

Encounter

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

Maan Barua

School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, UK

You encounter people ... movements, ideas, events, entities ... It designates an effect, a zigzag, something which passes or happens between two as though under a potential difference ... a single becoming which is not common to the two ... but which is between the two, which has its own direction, a bloc of becoming, an a-parallel evolution ... To encounter is to find, to capture, to steal.

—Deleuze *Dialogues II* ¹

Encounters are becomings, nuptials. They are movements, lines, flows of differing speeds and durations. An encounter poses problems; it reconfigures identities, space, political economies.

Encounters forge ‘contact zones,’ where people across cultures, with different histories come together into composition, interact and intertwine.² But encounters are also between beings of biologically different origins, equally vital to such histories and world-making. Domestication is an encounter, a two-way street: did plants not tame humans, as much as the other way around?³ Symbiosis is an encounter, an evolutionary force redefining the very beings that get entangled: the organelle we call mitochondria arose from cells engulfing free-living bacteria.⁴ Von Uexküll’s tick lying dormant for years in anticipation of a mammalian encounter: parasitism. Rewilding experiments too are about channeling encounters, letting novel assemblages and processes emerge. Encounters with potentials and powers not our own, force thought,⁵ they question how to inherit histories,⁶ who or what generates events.⁷

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¹ G. Deleuze and C. Parnet, *Dialogues li* (London: Continuum, 2007), 5

² M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2008).

³ Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2001). I am grateful to Annelie Bernhart for this reference.

⁴ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (Basic Books, 2008).

⁵ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁶ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁷ T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000). There are conceptual overlaps but also tensions in the deployment of the term

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To encounter is to trouble classification. Speciated reason, its categorizations of bodies, has long proceeded through burdened confluences with race. Taxonomies treat taxa as existents, 'out there,' to be found, compared, differentiated, grouped independent of the contexts in which they are encountered. Western taxonomies relegate other knowledges and ways of understanding. Classification here is arborescent. Species databases and genomic sequences are modern avatars of trees of life. But "it would be a mistake to assume much about species in advance of encounter."⁸ Encounters point to taxa being occurments, inseparable from the heterogeneous bodies, technologies and practices through which they are articulated. Multiple modes of knowledge are fused in classificatory schemes, evident when plicated histories of encounters between colonizer and colonized are unraveled.⁹ Encounters scramble genealogical trees: introgression and horizontal gene transfer happen across phyla and scales.¹⁰ They herald involutions, organismic filiations based on contagion and symbiosis.¹¹

Encounters reconfigure how we conceptualize the human, and concomitant notions of personhood and knowledge. 'Fungal persons' are Ingold's provocation for positing humans as an entanglement of differential lines of growth within a relational field.¹² Encounters with other persons, with that fold we call the environment, with microbial cells vastly outnumbering our own in the configuration of our bodies: together they constitute ever-ramifying lines that corporealize the human. Skills and knowledge, as outcomes of encounters, are not predicated upon logics of transmission but activities of situated practitioners responding to more-than-human ebbs and flows.¹³ Take von Uexküll being affected by the tick, Lorenz becoming jackdaw, or Derrida held by the cat's gaze.¹⁴ Each is an encounter across difference that is eventful, forging knowledges that cut across porous bodies and human-nonhuman divides.

encounter in Deleuze, Haraway and Ingold invoked here. Haraway, in particular, disavows the excesses of Deleuze (and Guattari) [Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*.], offering a feminist critique of their 'lines of flight.'. Her emphasis lies in actual encounters, with the mundane and processes of 'becoming worldly' [Haraway, *When Species Meet*.]. Ingold's earlier writings on human-animal encounters are in a different register to that of Deleuze and Guattari [Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*.], but later work on lines and the meshwork is more sympathetic to their rhizomatic thought [T. Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015); T. Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011).].

⁸ Haraway, *Where Species Meet*, 18

⁹ Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650-1900* (New Delhi: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁰ J.C. Avise, *Phylogeography: The History and Formation of Species* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

¹² T. Ingold, "Two Reflections on Ecological Knowledge," in *Nature Knowledge: Ethnoscience, Cognition, and Utility*, ed. G. Sanga and G. Ortalli (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003).

¹³ A. Tsing, "More-Than-Human Sociality: A Call for Critical Description," in *Anthropology and Nature*, ed. K. Hastrup (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁴ Jakob von Uexküll, "A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men," in *Instinctive Behaviour*, ed. C. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, 1957); V. Despret, "The Body We Care For: Figures of Anthro-Zoo-Genesis," *Body and Society* 10, no. 2-3 (2004); J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

The world of objects and networks, nodes and connections,¹⁵ poorly approximates the fluid character of living processes. To encapsulate encounters, we need to think with rhizomes, or rather the mycelium,¹⁶ with ceaselessly bifurcating and diverging webs of lines. Paul Klee: 'drawing knotted in the manner of a net,' is mycelium par excellence (Figure 1). Here, forms are not pre-given but generated through encounters. They emerge as lines entangle, knot and steer their own course, not passing from one point to another, but always through the middle, as their topologies change, divide, multiply.

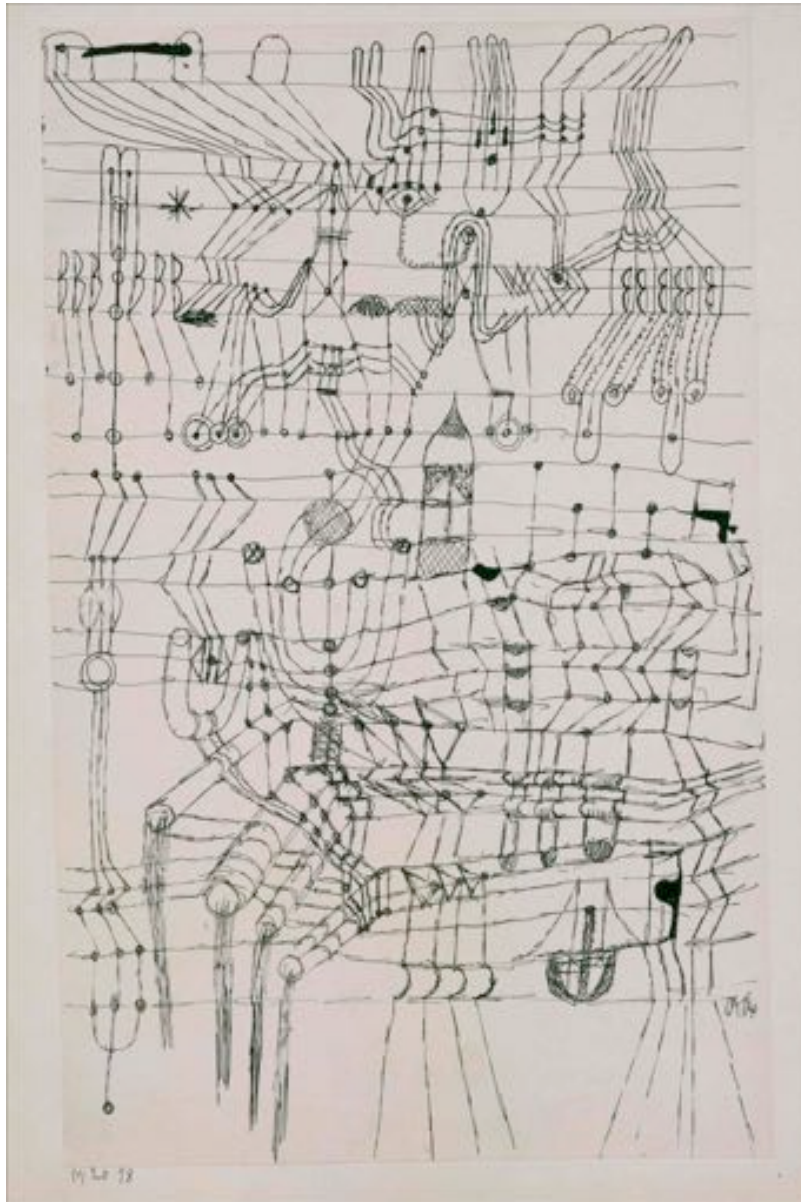


Figure 1. Paul Klee (1920)
*Drawing Knotted in the Manner
of a Net.* © The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York; The
Berggruen Klee Collection, 1984.

¹⁵ B. Latour, *Re-Assembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*; Tsing, "More-Than-Human Sociality: A Call for Critical Description."

Encounters are thus spatial; encounters spatialize. Not space as container, but an interweaving of trails, tracks and paths. Like Klee's drawings, spaces produced through encounters are knotted by the movements of a heterogeneous array of beings. Heterogeneous because they include nonhuman inhabitants of the world—beings that territorialize in their own terms, through song, through vision, through scent. Their lines are never sealed by perimeters, but touching, fighting, cooperating, parasitizing, or ignoring other elements of the meshwork. To think through encounters is to move from animal geographies and human placings of animals,¹⁷ to *animals'* geographies, the manner in which *they* apprehend and sense the world, in space-time rhythms that are different, but not entirely cleaved, from our own.¹⁸

Such a proposition strikes at the heart of cartographic 'inversions' that run deep within the colonial project:¹⁹ that building precedes dwelling, with only humans bearing the capacity to build or to 'produce' space; that humans and animals are not inhabitants but occupants of an already furnished world; that the 'in here' of society is separate and purified from the 'out there' of nature. These inversions position the surface of the earth as *terra nullius*, disavowing the meaningful environments of animals and claims of those purportedly below Europeans in the hierarchy of beings. Eradication of animals posited as vermin,²⁰ imperatives of fencing to monopolize animal bodies,²¹ hinge on these logics. To lay bare the spatial politics at work, one must begin to 'story' places differently.²²

There are encounters of passion, and encounters of pain. Capitalism too emerges through encounters, between labourers torn from their means of production and the owners of money. This was Marx's thesis of primitive accumulation,²³ a process that is not merely one of the past but is ongoing, crucial to the proliferation of an apparatus that seeks to turn all of the world into commodities, extracting surplus from labour without mercy. But seizure of the animal body is primitive accumulation as well. Divorcing creatures from their means of subsistence, fencing animal bodies from ecological and reproductive ties, are but means of ongoing accumulation. They comprise regimes of 'lively capital' where nonhuman labour is at stake.²⁴

Humanist frameworks of conventional political economy are inadequate for understanding such processes of value-generation. Here, the analyst needs to consider the

¹⁷ J. Wolch and J. Emel, *Animal Geographies. Place, Politics, and Identity in Nature-Culture Borderlands* (London: Verso, 1998); S. Whatmore and L. Thorne, "Wild(Er)Ness: Reconfiguring the Geographies of Wildlife," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 23 (1998).

¹⁸ M. Barua, "Volatile Ecologies: Towards a Material Politics of Human-Animal Relations," *Environment and Planning A* 46, no. 6 (2014); M. Barua, "Bio-Geo-Graphy: Landscape, Dwelling and the Political Ecology of Human-Elephant Relations," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2014).

¹⁹ Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*.

²⁰ J. Emel, "Are You Man Enough, Big and Bad Enough? Ecofeminism and Wolf Eradication in the USA," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13 (1995).

²¹ M. Barua, "Bio-Geo-Graphy: Landscape, Dwelling and the Political Ecology of Human-Elephant Relations," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2014).

²² Thom Van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, "Storied-Places in a Multispecies City," *Humanimalia* 3, no. 2 (2012).

²³ K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

²⁴ Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

concept of 'encounter value,'²⁵ a relational achievement fabricated through world-making entanglements of heterogeneous organisms, technologies and bodies. Encounter value involves bodily transactions and ethological labours of nonhuman organisms, which matter and make a difference to productive activity.²⁶ For Marx, 'socially-necessary labour-time' was the basis of value in capitalist economies centered on commodity production.²⁷ Productive activity was restricted to *human* labour, stamping ideas upon what is 'given' in nature to 'make' things within temporalities dictated by the clock. Animals were excluded from the value-generation process as their activities did not equate to making.²⁸

But human labour is only part of the story of contemporary capitalism where bees are brought in to pollinate insect-depleted orchards, when civets are made to produce value-added coffee beans through digestion, or when elephants are made to work in spectacular economies of ecotourism. They generate value through productive activity that is not so much about 'making,' as it is about setting up conditions for lively commodities to *grow*.²⁹ Production is thus *intransitive* with no fixed design stamped upon nature to shape it up into final form. Encounter value is about 'trans-actions,'³⁰ exchanges that are meaningful to nonhumans as well. Trans-actions may be initiated through relations fostered by a creature's own activities:³¹ take the case of crows gifting people bright tokens, at least in part in exchange for food.³² Trans-actions are also coercive: creatures confined and made to labour in captivity can "utterly destroy the animal's previous world."³³

Productive encounters with relations, forces and powers that are not our own, have immense potential analytical and practical purchase. To encounter is to become-worldly, to open up contingencies and processes of life, rather than cutting up the world into inert natures and static societies. Encounters 'ecologize' politics in ways that are vital for the environmental humanities' efforts to redistribute powers to act and to flourish.

²⁵ Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

²⁶ M. Barua, "Lively Commodities and Encounter Value," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (Forthcoming).

²⁷ Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*.

²⁸ Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

³¹ Jakob von Uexküll, "The Theory of Meaning," *Semiotica* 42, no. 1 (1982).

³² K. Sewall, "The Girl Who Gets Gifts from Birds," accessed 10/5/2015, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31604026>. I am grateful to Filipa Soares for drawing my attention to these trans-actions.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

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