



# Wit(h)nessing

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A bodily encounter with shared earth others—kin, commensal, prey, predator—is always an *encounter-exchange* if we think with the concept and mattering of *wit(h)nessing*. *Wit(h)nessing* is a word-concept seeded in ideas of co-poiesis by feminist theorist of affect, visual artist, and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger.<sup>1</sup> She writes that each of us is *already in relationship* before any assumption of an independent subjectivity—an *I*—is established. The “*I*” is already co-emerging in relation to the “non-*I*”: a priori, the first person is relational. There is no *I* without a non-*I*. While Ettinger is concerned with enlarging a notion of with-ness in thinking about human interdependency, resonant also is allusion to—and some unsettling of—the idea and practice of *witnessing*. Scholars such as Kelly Oliver describe witnessing in terms of the double meaning of *observation*—to be an *eyewitness*, to see, to watch—and to *bear testimony*.<sup>2</sup> Here, I propose *wit(h)nessing* as a waymaker that enriches and extends the work of witnessing by embracing the teachings of *affect* and *more-than-visual sensing* and mattering in our humanimal encounters.

I want to travel in time and place to flesh out this provocation by returning to an affective meeting on the edge of the prohibited Maralinga Nuclear Tests Area in late 1984. There, standing together in a sandy swale, I handed a museum skin of a Bilby—a small ground-dwelling mammal—to Alice Cox, an Anangu Elder and traditional owner and custodian of the vast mosaic of the Maralinga-Tjarutja Lands of South Australia. When these homelands were expropriated for the British-Australian atomic bomb testing in the 1950s, most of the traditional owner-residents forced to leave were displaced to Yalata, on the colder bluebush and saltbush rangelands of the Nullarbor to the south. But that August thirty years later, Yalata Community Elders and families were now poised in a busy, temporary camp at the boom gate on the road north of Ooldea, awaiting the formal handback of the Lands by the South Australian government in

1. Ettinger, “Weaving a Woman Artist,” 69; Ettinger, *Matrixial Borderspace*.

2. Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*.

January 1985. This is a long, unfinished story, powerfully told in the book *Maralinga, the Anangu Story*.<sup>3</sup>

Alice was one of the group of senior traditional women and men invited to participate in a program of consultation on extinct and disappearing desert homelands mammals, part of a larger two-way knowledge-sharing project between Western science and traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge in central and southern Australia.<sup>4</sup> The Elders were hosting our visit to meet and talk about the disappeared animals now gathering—albeit as a little assemblage of museum taxidermy forms—on the canvas groundsheet spread at our feet. Alice arrived late, in a rush, and I reached down and picked up the bilby skin and silently handed it to her. She immediately clasped it tightly to her chest, exclaiming its Pitjantjatjara name, *ninu*, and then, cradling and rocking it, began to sing lullaby-like to this animal.<sup>5</sup> After the shock—seemingly a mix of grief and happiness and excitement at seeing all the animals again, even in their inanimate skins—Alice was eager to talk about her knowledge of *ninu*, its clever burrow-making habits, the way she and other young girls had learned to hunt them—a recount suffused with respect for the bilby and its elusive ways. She had not seen or touched a living *ninu* since she was a teenager, and was now, in her words, “more than fifty.” There was much talk. But in those shared minutes of verbal and nonverbal encountering, a deep lesson in bilby culture by emplaced experts with lifelong body-archives of biocultural knowledge was shared in passionate, intellectual recall. And in that moving exchange, paused in those dunes, one little ground mammal was effortlessly re-sung back into a fleeting time-space of animated presence.

In the thick time of the present day, my revisit to this powerful meeting took impetus within the environmental humanities and contemporary arts—in an intersectional research space of extinction and loss, affect, and material aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> *Affect*, here, pertains to the forces and intensities of encounters *and* to the passages of these energies as becomings of thinking, making, doing, and undoing in research-practice.<sup>7</sup> In short, another thirty years on, not only had I not finished with the encounter, it had not finished with me. In generative after-affect, it was an *undoing* that accompanied my attempts to verbally articulate Elder Alice’s response and responsivity to *ninu*: I was incapable of speaking or writing about that meeting without being moved to tears.

3. Yalata, Oak Valley Communities, and Mattingley, *Maralinga, the Anangu Story*.

4. Burbidge et al., “Aboriginal Knowledge of the Mammals of the Central Deserts of Australia,” 9. The full study was shared back to the consultant communities and individuals as part of the wider knowledge exchange. I was present *then* as a zoologist researching the presence and absence of Nullarbor mammals. Permission to retell the story of the original meeting with Yalata Elders, naming Alice Cox, was sought and granted from the Yalata community. See Boscacci, “Trace of an Affective Object Encounter,” 166.

5. *Ninu* (also *Nirnu*) is the publicly spoken Pitjantjatjara name for the greater bilby, *Macrotis lagotis*.

6. Astrida Neimanis and Rachel L. Walker write of the “thick time” of the present, “a transcorporeal stretching between present, future, and past,” that reimagines “bodies as archives” (“Weathering,” 558).

7. This connects with a Spinozan-Deleuzian interpretation of affect in contemporary use; another main vector in concept and practice embraces the affects as *emotion states*, extending the work of Silvan Tomkins. See Boscacci, “Trace of an Affective Object Encounter,” 41.

Judith Butler writes: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.”<sup>8</sup> Even “before we enter into contracts that confirm that our relations are a result of our choice, we are already in the hands of the other—a thrilling and terrifying way to begin.”<sup>9</sup> Thinking more into this entanglement with affective others, both human and nonhuman, Ettinger’s theory of matrixial trans-subjectivity proposes that we, as human beings, are *already* transconnected and coemerging because each of us first grows within and coemerges with/in an other—a *m/Other*. Indeed, we each first share space and time within the maternal “womb,” or matrixial space and time. In this co-poiesis—co-making—the first person is *already* relational: there is no I without a non-I.<sup>10</sup>

I suggest that Ettinger’s word-concept of *wit(h)nessing* carries this *I+non-I* transconnection into—and potentially transforms—the notion of witness in our human and more-than-human encounters. It renders any *a-bodied* encounter explicitly relational: it is an encounter-exchange.<sup>11</sup> The Maralinga meeting was a shared impingement event, a profound exchange, even if I as one of the individuals in the cross-cultural gathering around disappeared desert mammals only partially understood its full dimensions that morning. In lingering after-affect and drawing on Ettinger’s insights, “witnessing” then, and now, is more acutely apprehended and articulated as *wit(h)nessing*.<sup>12</sup>

Words and ideas have material and experiential histories, as do emplaced bodies over time. But what might *wit(h)nessing* generate for feeling-thinking, making, and doing practices of the contemporary environmental humanities? *Wit(h)nessing* becomes a

8. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

9. Butler, “Judith Butler.”

10. James Hatley, thinking with the Atlantic horseshoe crab, invokes evolutionary kin and biogenic connections in a discussion of human emergence: “We humans are born not only from out of our mother’s womb, but also the wombs, both human and more-than-human, both viviparous and oviparous, of our forebears. And one should not forget those generations even more distantly related to us, emerging through meiosis and mitosis” (“Aion,” 181).

11. I use the term *a-bodied*, in preference to *embodied*, as a neologistic retuning to actively entwine the somatic and the cognitive—the feeling-thinking body—in encountering. Consider it to call up embodied mind, minded body, in interplay and movement. In drawing contemporary affect scholarship into conversation with the environmental humanities, in revalorizing embodiment and relationality in the encounter, Val Plumwood continues to remind us that a simple reversal of emphasis on the *underside* of Western cultural cuts such as mind/body—historically, the body—is a ready trap. “Breaking the dualism involves *both affirming and reconceptualizing* the underside.” Nor is hypermerging a solution to such hyperseparation, she cautions. (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 5). I suggest that *a-bodied* in an evolving vocabulary of embodiment elicits the attuned, electrically receptive body in its sensory material and fleshy fullness in active dance with a critical-creative, responsive mind. It is adopted from Brian Massumi’s ludic expression, *a-bodying*: “If everything is alive, it is because the expressive gestures of nature go a-bodying.” (*What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, 97).

12. Over time, my thinking moved from understanding my original role as an assumed observer-witness to that of a participant-witness, to one of an unintended provocateur (reckless, even), and, finally, to one entwined in *wit(h)nessing*. I am indebted to Alice Cox and her fellow Elders, whose generous presence and knowledge sharing sparked this becoming co-poiesis, as I am to *ninu* and other small-medium-bodied mammals whose living absence took me to that dune meeting that day. Each of these I and non-I relations affectively call me to trace and carefully story thicker transcultural understandings of extinction and loss, recovery, and precarity.

modality of being present in whole-bodied attunement and attention in encountering. There is much more to be said about the synergies of multisensorial work in this waymaker. Touch, gestural nuances, wafts of warming dune aromas collaborate with listening as well as the watch of witness. When we wit(h)ness, we risk being affected—a-bodily moved, grown more capacious or stilled and undone by the *occursus*, the chance event of powerful impingement.<sup>13</sup> We risk being ambushed, our particular burrows of knowledges unsettled, our practices unpredictably provoked across old disciplinary boundaries—and even transformed. More than ever, in the present age of seemingly relentless anthropocenic impingements and co-species extinctions, this is a critical time for wit(h)nessing and wondering. We are re-minded of our existing I and non-I interconnection as a participant, agent, and respondent *already in encounter-exchange* with each breath drawn from the transforming atmosphere of this planet in flux, promising irrepressible change. But I wonder what Alice Cox would say here?

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13. The *occursus* in the continual flow of everyday affective energies is the chance encounter of intense or punctuated affection (in the ethology of Baruch Spinoza). See Boscacci, “Trace of an Affective Object Encounter,” 48.

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