Careful Contemplations

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Imaginings

Ice on the lake in southern Bavaria. © Tyanif Rico Rodríguez. All rights reserved.

by Tyanif Rico Rodríguez

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A recording of the sounds informing the author's contemplation. © Tyanif Rico Rodríguez. All rights reserved.

Sitting on the warm wood was pleasant. The sun had drawn me to the shore of a small lake in southern Bavaria. To feel the warmth of the sun in the cold winter air after several cloudy days was a great gift.

The lake by my feet was frozen. From the nearby road I could hear the noise of running motors. Every now and then someone passed by, and curiously, those who stopped always seemed to throw stones or other objects into the icy water.

I was struck by the sound of bubbles and melting ice. Something was breaking, separating. The water was no longer tight, as if the cold had made it stick together until it solidified. The sun was making space between the cracks, making the water bubbles gurgle, the sound mingling with that of the birds singing in the trees. Everything was gurgling.

When others threw objects into the lake, I heard a watery squeak, almost like a frog splashing or a water drop jumping. A watery creak.

A dry whiplash sounded synchronous with the water melting in a temporality I didn't understand. But it was certainly a synchronous sound.

The echo was sometimes mixed with the sounds of German words in the background.

I wondered why passersby kept throwing stones into the lake as if to break the ice. Was this the gesture that expressed their relation to the lake? Did the frozen space need to be broken into or examined? Did it need to be touched or altered to be perceived?

A few meters away from me, a little boy and his grandmother were trying to break the ice on the shore with a piece of wood: The boy was hitting hard against the surface, and his grandmother was telling him to make sure not to get wet. She too started throwing stones into the lake, a bit further from the shore.

I wanted to listen to the water. Did they not listen to the lake melting in the sun?

What triggers in me the desire to listen, to contemplate, to pay attention in a less invasive way? Is this a careful way of paying attention?

I wondered what meaning was inherent in this way of observing, what indication or motion might be related to it. I thought of André Haudricourt and his idea of gesture as embodied historical testimony of how relationships between humans, animals, and plants are organized[1]—ways in which attention and relationships include the memory of how humans transform the world and relate to each other.

I wonder what modes of attention are enacted in the different ways of relating to the lake. There is a gesture both in the one who examines something by intervening in it, and in the one who contemplates it.

After a while, the song of a bird in the treetops made me aware of the air. The temperature was changing as the clouds obscured the sun. It was getting colder.

I started writing shortly after I began recording the wet sound of the water droplets —a moment given to me by the gesture of contemplation. The water was shivering.

I chose to listen to nature, to cultivate a careful mode of attention. But I couldn’t resist observing and wondering, how do we humans attend to the world around us? If we shift our modes of attention, what changes around us and within us? Will there be answers within the modes of care we develop? In other words, how can we give our practices ethical-political meaning, attending to undervalued and neglected issues such as our affective relationship with nature?

Will our mode of attention allow us to embrace the enchanted ethics Jane Bennett speaks of, which consist of cultivating in ourselves a more generous disposition toward the richness of nature-culture as a source of wonder? When the environment is obliterated as a surplus to the human, it is difficult to give value to the material existence of a world beyond its prerogative as a resource for exploitation. Therefore, “it is necessary to nourish a different kind of enchantment, committed to the complexity of life and imbued with an affective energy more favorable to life.”[2]

A frog croaked in the background, and careful contemplation called me back.

That, that crackling sound! Was that in the water?

I believe that thinking with care not only offers us a horizon of desires about how we would like relationships to be but also allows us to understand them. It situates us in a present in which varied forms of care coexist in hybrid and related ways, as well as in tension.

Forms of relating sustain and shape the landscape. That nature-humanized habitat in which we make territory or build a path diffracts our world.

A child singing in the background wanted to show something to his mother. “Ich komme,” I am coming, he repeated, following her.

I love when children sing songs to nature, exploring the relationship between themselves and their surroundings.[3] Are these modes of care and attention an example to follow?

Perhaps this is a way of cultivating a shared sense of the world that is more affectively connected to others, beyond our partial modes of care and attention centered in the human prerogative.

By developing new songs to the sun and to nature, we will recognize the world around us as our home. As described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the lost child within us will find our place in the world, territorialize, with musical gestures and varied motifs, practicing enchanting ethics of care attuned with the vibrancy of life around us.[4]

We could establish a rooted relationship with the earth by being careful, attentive, and grateful for its presence. Marc Badal describes our lack of attachment to the earth as "ingrávidez," bodies not subject to gravity—weightless, detached.[5] Ours should be an intimate relationship: our bodies grounded, rooted.

Before they left, the family whose child had been singing threw stones into the lake.

Let us follow the child.

Let's make songs with the river, the lake, or the mountain.

Let us listen to the songs of others.

Let's pay attention, carefully.

Let's place our ears onto the ground and invocate the materiality of a careful gesture.

Colophon

It is difficult to narrate a story without the human voice; the mediation of my material self as the one who expresses and enunciates something through different modes of communication will always be present. But I am sure that the reader or listener, whoever is being affected by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's landscapes of ritornellos —or songs of relation—in their living territory, their body, and the expansive world of their ideas and abilities, will be able to find the rhythm to connect with nature, a rhythm that encourages care, respect, and reciprocity.

Undoubtedly, I have always been present: in the text, in the story, in the gaze, in the hand that holds the device while recording, in the body that feels the warmth of the wood, protecting it from the cold. Undoubtedly, the modes of attention we cultivate are a gaze, and as such, a mode of interaction. The world will be made from them.

Acknowledgments

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