

To Speak of Wildness

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“He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That the dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are clear to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger.”¹

- Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature*

“It is not inherently in the nature of the world that it should consist of things that may or may not be appropriated by people.”²

- Tim Ingold

The memory is vivid.

It was nighttime and the sky had been dark for hours. My wife and I were driving on a stretch of road, cars were clustered, but it was neither busy nor desolate. There was some space between the cars ahead of us, but a good number of cars following. And then there was a sudden, unmistakable flash of white dotted with brown. It moved quickly and it was gone. Had we blinked, we could have easily missed it entirely.

Neither of us blinked. We knew immediately that what had flown feet in front of our windshield was a Great Horned Owl. There was a stillness to it, as if it all happened in slow motion. Even with a decent amount of traffic, that owl had flown in front of our car only.

And this wasn't the only time. It wasn't the first and it certainly wouldn't be the last, yet this time there was no question: the owl wanted to be seen.

Owls are often solitary animals. As someone who has dedicated a fair amount of time to tracking them, I can assure you of this. There are some variations to that. Barred Owls can be downright social. We have had them swoop in over fires just to inspect.

This, however, is far from the norm.

Owls are as excellent at camouflage as they are hunting carried out with a nearly imperceptible hush to their flight. Even expert owl trackers who literally wrote the book on the subject, Patricia and Clay Sutton, observed that “it is amazing how [owls] can seem to simply not exist until the perfect angle makes one visible.” This doesn't change the fact that despite their invisibility, owls “are all around us.”³

¹ Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature*. Harper and Row: New York, 1978. Pg. 1

² Tim Ingold, ‘Time, Memory, and Property’ in Widlok and Tadesse, *Property and Equality Volume 1: Ritualisation, Sharing, Egalitarianism*. Berghahn: New York, 2007. Pg 165.

³ Patricia and Clay Sutton, *How to Spot an Owl*. Chapters Publishing: Shelburne, VT, 1994. Pg. 18.

When an owl wants to be seen, it is awe-inspiring. An extremely different feeling than the joy of finding Great Horned Nestlings or catching the flash of Screech Owl eyes as light crosses thickets at night. For us, that flood of feeling is always eclipsed by one thought in particular: confirmation. The Great Horned Owl is our messenger of death.

When death comes for a relative, a friend, an acquaintance of those close to us, there can be heaviness in the air that is inexplicable otherwise. Things feel off. My wife and I have regrettably become accustomed to it over the years. We start doing a mental inventory of whom we know that might be going through some turmoil or difficulty. But when the Great Horned Owl shows themselves, little doubt remains: something has happened.

The night that stood out so clearly in my memory stands out because it was the time when the rational, domesticated part of my brain broke down. When the probability of coincidence was worn too thin and the veneer cracked. There is something here. Sure enough, we found out fairly quickly that there had been an accident. A family member had been involved in a fatal collision. While he was revived on the scene, the driver was not. That happened nearly 1,000 miles away and at the same time the owl came.

This was nearly 12 years ago now. Circumstances changed, but the Great Horned has come numerous times. As grandparents passed, as relatives took their own lives or succumb to cancer or diabetes, as family and their acquaintances overdosed; every time, we get the news from this majestic winged hunter.

The silent flier speaks up.

That night opened a door of perception that I had only casually noticed before. The Great Horned was a messenger of death, but there were many others. There was a distinct air of familiarity and comfort in the Mockingbird that sat on my grandfather's casket during his funeral and watched silently. A Rattlesnake made themselves known to indicate that a family member had died from heroin overdose, a fitting messenger for having injected too much venom. A calming White Tailed Deer that stood before me as I nervously wondered about my as-yet-unborn daughter. And there was a Flycatcher screeching outside of our home to warn us about an instigator amongst us.

These messengers were there all along; I just hadn't put the pieces together. I still feel discomfort even speaking of them openly, but I cannot deny them. And I am only scratching at the surface here.

Seeking council from the wild isn't a matter of being fully integrated into the world around you. These messengers don't come because you seek them; it is not their purpose to serve you. They are simply doing what they do: responding with empathy to impulses that are more apparent to them than to us. That we are continually missing such messages is on us, our own aloof non-presence in the world.

This isn't meant to downplay the breach of any civilized social contract that is happening when wild beings are bringing news, warnings and offering direction. Considering our sanitized sense of intellectual superiority and deadening of senses, it's not surprising to know that something like Laurens van der Post's account of a hunter-gatherer of the Kalahari telling him: "We Bushman have a wire here,' he tapped his chest, 'that brings us news'"⁴ is interpreted as evidence of telepathy. Anything other than pure supernatural power is unthinkable.

That the world speaks to us shouldn't be news. The Lakota-Sioux Lame Deer echoes the word of indigenous peoples the world over with statements like this: "You have to listen to all these creatures, listen with your mind. They have secrets to tell. Even a kind of cricket, called *ptewoyake*, a wingless hopper, is used to tell us where to find buffalo."⁵

The writing is in the thickets and the cracks in the wall, yet this isn't the headline. To get messages from wild beings is tantamount to pleading insanity in this society. But those messages are always there. What keeps us from receiving them is our own ability to perceive that they exist.

Perception and the Better Angles of our (Human) Nature

"In spite of our precious rational process and in spite of our cherished scientific objectivity, we continue to maintain an absolute and unchallengeable distinction between man and the nonhuman. It has occurred that the firmness of this insistence may be one measure of the need we may perceive for justification of our overwhelmingly antibiotic actions."⁶

- John Livingston, *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation*

And here lies the root of our problem: the process of domestication, the taming of our wild souls through constant programming, can only exist in a dead world. The world that makes our existence possible is flattened, dissected and reassembled as a sum of all parts.

Our compliance is built upon an uprooted lack of place. We are aliens in our own home. Our virtues and pride are built around artificial replacements for com-

⁴ Laurens van der Post, *The Lost World of the Kalahari*. Harvest: San Diego, 1958. Pg 260.

⁵ John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erodes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*. Washington Square Press: New York, 1994. Pg. 136.

⁶ John Livingston, *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* in *The John A. Livingston Reader*. Mc-

munity, for a sense of being, for a sense of belonging, and an amplified sense of self. Domestication is the process of stunting the growth and relationships that our hunter-gatherer minds and bodies require and redirecting those impulses to productivity. Our entire sense of identity is built upon *neotony*, an incomplete process of personal development within the greater community against a backdrop of living remembrance and myth.⁷ Psychologically speaking, we are runts.

Our senses are dulled, the instincts that we possess as children are subdued. Our world is flattened. As the anthropologist Colin Turnbull observed in comparing the stages of “the human cycle” between hunter-gatherers and Modernized consumers: “if in our childhood and adolescence we have not learned other modes of awareness, if we have not become fully integrated beings, and if we persist in dissociating reason from these other faculties, these other modes of knowing and understanding, then we remain fettered by the limitations of reason and cease to grow.”⁸

We absorb the fears of the farmer, politician, priest, and industrialist. We regurgitate them so that we can find some solace in their hollow promises. We build cities, countrysides, nuclear power plants, and open pit mines upon that foundation. We volunteer in the war against our own animality.

And all the while, these wild beings are constantly reminding, warning and telling us what our bodies and hearts know: we are connected. There is something here. A message lost as owl carcasses pile up on the sides of highways: we are born wild. And to our would-be messengers, we still are. We just aren’t recognizing it.

This is wildness. Yearning. Reaching. Crying out and carrying on.

And the blood of the messengers is on our hands.

Our perception of the world is fickle. Our subjective experiences can turn into self-sustaining feedback loops that only serve our own ideological biases. Biases crafted and sold to us by programmers, priests, and salespersons. But the world is more than that.

The world, to put it simply, exists.

Wildness exists.

It exists in its own right, comprised of billions upon billions of living beings. Physical separation may be real, but the stoic independence that the domesticated uphold is a fragment of our own fractured minds. A blinder: a limitation.

We look into a mirror of the isolated soul of a civilized being, a consumer of life, and subject the world to the distortions that we carry. We unload our burdens onto

Clelland and Stewart: Toronto, 2007. Pg 89.

⁷ This is a point Paul Shepard did not miss. It is a common theme amongst his work, but most notable in *Nature and Madness*. Sierra Club Books: San Francisco, 1982.

⁸ Colin Turnbull, *The Human Cycle*. Simon and Schuster: New York, 1983. Pg 129.

that barren soil, onto “nature”. It too must feel our loneliness, our isolation. Our wanting.

There is much to be said about the importance of critique. My short sell on anarcho-primitivism (AP) is that it is a critique with implications. And those implications are things that I don’t take lightly.

The AP critique is a short hand way of saying that civilization is killing the earth and that the domestication process is perpetually taking its toll on our lives in every sense of the word. Most importantly, the AP critique is saying that civilization, the culture of cities, doesn’t arrive out of thin air. There are roots here. To understand how we’ve gotten to this point, we must dig.

And so we dig.

The crisis we face is an old crisis, going back in some places nearly 12,000 years. That is literally to the beginning of History. In ecological time, that’s a drop in the bucket. Fortunately, as wild beings, our roots lie in ecological cycles, not linear time. Our roots go deep. Infinitely deep. We, human beings, are the slow outgrowth of millions of years of wild existence. It would be easy to regurgitate the narrative of Progress that our presence indicates a tooth-and-nail conquest of a world that is both Social Darwinian and Hobbesian in nature.

But we know this isn’t the case. Our development as a species has been relatively slow and stable. Our timeline for the antiquity of stone tools pushes back continually and is largely fogged by the inability to admire the ingenuity of our grounded ancestors and cousins. We *want* to believe that things have gotten better, that *we* have improved. Yet this isn’t true. All of the psychological and physical breakdowns of the human body and mind are an indicator that as adaptive as humans are, we can’t tolerate the domestication process and the reality it has created. This only becomes more increasingly apparent.

In short, the implication here is that we are not starting from scratch.

We are not born with the *Tabula Rasa*, the “clean slate”, that Plato and his predecessors had described. Philosophy, an indicator of our trained disconnect with the world around us, has always been a crucial tool of programmers and specialists alike. We are wild beings: each and every one of us. The AP critique is about understanding how changes in circumstance (specialization, surplus orientation, agriculture and pastoralism, sedentism; to name the primary culprits) created the vestiges of social power that have ultimately held our world, the wild community, hostage. Our mythos is cracking.

Human nature may historically have a lot of baggage, but from an ecological and biological perspective, it’s pretty impossible to dismiss. We are born hunter-gatherers, everything that domesticators have sought to impose is working against

⁹ Paul Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. Pg 138.

that basis. And they are failing as much now as they always have. “Wildness”, ecologist Paul Shepard was known to remind us, “is a genetic state.”⁹

Wildness is *our* genetic state.

The Nature of Language and Language of Nature

“Reification, the tendency to take the conceptual as the perceived and to treat concepts as tangible, is as basic to language as it is to ideology. Language represents the mind’s reification of its experience, that is, an analysis into parts which, as concepts, can be manipulated as if they were objects.”¹⁰

- John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal*

Wildness is a complicated concept.

Its critics have conflated *wildness* with *Nature*, a move that obscures intentionality with conventional shorthand. From the very start, proponents of wildness have made a decisive choice in this language. What is being lost in the shuffle is that if you hold an ecological perspective, that the presence of wildness is hardly a means to supplant god/s, but indicative of the connections that we, as wild beings, share with the world. It’s an exploration of empathy, not an apathetic move to remain enthusiastic by-standers like conservationists.

The purpose isn’t to evoke wildness as an aesthetic, but as continuity, as our baseline: this is the ground that we are standing upon and it is worth defending. That the word is indefinable speaks to its complexity, it demands engagement.

So why use it?

There are many reasons not to use a word or to avoid naming altogether. Wildness, at least how I experience and conceptualize it, is sacred: that word is an indicator, not an encapsulation. That would be a good argument for leaving it even more obscure. But the problem then comes down to intentions. If I want to discuss civilization with anyone, this is my baseline, my reference point: wildness is the attainable and lurking reminder that we were not meant to live civilized lives.

Wildness, as the term is often used, transcends space and time: unlike *wilderness* it is not a place and unlike *nature* it is not external. Wildness is reflective of a continuum. Sure enough, hippies and New Agers may have tried touching on it and self-help gurus might delve into the term,¹¹ but there’s a degree of inescapability

¹⁰ John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal* (2nd Edition). CAL Press: Columbia, MO, 1999. Pg 34.

¹¹ Radicals are not to be dismissed from this as well. The prime example being Derrick Jensen who tried appropriating the “language older than words” as he believed indigenous peoples have reiterated it. This, however, ends tragically after he began calling himself Tecumseh, talking about

to that. Words travel. As recent attempts to completely own and market *rewilding* have highlighted, you can't control the usage, but you can contribute to the context.

That is not a minor point. Anthropologist Hugh Brody saw it as a more practical observation in terms of the age old question as to whether language shapes the mind or mind shapes language: "a person can explain how a word is used and what it refers to, but the word's *meaning* depends on knowing a web of contexts and concealed related meanings."¹²

That the term *wildness* can be written off isn't an indication of how the word itself is reification, our abstract representation, because all words are arguably reifications. The difference is in the *context*. Should wildness be defined and corralled into a trap of stagnancy, then the context, that flowing, organic, struggling and ever-presence that defies reflection, would be another matter altogether.

Like domestication, it's easier to know it when you see it.

The problem is that we aren't seeing it.

Ecologist David Abram in his landmark book on perception, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, echoes a trajectory of philosophy in pointing out that: "the perceptual style of any community is both reflected in, and profoundly shaped by, the common language of the community." For our rooted hunting and gathering relatives, that language includes "the speech of birds, of wolves, and even of the wind". Contrast that against the world of the civilized, the world we've all been raised in, where "we now experience language as an exclusively human property or possession".¹³

For all of our narcissistic obsessions with technological development, we have completely disregarded that the counterpoint to the self-applied badge of Progress is our increased our dependency upon stimulation overload on one side and complete sensory deprivation on the rest.¹⁴ Building upon civilization's foundation of hierarchy and complacency, we externalize our frustrations to (and often beyond) the point of self-destruction. I'll allow an anthropologist to state it lightly:

"if our species really did evolve in the context of social relationships approximating those in current immediate-return societies, then our cur-

domestic animals offering their bodies to his axe, having his dogs eat feces from his source, or having sex with trees. Needless to say, his "conversations" with nature, lacking in any and all humility, bare little resemblance to those reiterated otherwise here.

¹² Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden*. North Point Press: New York, 2000. Pg 47.

¹³ David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*. Vintage: New York, 1997. Pg 91.

¹⁴ For more on this see my essay 'The Suffocating Void' in *Black and Green Review number 1*. Black and Green Press: Ephrata, PA, 2015.

rent delayed-return societies may be requiring us to behave in ways that are discordant with our natural tendencies”¹⁵

Put bluntly: removed of our own wild context, we are out of balance.

Nature, the bandage we apply on the externalized wild world that we are actively destroying, is our counterpoint. It is our Other.¹⁶ “Nature” as sociologist Peter Dwyer aptly points out, “is an invention, an artifact.”¹⁷ Not one to mince words, anthropologist Tim Ingold gets down to it: “the world can only be ‘nature’ for a being that does not belong there”.¹⁸ As we will elaborate, this is yet another civilized disease which hunter-gatherers have not suffered:

“[Hunter-gatherers] do not see themselves as mindful subjects having to contend with an alien world of physical objects; indeed, the separation of mind and nature has no place in their thought and practice.”¹⁹

The obedience required by the domesticated demands a world of binary dualisms: of innately oppositional forces. In turn, it created those dichotomies. Nature versus civilization, wild versus domesticated, developed versus undeveloped: there are many iterations of an increasingly antagonized division between the individual and the world that surrounds them. We can say this is a problem of linguistics, we can use philosophy and theory to try to perfect the language and have an asterisk on every word we utter, but none of this escapes the fact that the *reality* domestication has created is one of binary opposition.

Civilization doesn’t just oppose nature; it created it so that it could stand against it. This is what we have conquered. This is what we have crawled out from to stand on our feet with pride.

Wildness vs Wilderness

“The idea of wilderness, both as a realm of purification outside civilization and as a special place with beneficial qualities, has strong antecedents in the High Culture of the Western world. The ideas that wilderness offers us solace, naturalness,

¹⁵ Leonard Martin and Steven Shirk, “Immediate-Return Societies: What Can They Tell Us About the Self and Social Relationships in Our Society” in Wood, Tesser, and Holmes (eds), *The Self and Social Relationships*. Psychology Press: New York, 2008. Pg 178.

¹⁶ For more on this subject, see my essay “Egocide” in Kevin Tucker, *For Wildness and Anarchy*. Black and Green Press: Greensburg, PA, 2009. Also pretty widely available online.

¹⁷ Peter Dwyer, “The Invention of Nature” in Ellen and Fukui (eds), *Redefining Nature: Ecology, Culture and Domestication*. Berg: Oxford, 1996. Pg 157.

¹⁸ Tim Ingold, “Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment” in Ellen and Fukui, 1996. Pg 117.

¹⁹ Ibid, pg 120.

nearness to a kind of literary, spiritual esthetic, or to unspecified metaphysical forces, escape from urban stench, access to ruminative solitude, and locus of test, trial, and special visions—all of these extend prior traditions. True, wilderness is something we can escape to, a departure into a kind of therapeutic land or sea, release from our crowded and overbuilt environment, healing to those who sense the presence of the disease of tameness. We think of wilderness as a place, a vast uninhabited home of wild things. It is also another kind of place. It is that genetic aspect of ourselves that spatially occupies every body and every cell.”²⁰

<>.²¹ Furthermore, this enacted knowledge “is generally holistic, and not easily subject to fragmentation. To deconstruct it and arrange its features in analytic categories, and then to discuss them cross-culturally, is to Westernize them”.²²

Much of what can be said of wildness in defiance of nature echoes into the discussion about *wilderness*.

Following up on his observations about wildness as a “genetic state”, Paul Shepard contrasts wilderness as the place we have dedicated for wildness to exist. An extolling of demons, a soothing of lingering desires: the playground and museum to engage our senses through voyeurism. But the cost of entry here isn’t just complacency, it’s far more malicious. The narrative offered is a reiteration of our distancing, but the trip is courtesy of your local tour agent: our leisure is another purchase.

In Shepard’s words: “Wilderness sanctuaries presuppose our acceptance of the corporate takeover of everything else. Privatizing is celebrated as part of the ideal of the politics of the state, masked as individualism and freedom.”²³ The experience of wilderness is far from an expression of wildness. The terms may only differ by a mere two letters, but the implications couldn’t be greater.

That adventures in wilderness have become a basis for actual dispossession and displacement for those hunter-gatherers, who lacked a context for *nature* as a removed place, is no coincidence. Exemplifying the point, the Hadza of Tanzania were threatened with forced removal from ancestral lands by a hunting safari company based out of the United Arab Emirates.²⁴ A fate that resonates amongst the

²⁰ Shepard, 1998. Pg 132.

²¹ Catherine Fowler and Nancy Turner, “Ecological/cosmological knowledge and land management among hunter-gatherers” in Lee and Daly, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers*. Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1999. Pg 421.

²² Ibid, 419.

²³ Shepard, 1998. Pg 138.

²⁴ Survival International, “Safari concession threatens Hadza tribe”, June 28, 2007. Online: <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/2467>. Accessed July 8, 2015.

!Kung of Botswana and Namibia who are arrested for poaching and trespass within reserves that bear their names.²⁵

These are stories that repeat and play out constantly throughout history, which is since civilized people began recording time instead of living within it. These are the footnotes to the autobiographical legacy of colonizers and conquerors. While we have been ingrained with their perceptions and narratives, they still must constantly be positioned to work against our own wild state: the hunter-gatherer inside your mind, your being.

To awaken those senses, it is helpful to understand how those rooted peoples see their world. *Our* world.

Perception and the Living Earth

“I was born in the forest. My forefathers came from here. We are the Wanniyala-aetto and I want to live and die here. Even if I were to be reborn as only a fly or as an ant, I would still be happy as long as I knew I would come back to live here in the forest.”²⁶

- Kotabakinne (Veddah) chief, Uru Warige Tissahamy.

The abolition of *nature* is not an uncommon theme amongst post-modern philosophers. Their impulse is born of Modernity and interacts with the world as they have been trained to see it. They are correct in their assessments that the world is constantly in flux and that stagnancy stands in the way, but they continue on the legacy of the ungrounded, the uprooted. Their sense of entitlement to a present without bounds neglects the consequence of the world as we know it: the world where our actions impact life across the planet and beyond our generation.

They carry on without context.

To see the past, present and future as evident in all life is an ability that we should have, but that perception comes only with living in a way that is not detrimental towards the past, present and future. Rooted indigenous societies have notoriously lacked any sense of linear time. Like *nature*, they lack the separation necessary to create it.

In living with the hunter-gatherer Pirahã of Brazil, missionary turned agnostic Daniel Everett observed that the inability to “spread the word” was attributed in part to the fact that Pirahã “only make statements that are anchored to the moment

²⁵ See Rupert Isaacson, *The Healing Land*. Grove Press: New York, 2001.

²⁶ Cited in Lee and Daly, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers*. Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1999. Pg 271.

when they are speaking, rather than to any other point in time.”²⁷ Their world lacked a need to speak in historic terms and, subsequently, their language lacks anything beyond a simple form of tense.

A world without presence was unthinkable.

That is the world in which wildness runs rampant. It is the place where language has never been solely attributed to humans. This is the place where the messages of animals, plants, and weather are taken at face value and understood. The ability to read the language of birds is a given. The ability to read bodies and movement are not separated from the definitiveness that we attribute only to speech. This isn't the world beyond nature; it is the world where it is unnecessary.

The connectivity that New Agers and their ilk have sought to be proponents of is a by-product of our own limits to perception. Our glass is fogged over. Those connections are within reach, but we have to be prepared for the humility of breaking down the domesticator in our minds.

For the hunter-gatherer, no such obstructions exist until they have been forced upon them. Their perception minces no words on the matter of matter. In the words of Ilarion Mercurieff, an Aluet native, speaking of the world of the hunter-gatherer;

“Theirs is a world in which the interdependence of humans, animals, plants, water, and earth – the total picture – is always immediate, always present. And the total picture – every day, every season, every year – is seen as a circle. Everything is connected: the marshlands to the beaver, the beaver dams to altered conditions, the new conditions to the moose herd, the moose herd to the marshlands. Each affects the other, and it is in this intimate knowledge of the environment (all the curves in the circle) that has allowed these people to survive for hundreds of generations.”²⁸

The ability to externalize “the Other” is demolished through proximity and familiarity. Anthropologist William Laughlin observes a common theme amongst the development of children in hunter-gatherer societies: the passing on of the world of the hunter as a trade in and of itself. The wholeness of climate, growth patterns, migration movements, the knowledge of track, sign and bird language, the detailed knowledge of anatomy that comes from butchering and stalking; all of these elements are integral to life in the wild.

²⁷ Daniel Everett, *Don't Sleep, There are Snakes*. Pantheon Books: New York, 2008. Pg 132.

²⁸ Ilarion Mercurieff, “Weston Society's Linear Systems and Aboriginal Cultures: The Need for Two-Way Exchanges for the Sake of Survival” in Burch and Ellanna, *Key Issues in Hunter-Gatherer Research*. Berg: Oxford, 1994. Pg 409.

This is not particular to humans, but in using language to reflect upon it, Laughlin observes: “Their conversations often sound like a classroom discussion of ecology, of food chains, and trophic levels.”²⁹ This is not lost on the children, whose growing knowledge of animals is “prominently based upon familiarity with animal behavior and includes ways of living peacefully with animals, of maintaining a discourse with them”.³⁰

Philosophy is not an adequate replacement for proximity without separation. Wildness here needs no interpretation, but is often subject to exaltation. “I suggest”, observes Mathias Guenther of the timeless rock art of the !Kung, “that animals are beguiling and interesting to man prima facie, in and of themselves, without any mediation through social structure.”³¹

The relationships in question bare more resemblance to symbiosis than the symbolic. The case of the Honey Guide bird in the Kalahari is one oft-cited example. The Honey Guide leads a more physically able being towards beehives to harvest honey. It matters not if that being is a human or a honey badger so long as the harvester sets honeycomb aside for the willing and patient guide.³²

And yet the language of wildness here maintains a circumstantial definition. Little more is needed.

The participants in this world need no terminology and, in light of solid context, the terms may be translated into a placeless language like English, but without having relative experiences, the meaning is lost. I feel the weight of the words used by the Mbuti, whom Colin Turnbull lived amongst, as they spoke of *ndura* or “forestness” represented by the symbols of fire, water, air and earth, which they “cannot move, eat, or breathe without being conscious of one or all of these symbols, and all are treated with respect, consciously recognized as integral parts of the ultimate giver of life, the forest.”³³ What resonates further within me is that the wind is upheld as *pepo nde ndura*, or, “the breath of the forest itself.”³⁴ Amongst the Nayaka of southern India, the forest is similarly referred to as “the giving environment”.³⁵

It is important to note that while my emphasis so far has been on animals, the same notions and connections extend to plants themselves. They too can serve

²⁹ William Laughlin “Hunting: An Integrating Biobehavior System and Its Evolutionary Importance” in Lee and Devore (eds), *Man the Hunter*. Aldine De Gruyter: New York, 1968. Pg 314.

³⁰ Ibid, pg 305.

³¹ Mathias Guenther, “Animals in Bushman Thought, Myth and Art” in Ingold, Riches, and Woodburn, *Hunters and Gatherers Volume 2: Property, Power and Ideology*. Berg: Oxford, 1988. Pg 202.

³² Just one great reason to look into Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, *The Old Way*. Sarah Crichton Books: New York, 2006. Pg 167.

³³ Colin Turnbull, *The Human Cycle*. Simon and Schuster: New York, 1983. Pgs 50-51.

³⁴ Colin Turnbull, *Wayward Servants*. Natural History Press: New York, 1965. Pg 249.

³⁵ Nurit Bird-David, “The Giving Environment: Another Perspective on the Economic System of Gatherer-Hunters”. *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Apr., 1990), pgs 189-196.

both as messengers and healers. Herbalist and natural veterinarian Dr. Randy Kidd shares a story of having attempted to grow mullein in his own rock garden to no avail. He decided to ask his neighbor about the beautiful stalks of it growing in their yard. The neighbors had paid little to no attention to the sage-like green stalks and their tiny yellow flowers protruding amongst the rocks, but they happened to mention that one of the residents was currently hospitalized for asthma – a disease which mullein is known to treat.³⁶

Our ability to forget that our connections extend beyond other animals has led equally to the facilitation and “the loss of plant species, the loss of health in ecosystems and our bodies, and the loss of the sense of who we ourselves, are.”³⁷

The tragedy that we face arises both from our distancing from that timeless world and the ways in which our rooted hunter-gatherer minds are physically incapable of thinking on a global scale.³⁸

We are trapped by circumstance.

Our escape demands a realization of the world as it has been and will be, but remains hindered by the obstructions, the sheer physicality and devastation that civilization has created. The urge is there to delve completely into the world of the hunter-gatherer, a place both rooted and unbound. It is the place where we belong and it lurks within us and struggles to stand its ground on the periphery. But ignorance is not our path there.

Empathy is.

By seeking to immerse ourselves in the wildness that surrounds us, we can't expect the spiritual salvation offered by Gurus on weekend retreats. This place is sacred, but it is not a safe place. It is under assault. As are we. As are all living beings.

It is through connection, through grounding, that we understand what is at stake, what is lost and forgotten, buried and removed. When we begin to prod our constant process of pains inflicted upon our being, when the Self and Other fade, when we identify that source of agony: only then will we fight with passion and meaning for what is *known*.

Wild Existence, Passionate Resistance

“An-archic and pantheistic dancers no longer sense the artifice and its linear His-Story as All, but merely one cycle, one long night, a stormy

³⁶ Randy Kidd, DVM, *Dr. Kidd's Guide to Herbal Dog Care*. Storey: Pownal, VT, 2000. Pg 32.

³⁷ Stephen Harrod Buhner, *The Lost Language of Plants*. Chelsea Green: White River Junction, VT, 2002. Pg 229.

³⁸ For more discussion of this, see “Everywhere and Nowhere” in Tucker, 2009.

night that left Earth wounded, but a night that ends, as all nights end,
when the sun rises.”³⁹

- Fredy Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan*.

The term *rewilding* has had its share of false Gurus and snake oil salespersons attempting to derail the process and turn it into consumable fodder.⁴⁰ False hopes and rewilding “Ninja Camps”⁴¹ aside, the rewilding process, like the anarcho-primitivist critique, carries with it an innate understanding of human nature as rooted in nomadic hunter-gatherer life. To *re-wild* is to acknowledge that wildness is our baseline.

Rewilding, to put it simply, is about stopping and *undoing* the separation created through the domestication process. As programs may try to sway towards a singular emphasis on primal skills or may tiptoe around with the voyeuristic tourism of a hiker, this underlying principle remains. As the consequences of domestication continue to unfold and assault the world we live in, the radicalism of that sentiment stands.

What separates rewilding from any other form of naturalist and ecophilosophical inquiry is that the end point is integration. The path overlaps in terms of observation, but the “leave only footprints” Nature fan has no interest in undoing the dichotomy that civilization requires. Their quest is one of indulgence, not subsistence and substance. It is akin to meditation.

To embrace the wild, we have to undergo the process of allowing wildness to help us evaluate our baggage. To remove our separation requires a transformation of thought that erodes the scientific taxonomy that seeks to understand the world through a microscope. As naturalist Jon Young points out, native knowledge and scientific knowledge are “two ways of paying supremely close attention.”⁴² Native knowledge, or “science without all of the trappings”, is riddled with empathy, itself “a dangerous word in science” as it stands in complete opposition to the necessary removal implicit in the intent cloak of objectivity.⁴³ Young argues that his primary focuses, bird language/communication and tracking, rooted at first in observation inevitably lead those who take the time to “not just show up, but really tune in”,

³⁹ Fredy Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan*. Detroit: Black and Red, 1983. Pg 302.

⁴⁰ See Four Legged Human, “The Commodification of Wildness and Its Consequences” in *Black and Green Review* no 1, spring 2015.

⁴¹ This joke is sadly true. Brought to you by the douche bags of “ReWild University” at rewildu.com.

⁴² Jon Young, *What the Robin Knows*. Mariner Books: Boston, 2012. Pg xxi.

⁴³ *Ibid*, Pg xxvi.

to build relationships and experience the community of wildness on its own terms will experience what can only be called a primal awakening.⁴⁴

That is a spiritual awakening.

Echoed by tracking instructor Paul Rezendes, what I call the “radical humility” of having your ass handed to you by the wild in terms of thought and physicality is no easy process. As having been raised with the redirected impulses of a wild being towards consumable traits, we have much work to do. It is only “when the self becomes tired and weak and pride languishes can the awareness that is wildness step in.”⁴⁵

The salvaging of scientifically understood connections through biology, ecology, psychology, as well as anthropology and sociology, requires a difference in perception. That the methods used to gain knowledge are flawed doesn’t change that they can still glean elements of reality; they just took the long way there. The pride of achievement domestication awards us can quickly fade in light of, as Young states, “what the robin already knows.”

The teachings of the robin are not far off from those of our hunter-gatherer relatives. They remind us of the timeless place where history is lived rather than charted. “Both humans and non-humans, in short,” Tim Ingold observes, “figure as fellow-participants in an ongoing process of remembering.”⁴⁶ Wildness is within us. Wildness surrounds us. It suffers alongside and through us, its wounds still being inflicted.

Yet it does not give up.

No amount of concrete, steel, ideology, or distancing has succeeded in its conquest. None will. Civilization measures its victories in temporal measures that within a historic timeline appear significant. Removed of linear time, removed of our forgetting, our disconnect, their significance wanes into collections of dusty books and obsolete technology.

Civilization is both a complex and volatile target. Its ideology and mechanics are built upon regurgitated narratives built upon the false belief that our future, as humans, will take us from the dreaded earth. That our history will show a gruesome conquest of animality, ours included, moving from the reflection of gods to a god status.

And yet each of us, every single one of us, is falling apart along the way.

We are testaments to the failures of domestication. Our bodies, built to withstand the extremes of climate, movement, famine and feast, succumb to diseases of the

⁴⁴ Ibid, Pg xxviii. This point is really driven home in his excellent 8 CD set with the underwhelming title of *Advanced Bird Language*. I can’t recommend it enough to reiterate and elaborate points I’ve made throughout this essay.

⁴⁵ Paul Rezendes, *The Wild Within*. Berkeley Books: New York, 1999. Pg 204.

⁴⁶ Tim Ingold, ‘Time, Memory, and Property’ in Widlok and Tadesse, *Property and Equality*

sedentary, the undernourished, the overfed, the toxins, and the meaningless wanderings. Blind to the catastrophe unfolding through us, we miss the connectivity hiding in plain sight: the wildness creeping through the cracks. Turnbull, contrasting the emptiness of civilization against the grounded life exhibited amongst the Mbuti, noted that having “never learned to employ our whole being as a tool of awareness” has kept us from “that essence of life which cannot be learned except through direct awareness, which is total, not merely rational.” Encounters with the Spirit, the wildness, in “our form of social organization merely allows it to happen as an accident, if at all, whereas the Mbuti writes it into the charter from the outset, at conception.”⁴⁷

The structure of Mbuti life embraces the *pepo nde ndura*, the breath of the forest, whereas the structure of our world is built around avoiding or diverting it at all costs. If another way of being were seen as possible, the sanctity of the Freedom to Consume would fade. The burden of work would collapse.

And it is through the reconnection with the wild, through the erosion of our stagnant sense of removal, that the weaknesses of civilization become apparent. The struggle of the wild becomes real. The impact of climate instability and ecological devastation become our battle cry. The exacerbated feedback loops of drought and flood, the fires of thirsty and embattled forests ignite our animalistic urges.

When we remove the distance between the destruction of the earth and bear the scars of wildness, we will know not only what the robin has told us, but what our indigenous and lost relatives and ancestors have told us: when you know what it means to be wild, you will know what it means to fight.

To struggle.

To resist.

Around the time that I began to acknowledge the messages I had been getting from wild messengers, I began to push myself further into the woods. I tried to escape the sounds of the designed world. But valleys carried the echo of distant engines. Power lines and radio towers carried the news of conquest.

There was much to be found in those forests, but perhaps what I found the most was within myself. I had much to learn. I have much to learn. As my love and empathy grew, my rage burned deeper. The sheer simplicity of symbiosis tears at my soul. How many messages had I missed? Why, in light of my own complicity with ecocide, were the wild ones willing to recognize me, a descendent of colonizers walking on stolen land?

But it wasn't me they were after.

Volume 1: Ritualisation, Sharing, Egalitarianism. Berghahn: New York, 2007. Pg 166.

⁴⁷ Turnbull, 1983. Pg 77.

Just as hunter-gatherers lack a conceptual basis for nature or wilderness, the wild lacks the framework for vengeance. The language of birds will immediately ring the alarm over our indifferent, yet aloof demeanor whether we chose to recognize that or not. Their communication has nothing to hide and they share their trepidations widely. Hunter-gatherers and anyone willing to acknowledge this can act accordingly. Strange though our behaviors might be, the birds recognize what we have been trained not to see: the wildness that we carry in our being.

We belong here.

Their songs, their alarms, these messages; all of these are an unquestioned part of their world. Of our world.

And they await our return.

I often wish that Nature was real. That vengeance was within her. That she would undo civilization. No doubt she possesses the might. But it doesn't work that way: the sheer weight of inevitability errs on her side, yet I am left with nothing to transpose my own helplessness onto. There is no escape.

Wild beings under attack simply respond. They bite. They claw. They tear. It is instinctual and instant, not prolonged and devoid of responsibility. Our playing field is not level. Planners and programmers play chess with our fates. The potential of our own demise is the footnote to blueprints for a Future that will never come on a planet that was never meant to support it.

There is no easy salvation here. Wildness is not a retreat.

When we overcome our rational minds and embrace it in our souls, we will do as our wild relatives, human and nonhuman, have done: stand our ground.

Bite, claw, and tear.

And we will fight until the wound is no longer inflicted.

The power of the known, the meaning of context, the power of wildness lies in their ambiguity. The inability to define wildness attests to its enduring strength. It refuses constraint.

You will simply know it when you feel it.

And I can think of no greater end to aspire to.

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