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Midterm Self Evaluation #1

Word Count: 869

For the ILC we’re calling Animism in the Anthropocene, my intention was to examine what role human belief about our place in the biosphere holds in our actions towards the rest of the community of life. I wanted to examine current scholarship on the topic, as well as see what kind of knowledge could come from my own intuitive or bodily self. To this second end Allan and I decided to practice what we called “somatic explorations”; going out into the world as embodied creatures and seeing what we could feel and what information could arise from that through free-writing. Lately I’ve become suspicious of language and the role it plays in allowing us to keep one step removed from the breathing world, in allowing us to abstract all of the sensory information that comes to us through our bodies.

In The Lives of Animals, J.M. Coetzee writes the following scene:

“Do you really believe, Mother, that poetry classes are going to close down the slaughterhouses?

“No.”

“Then why do it? You said that you were tired of clever talk about animals, proving by syllogism that they do or do not have souls. But isn’t poetry just another kind of clever talk: admiring the muscles of the big cats in verse? Wasn’t your point about talk that it changes nothing?”

Later in the same conversation, Elizabeth says, “John, I don’t know what I want to do. I just don’t want to sit silent.”

He also writes:

To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being- not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation- a heavily affective sensation- of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. (33)

Coetzee seems here, through Elizabeth Costello, to also question the role language plays in our separation from ourselves as animals. I have found during these first four weeks of class that I spend a lot more time inside with my nose in a book than I do outside experiencing the world that I think I am trying to say we all need to reconnect with. This has been frustrating. To the questions of the commodification of food and knowledge, my first thought was to connect the business model of packaged, marketed, unhealthy food with the packaged, marketed, unhealthy ways of learning such as those in traditional academia. I’ve stayed inside with the books because I felt like I had to, to come up with enough words to prove I’m doing real work. Wandering in the woods doesn’t feel like real work. I spent years attending colleges with more standardized methods of scholarship than Evergreen, and the habits of stress, anxiety and trying to channel my thoughts into academic speak are hard to break. The SOS and ILC formats enable the kind of messy, intuitive exploration of ideas that more structured colleges didn’t allow, and for that I am grateful, if often confused and uncomfortable.

I distrust language, but have also been trying too hard to use language in the ways I was taughtt, and the result has caused a lot of anxiety. I’m wondering what different ways of being within and use of language that I’m missing. In Dark Ecology, a central text for this ILC, Timothy Morton discusses how the development of agriculture shifted the way some humans think and see the world from one of wonder and humility to one of order and control. One hallmark of this kind of thinking, which he calls *agrilogistics*, is the ‘Law of Noncontradiction’. We look at the world and see it one way and one way only. Paradox is anathema to agrilogistics. I was born and bred into agrilogistic thinking, and so now I am trying to learn to see that language can be both a creator of the problems much of the human species is experiencing right now; something neutral; and even perhaps a way out of the tangles we’ve gotten ourselves in.

In the essay, We Call It *Tradition*, Linda Hogan discusses “how diverse indigenous languages contain and hold within them the embedded knowledge and deep science,” (Hogan, 18) of the places in which they lived in reciprocal relationship. It is only now, as I’m writing this, that I realize how deeply I had begun to believe that language is inherently a separator; but language arises from the body, and can be used to hold deeply sacred knowledge and interaction between a people and the land, between two selves, and even “between a being (relation between a being and itself),” (Morton 155).

When Elizabeth Costello’s son asks her if she really believes poetry will close down the slaughterhouses, she doesn’t know why she thinks poetry is important, and can only answer, “I just don’t want to sit silent.” My focus for this ILC is starting to turn from the question of using language at all, to one of questioning in what ways language can be used as a connector, rather than a separator. Is it through poetry? Song? Could we change the way language can “keep freezing the things, deadening their dynamism, closing them up with themselves as fixed and finished commodities” (Abram, 129) by changing the way we look at the world, or would the changing of language need to come first? I don’t know why these questions are important to me, but they are and like Elizabeth Costello, I cannot sit silent.

Language is our birthright, for good or evil. The mind is the tool, not the master. This project is forcing me to confront the grief I feel at the disconnection my rational mind seems to bring between my self and the breathing world, my body included within that world. It is also reminding me that words can facilitate- or really in some deeper physical way can actually BE- that connection that I so long for. In the five weeks remaining I will continue to dive into the muddle that knowledge feels like at the moment, through the grief and the anxiety and the fear and the frustration, and trust that at the other end lies some place that I want to be.