder in the context of a disenchanting world, Jeffrey Kosky describes what he understands as the reconstitution of what counts as a legitimate way of being a human that produces disenchantment and, by extension, loneliness. As he puts it,

A good modern... does not come under the spell of mysteries, nor is he held in thrall by the charm of unspeakable wonders. He lets his actions and decisions be organized as methodic and systematic means in pursuit of known ends, and he can, precisely because he calculates means to pursue ends "controlled by the intellect," offer a reasonable account of all he does.²⁶

Let us pause for a moment and reflect on what is being claimed here. This modality of knowledge, as Weber described it, comprises "rationalization and intellectualization," employs "technical means and calculations," and hence expels "mysterious incalculable forces" from its ambit.²⁷ Such processes of calculability and reasoning logically entail certain restrictions on what can show up as knowable. The known can only be that which can also be clearly and unambiguously counted. It must have a beginning and an end. It must have clear outlines: lines that make clear what is inside and outside and that provide unambiguous demarcations. Further, the ends that "he" pursues, and which then prescribe the means "he" adopts are those that are also "controlled by the intellect" (understood in the restrictive terms just set out). Accordingly, those ends cannot be ones that take into account the good or the flourishing of beings who—by definition—cannot enter into his knowledge. Here are conjoined a truncated epistemology, a rigid ethical hierarchy, and a disenchanting lonely world. To return to my initial pause then, the claim here would seem to

allel Great Apes in Flexible Planning for Tool-use and Bartering," *Science* 357 [6347] (2017), pp. 202–204, doi: 10.1126/science.aam8138.

²⁵ See Brian Onishi's paper *The Wonder and the Terror of Getting Lost in "The Room"* in this volume.

²⁶ J.L. Kosky, *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity-Walter De Maria, Diller+ Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy*, Chicago 2019, p. xii.

²⁷ The text of Weber's is *Science as Vocation*, quoted in J. Kosky, *ibidem*.

be that the modern subject of the west assumes their contours within these quite disciplined and bounded epistemic, ethical and ontological fields.

It is important to read Weber's description of this form of knowledge within the broader context of his attempt to trace certain historical trends and shifts in the accepted forms of legitimation that were generally accepted in a given social and political context. In articulating this form of knowledge, he was making a distinction so as to illuminate the emergence of ways of knowing that he saw as novel, and that, given their implications, he thought merited distinguishing. Of late though, the claim that this form of knowing is coincident with the knowledge available to "moderns" in "the west" seems to have taken hold with particular vehemence.

As I read through the writings of many of my contemporary scholars, I increasingly notice the figure of the "modern west," or even the (eternal) west, depicted as a monolith in which the form of knowledge and experience Weber here depicts reigns unchallenged. Given the vigorous critiques of essentialism that dominated scholarly debates in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and the many movements, perspectives, peoples, as well as on the philosophical, political and cultural cleavages within "the west," one would think that such monolithic caricatures would be easily and readily rebutted, both analytically and empirically. That they so frequently pass unchallenged ought to make us curious about what is going on.

Perhaps what motivates such glossing of the many forms of knowledge, philosophies and ways of being that might otherwise be said to belong to "the west" is the range of affects circulating as we confront intensifying crises of injustice and ecological collapse. I well understand the anger, or the guilt, or both, at the impacts of forms of life that emanated from the empires of Europe and their colonial outposts, that reaped and continue to reap such havoc on the peoples and ecologies they dominated, and that now wrack all planetary life. But comprehending the affective terrain undergirding the conflation of the particular form of knowledge and associated ways of being Weber distinguished and Kosky pinpointed with either "the west" or "the modern" is not the same as accepting the veracity of this conflation. And this is not simply a matter of truth; it also concerns the effect this conflation has on the objects of analysis themselves: ways of knowing and "the west." Because the effect is to constitute the very monolith it claims to observe.

What presents itself as righteous criticism serves, albeit ironically, to fortify the very hegemony it seeks to disable. Rather than illuminating the counter-hegemonic tendencies attention might light upon, it forecloses and renders imperceptible a great deal of what many humans in the midst of modernity, in the midst of the west, in the midst of philosophy, have long affirmed as dimensions of knowing that lie at the heart of what makes their lives worth living. Where are poetry and artistic practice, Romanticism, birdwatching and stargazing?

When our arguments occlude these forms of knowing, forms that have lived and continue to live amongst those who constitute "the modern" and "the west," do we not ourselves assent to the omnipotence of a constrained way of knowing? Do we not affirm its capacity to murder all other modalities of knowing, and the impotence of these other modalities, their incapacity to survive, even to flourish and resist? Do we note bow to the sovereignty of master rationality?

Even more deleteriously, to assent to the idea that all “modern (western) subjects” have been fully interpolated into this way of knowing the world is to affirm the febleness of Earth others, and their incapacity to appear in any way other than as the reduced means-to ends, bits of resource to which this schema would relegate them. It is to deny, no—more than that—to refuse—to us (the humans of “the west”) the capacity to be permeable to the authentic heterogeneity of others, and to Earth others the potency to break through in their heterogeneity. It is to add a seal to the outline, to arm the border guards with ever more deadly weapons. Such analytic certainty is not innocent. Perhaps a more fertile path would be one that hesitates, allowing that for all that has been truncated, and the violence that has been wrought, “we” moderns, we of the (heterogenous) west, are also and already available to the appearance of the wonderful.

8. Side by Side with Katy

To be ever ready to admit that another person is something quite different from what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather, to read in him that he is certainly something different, perhaps something completely different, from what we read in him. Every being cries out silently to be read differently.²⁸

Two memories of Katy, who was a pig, and me, a human, pulse through my arms, hands, and fingers as I write. They have been resting heavy in my gut, and now they are moving onto the page. In one, my back rests on her belly, her belly touches my back; my head on her shoulder, her shoulder beneath my head. The afternoon light is intensely bright, and her eyes are closed, but mine are trained on the book I hold up against the sun. She is still, but the passage of her breath, deep and even, moves through my body and soon we are breathing together. Her underside is against the earth, which also presses up beneath my butt and legs stretched out beside her.

I’m doing something so ostensibly cognitive and uniquely human: reading. But the papers and books I bring with me when I read with *her* are always about other animals, and almost always, given how things are these days, about the violence, suffering, and injustice that these human forms of life are raining down upon them. Industrial factory farming. Habitat destruction. Extinction. When I read the words describing the fast and slow deaths and reflect on the worlds they are seeking to convey, our bodies touching like this, the words start to have the palpable and affective quality they merit. I’ve come to sense that there is something terribly wrong with reading these texts in an office with barely a window constructing a carefully outlined view onto the world. The text and me on one side, the “in” side; the animals on the other. If that is reading about animals, kick me outside.

Here with her, the papers almost always end up grimy and often slightly rumpled. They are usually out of order when I get back home because I removed the paper clips when I took them out of my bag. And because she scoots around quite a bit, I sometimes drop them, and the wind might even blow them a little way down the

²⁸ S. Weil, “Readings,” [in:] S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 134–135.

run or into a bush nearby where I will pick them out and try to reassemble them. Their disorder and muckiness seem completely apt though, and I really don't mind because it is such a damned privilege that she will lie with me like this, allowing me to read with her and to wonder about the meaning of what I am reading in this unmediated presence of her life.

The other memory has moved up as a bitter taste in my mouth as it starts to crystalize into something like a narrative, and my teeth are on edge, like chalk on a board.²⁹ This time there is no breath and there is no warmth from or in her body, because she is dead, and I am gazing at the curve of her blackened back. All of those pages and pages about violence against other animals and ecological devastation and the climate catastrophe are her charred body. The heat of the fireground is palpable through my shoes, and the air buzzes almost unbearably loud with flies.

The intimacy of the afternoons of the first memory has been jettisoned into: finality that will never be again. And yet, as I gaze at her, I am down there inescapably contemplating how it was for her to be killed like this. What happened to her world in those minutes before she was burned to death? And because of those many days, and all of the others where we walked together, or when I smelled her vanilla scent, or when I fed her watermelon and listened to her munch her way through the huge dripping pieces, I tarry between life and death. It's a strange gift she keeps on giving me, or perhaps it's more accurate to say it's a gift we created together. I'm still held there with her, never fully able to get away to the fantasy place where, because I am a privileged human being, I'm safe from things like fires.

Only that's not true because she is dead and I am here writing about her.

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²⁹ I elaborate on Katy's life and her death in D. Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future*, 2021.

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