

Book Review: Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology

For this reader of David Abram's text, Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology, * three main "pop outs" appear in his writing. One is the lovely, recurring synesthetic imagery, experiences, and language. The best (strength) of his book is about these experiences. As inspirational material, Abram provides words and new metaphors for those who seek to emulate his journey, or after experiencing similar intimations, lack the words to make them legible and coherent. His language could also become an invitation to others who might be *less sensitive* than he is, and limited to reading 'nature's text' from an existential periphery, only rarely apprehending the kinds of 'insights' Abram obviously experiences and aptly shares. The second was a sense of familiarity with his ideas: the *supreme cybernetic* of Gregory Bateson. A third might be that this eco/biosemiotician recognizes in much of what David Abram writes a popularized and even "new age" version of eco/biosemotics proper: the beginning of a question rather than an answer.

Ultimately, the book "works" as a uniquely personal journey and exploration of Bateson's supreme cybernetic, sadly, without giving proper credit where credit is due. (It is odd, for example, that Bio- Eco-semiotician Kalevi Kull is mentioned in his acknowledgements but no posthumous acknowledgement of Bateson, a key figure in semiotics, can be found. Equally odd is the fact that Dr. Kull's name is mentioned but the entire text says almost nothing about eco/biosemiotics.)

On this account, only if one has not read Bateson (e.g. MIND as an aggregate) does David Abram seem remarkable or original. In a Batesonian-like manner David Abram ponders:

"What if there is, yes, a quality of inwardness to the mind, not because the mind is located inside us (inside our body or brain), but because we are situated, bodily, inside it—because our lives and our thoughts unfold in the depths of a mind that is not really ours, but is rather the Earth's?"

Nor can anyone be denied the return journey and experience of reproducing (confirming?) or identifying with Batesonian "truths"; sharing these with a new generation. However, Abram is no Gregory Bateson. The book's strengths, then, again, lie in being a journal and even a manual for intimate or *autocentric* sensuality aiming to get in touch with a purported, extended intelligence: "Of course, I can hardly be instilled by this intelligence if I only touch down, briefly, on my way to elsewhere." One is also reminded of deep

ecological practices of wandering as a means for achieving personal (ecological) insights.

Because Abram writes in and elucidates with all too familiar Batesonian-like terms, one must accept, at least momentarily, his premise that we are ONE MIND, therefore, that no *unnatural* disjunction exists between us and the “natural.” A reiteration of many “truths” Abram guides readers through his own mindful, contemplative journey while hinting at a rarer and deeper connection with “nature.” Because this personal journey is composed of synesthetic imagery, experiences, and language, it may be both prohibitive and insular in the sense that there are multiple modes of relating to nature, some of which might exclude synesthetic experiences and language, but are nevertheless as deep or meaningful. For example, a Hawaiian spear fisherman, swimming with the totality of his (her) nude body, immersed in one of the most primordial place-elements of/on our planet, salt water, and using Batesonian language, a liquid MIND, may or may not agree with Abram’s intimations. The swimmer may belong to an ancient, rich, and naturally complex aboriginal tradition. The swimmer may experience a deep sense of connection with the sea (they do, so they tell me). The swimmer is hunting, itself a series of mindful and purposeful acts connecting a hunter’s mind to other animal minds, and finally to “MIND.” And yet, the same Hawaiian swimmer may not ‘get’ what Abram might be saying. This Hawaiian swimmer-hunter, equally, might suspect that most bipedal and clothed whites or non-swimmer-hunters “don’t get it.” A surfer might be another case study of authentic immersion, for the purposes of recreation, rather than purposely seeking earth-shattering truths, who might very well say “gnarly” after one of these intense ‘connection’ moments and sum up the totality of that experience with a simple “Shaka” wave and a wide-eyed smile. Who says his (her) experience would be less intimate or “real”? In both cases, the “earthly cosmologies” of swimmer-hunter and surfer are both about WATER and VERY DEEP.

I did get the sense that much of Abram’s insights are consistent with a white man’s *new found intimation* with nature--the surprise of seeing and feeling so much! In this, his experiences are an ecopsychological journey without, again, being burdened or obligated to use precise terminology that has been around since the 1970s and 1980s. Growing up in Venezuela, having wandered through natural settings in my childhood and adolescence, from the 1960s through the late 1980s, I too identify with his child-like sense of ‘new found glory.’ I still do in my fifties. He worries, like many of us do, about the consequences of:

“So many children have been raised, day after day, on the flat screens of televisions, video monitors, and handheld computers—as indeed many adults spend their waking hours focused upon digital screens!”

From a cognitive psychology perspective it is worth mentioning that little of this science is seriously employed for studying and ultimately clarifying Abram's experiences and insights. He tries but fails and misses the obvious in a handful of pages. For example, from a cognitive perspective, scientifically speaking, one could ask (and test) whether the synesthetically rich experiences Abram writes about could lead such a mind to easier, casual *animistic interpretations* of "nature." If so, then, cognitively speaking, Abram's insights are merely his own—exist only in his Mind/Body system--and speak not about an aggregate MIND but about a syndrome, a subjective phenomenology, sometimes shared by others, most of the time, I suspect, not. Fully-fledged as ecopsychology, this cognitive exploration might, for example, be able to trace the origins of our apocalyptic disgrace to a reduction in the number of synesthetic "souls" generation after generation (an empirical question). Such an inquiry, without necessarily providing final answers, could entice interdisciplinary—scientists--readers to do something more with Abram's text.

In short, if a reader comes to Abram's text without having first read at least some Gregory Bateson, Jakob von Uexkull, Winfried Nöth, or Lynn Robertson's work on synesthesia—or worse, without having read William Henry Hudson's *Green Mansions—Becoming Animal* would seem/feel/sound/taste/smell very original. (There is a lot of award-winning, stellar fiction out there that speaks better—more forcefully and clearly--about semiotics, cognition, psycholinguistics, nature-spirituality, ecosemiotics, and synesthesia than Abram's work does, for example, Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* and Larry Niven's *The Integral Tress*.)

To be fair, Abram begins his book with an honest and accurate statement and disclaimer that most editors would discourage their writers from using (I would): "I have no intention with this work to offer a definitive statement much less a comprehensive one." Later on, Abram states that, "Some might claim that this is a book of solitudes." It is mostly the latter. The end of the book expires the way a fish out of water does when it has lost a fight, with a platitude presented as a profound esoteric insight. Because it is not a memorable ending or connected to any significant plot, I can give it away here: "...finally fountain-ing into the open biosphere through blossoms and budded leaves and through the craft of our fingers, through the gleam in your lover's eye and the fluted music upwelling now from the beak of a blackbird..."

Given the facts that we are already in the midst of multiple global catastrophes, in the midst of a transitional "quickenning" of dramatic proportions, works (and writers) similar to David Abram's may not turn the tide back—how could a single book a real tide turn? As I close his book yet

another time, I think, "It is inspirational material." I smile, feel good for awhile and think, "At least HE gets it." We have run out of time. If David Abram can make a few converts here and there before the apocalyptic scenarios that we are entering into are sure to come, then, Kudos! We need as many people as we can to clean up this mess. Who knows what the synesthetic experience of global *terrifying mayhem* will feel like? We might learn the answer from Derrick Jensen's Endgame (1 & 2) but not from David Abram's Becoming Animal.

* Pantheon Books, New York, 2010