



Becoming-With

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

Kate Wright

School of Arts, University of New England, Armidale, Australia



L
E
X
I
C
O
N

Figure 1 Sean and Michael McQuilken becoming-lightning at Moro Rock, California (1975).
Photograph © Michael McQuilken

This photograph of two brothers was taken on 20 August, 1975 at Moro Rock in California. Sean and Michael McQuilken (aged 12 and 18) were on a hiking trip with their sister, other brother, and some friends, when nearby visitors noticed that their hair was standing on end. Their sister took a photo of the laughing boys, a few minutes before they were struck by lightning. The boys survived, but the younger child—Sean—suffered third degree burns. Another visitor to the rock was killed by the lightning strike.¹

¹ You can read more about this event in an online article by Michael McQuilken (1995), available here <http://www.socialpositive.com/c/stories/A-Hair-Raising-Experience-on-Moro-Rock-133301>

Copyright: © Wright 2014

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons License (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0). This license permits use and distribution of the article for non-commercial purposes, provided the original work is cited and is not altered or transformed.

I first came across this photograph in an online newspaper article instructing people on signs that lightning is dangerously close. I can see a madness in the image—in the hair that seems bewitched, and in the heedless laughter of the boys exposed to radical atmospheric intensities. This image and its story seem to speak to becoming-with in our dark and unpredictable ecological moment.

The *Environmental Humanities* is an engaged, scholarly response to madness—an attempt to address the systemic pathology of a species disconnected from the conditions of its world. Becoming-with offers a metaphysics grounded in connection, challenging delusions of separation—the erroneous belief that it is somehow possible to exempt ourselves from Earth's ecological community.² Donna Haraway tells us that “[i]f we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism then we know that becoming is always becoming *with*, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake.”³ This image speaks directly to the life and death stakes of failing to recognise connectivity, feedback loops, interdependence and vulnerability.

Just before a lightning storm, air is ionised—it ‘breaks down,’ as electrons are stripped from positive ions, creating a more conducive flow for electricity.⁴ Air that is ionised is the space of the virtual, an air thick with propositions.⁵ Vicky Kirby observes the way lightning forms as a kind of “stuttering chatter between ground and sky”⁶ because a lightning strike does not come down from the clouds in a continuous motion, but is formed in communication with the earth. Karan Barad writes, “[i]t is as though objects on the ground are being hailed by the cloud's interpellative address,”⁷ where an upward response meets a downward proposition, and the electrical circuit closes to form a lightning strike. This becoming-with aligns with Barad's agential realist ontology, where the world is not composed of discrete ‘things,’ but “phenomena-in-their-becoming” —“a radical open relatingness of the world worlding itself.”⁸

The becoming-with of a lightning storm creates diffuse becoming-withs, as ionised air draws bodies into an affective circuit of shocks and discharges. Ionised air electrifies bodies to the point that if I touch you with my finger I can cause you a static shock through the same

² Mick Smith, “Ecological Community, the Sense of the World, and Senseless Extinction,” *Environmental Humanities* 2 (2013): 30. Mick Smith writes that “[e]cology is a reminder of a multi-species and multi-existent ‘we’ that modern humanism chose to forget, or rather struggled to exempt and/or except the human species from. There is no way to be exempt from this community of different beings each exposed to each other in myriad different ways.”

³ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 244.

⁴ M. Uman, *Lightning: Physics and Effects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁵ My understanding of propositions here is infused by Bruno Latour's reading of Isabelle Stengers, where the world is full of propositions waiting to be registered by interested bodies that are attuned to difference (Latour, “How to Talk about the Body? The Normative Dimensions of Science Studies,” *Body and Society* 10, no. 2 (2004): 205 – 229; Stengers, “A Constructivist Reading of Process and Reality,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 25, no. 4 (2008): 91 – 110.

⁶ Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 10.

⁷ Karan Barad, “Nature's Queer Performativity,” *Women, Gender, and Research* 1-2 (2012): 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

intra-active mechanism that forms a lightning strike. This bodily attunement to molecular difference in the air is a becoming-lightning-storm that operates below consciousness.

The smiles on the faces of the McQuilken brothers, bemused by their hair-becoming-storm, betrays a disjuncture between what the body responds to and how the (supposedly) rational mind perceives that response. A key tenet of the Environmental Humanities is a deeply engaged critique of anthropocentrism. Humans' fixation on subjectivity, consciousness, and rationality, which separates anthropos from the rest of the living world, is a narcissism that blinds us to a multiplicity of becoming-withs in which we are immersed, and which can sustain or destroy us. The rational mind is made irrational when it fails to recognise its limitations in a complex system—a system that, in the words of Frank Egler, may not just be more complex than we think, but more complex than we *can* think.⁹ The becoming-storm of the hair in this image fractures the illusion that the mind is always the most responsive part of our being, and what enables us to be, in Haraway's terms, "response-able."

Haraway wrote that "the world is a knot in motion,"¹⁰ and Gregory Bateson emphasised the importance of "the pattern which connects."¹¹ I look at rhizomatic lightning strikes, and this mad hair, and it occurs to me that as we reconsider the responsiveness of nonhumans we might be wise to focus too on our own embodied, non-cerebral, ways of knowing. Our flesh is inscribed with a multispecies history of becoming-with, what Deborah Bird Rose terms "embodied knots of multispecies time."¹² It makes sense then that the pattern which connects might be best articulated through the poetry of interspecies relations, reverberating through affective responses to environments.

When I was a kid I knew when a thunderstorm was coming because my dog would become storm-like, madly tearing up and down our dirt driveway, and ants would appear on our kitchen bench before rain. A thunderstorm induces a becoming-with in multiple species simultaneously, each body an instrument in an orchestra of light, movement and sound.

From this multispecies perspective we can think of becoming-with *as an ecology*. This is an epistemological framework that undermines solipsistic thinking, because we learn about our position in a complex system not through abstract knowledge, but through the affective capacities of our own bodies and the bodies of the more-than-human world.

Becoming-with is a form of worlding which opens up the frames of what registers to us and so what matters to us (in part by recognising what matters to others). For example, in becoming-dog one does not acquire fur or paws,¹³ but becomes attuned to a multiplicity of

⁹ Frank Egler quoted in Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin, "The Ecological Humanities in Action: An Invitation," *Australian Humanities Review* 31–32 April (2004).

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 6.

¹¹ Gregory Bateson and Mary Bateson, *Angels Fear: Toward and Anthropology of the Sacred* (New Hersey: Hampton Press, 1987/reprint 2005), 8.

¹² Deborah Bird Rose, "Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time," *Environmental Philosophy* 9, no.1 (2012): 127–140.

¹³ Becomings are neither imitation, nor literal transformation, but the proliferation of multiple identities and ways of being in the world. Deleuze and Guattari observe "becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal and one does not 'really' become an animal any more than the animal 'really' becomes something else ... What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming,

worlds through encounter with a new relational context—a doggish *Umwelt*.¹⁴ In other words, we become-with life as it is manifested through the body of another, and lives are always connected to worlds.

This multispecies becoming-with leaves us open to the responsive capacity of all earthly life, and this has important implications for ethics. If our knowledge of Earth's complex ecological systems relies on interspecies connectivities, issues like extinction, biodiversity and conservation become epistemic—if we lose a species, we might irrevocably damage a multispecies way of knowing through becoming-with, diminishing what Mick Smith has termed the “species of possibilities” that define our “sense of the world.”¹⁵

This links the ethics of face-to-face encounter with developing an extended ecological imagination. Becoming-with nonhumans, and appreciating their capacity for meaning-making and worlding, may enhance our ability to respond to the disturbing and amorphous becoming-withs of the Anthropocene—more-than-(but including)-human¹⁶ assemblages like superstorms, acidifying oceans, and antibiotic resistant bacteria.

Ultimately, this compelling photograph of two young men laughing in the face of powerful planetary forces is a reminder of how tragic and dangerous the cognitive illusion of human exceptionalism can be. We can never disconnect from Earth's ecological community, because we are always becoming-with, in a living multispecies world composed of phenomena and transitions. But we *can* terribly damage our ability to respond to that world. Failing to attend to ecological connectivities does not break them, but leaves them disfigured. These neglected connections hang in the air, like exposed faulty wiring, pulsing with a deadly charge.

Bibliography

- Barad, Karan. “Nature’s Queer Performativity.” *Women, Gender, and Research* 1-2 (2012): 25–53.
- Bateson, Gregory, and Mary Catherine Bateson. *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*. 1987. Reprint. New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2005.
- Curry, Patrick. “Nature Post-Nature.” *New Formations* 26 (2008): 51–64.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.
- _____. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Kirby, Vicki. *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

not the supposedly fixed terms through which that becoming passes.” *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 238.

¹⁴ Nineteenth-century biologist Jakob von Uexküll used the term *Umwelt* to describe the way organism and environment form a whole system. Each organism has its own *Umwelt* which is its meaningful environment. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans, with A Theory of Meaning*, trans. Joseph D. O’Neil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1934, 1940, 2010).

¹⁵ Smith, “Ecological Community, the Sense of the World, and Senseless Extinction,” 31.

¹⁶ Patrick Curry, “Nature Post-Nature,” *New Formations* 26 (2008): 59

- Latour, Bruno. "How to Talk about the Body? The Normative Dimensions of Science Studies." *Body and Society* 10, no. 2 (2004): 205–229.
- Rose, Deborah Bird, and Libby Robin. "The Ecological Humanities in Action: An Invitation." *Australian Humanities Review* 31–32 (April, 2004).
- Rose, Deborah Bird. "Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time." *Environmental Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2012): 127–140.
- Smith, Mick. "Ecological Community, the Sense of the World, and Senseless Extinction." *Environmental Humanities* 2 (2013): 21 – 41.
- Stengers, Isabelle. "A Constructivist Reading of Process and Reality." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 25, no. 4 (2008): 91–110.
- Uman, Martin. *Lightning: Physics and Effects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- von Uexküll, Jakob. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans, with A Theory of Meaning*. Translated by Joseph D. O'Neil. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, (1934, 1940) 2010.