

Working With Uncertainty Through a New Animist Experience of Fog

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While on my paddle board early one morning, a thick fog rolled in, limiting what I could see to what was within a few feet. Unable to orient myself to the sun or familiar landmarks, I drifted, uncertain where I was in the lake and in which direction I should paddle. As I waited for the fog to lift, I engaged in a centering practice of noticing my feeling state, both physical and emotional. I noticed as fear arose and faded, as my body tensed and relaxed. I contemplated how I was relating to the fog and noted an unease with not knowing where I was in the moment. I frequently paddled this small lake, where the shore was always within sight, except when the fog blocked my view, so I knew I was safe, yet tension and fear arose nonetheless. The incident prompted an inquiry into how I related to fog and my ability to be uncertain, even for a short time.

In modern Western discourse, certainty seems to reign. From science to politics to religion, one must be unwavering in what they believe they know or be called fickle, faithless, or a charlatan. Uncertainty, however, is the state from which creative inquiries arise, evidenced by my own thoughts as I stood on my paddleboard in the fog. Certainty, as Merriam-Webster reminds me, is the state of being indisputable, known or proved to be true, which continuing scientific inquiry has shown is rarely actually the case. Certainty is also the state of being inevitable (*Definition of CERTAIN*, 2024). If anything in the future is, in fact, inevitable, it is that it is unlikely to be what one is sure it will be. The future is always, in a word, foggy.

In “People of the earth: Inviting a new animism,” landscape photographer and author, John Briggs (2015), described visiting a canyon at night, putting his camera away, and feeling not the drama or spookiness he expected, but rather serenity and gratitude. Briggs’ experience in the dark canyon, and others, informed an animistic perspective that he encourages his readers to adopt to counter the anthropocentric certainty of reductionist science. New animism is, as Briggs

describes it, an embrace of uncertainty, “the mysterious ever-present meaningfulness that constitutes life itself” (2015, p. 484).

The dark, for Briggs, and the fog, for me, were situations of felt uncertainty from which animist perception arose. As a result of my experience, I wondered both about fog, and how fog was animated on its own or in relation to me, and about uncertainty and what fog, animated or not, could teach me about being uncertain. In what follows, I explore several definitions of new animism and, through the lens of two definitions, my relationship with fog and uncertainty.

What is New Animism?

What new animism is, is contested in the literature, but several working definitions can be derived from that contestation. What is generally agreed upon is that new animism does not refer to the pejorative term applied to indigenous religions by Edward Burnett Tylor and other nineteenth century anthropologists. New animism is, generally, understood to be a post-Western, post-humanist theoretical challenge to the current nature vs. culture paradigm (Haber, 2009), although different thinkers take different approaches. I have been selective, setting aside several as not to overly muddle my inquiry.

Ethnographies of existing indigenous cultures provide insight into animist practices. For example, the Sami reindeer herders in Northway and Sweden live as if the land, in relation to them, nurtures and sustains them and the more-than-human animals and creates an ethics of interaction. Ritualized or mystic communication between humans and more-than-humans guides daily activities (Helander-Renvall, 2010). Another example arises from an ethnography of the Warlpiri, an Aboriginal people of Australia, whose complex and metaphorically rich ontology differs from the Sami yet also provides an example of how to behave with respect toward the more-than-human world (Peterson, 2011). The difficulty with applying animism as a label for

indigenous cultures and practices is, even as a tool for analysis, a Western thinker from outside the culture cannot extract similar meaning from such an analysis. The Sami and the Warlpiri relationships with their worlds are based on living with the land and other species for generations. To put the label “animist” on an indigenous culture or people does not suggest understanding but rather a recognition that an outsider cannot understand. Labeling a culture “animistic” can only be a starting point for acknowledging that the culture is strange observed from the humanist frame of the West (Wilkinson, 2017). While anthropological studies of these cultures can be fascinating, they do not typically break from modern Western subject-object construct and thus do not create the perceptual turn needed to be present, in an animistic way, to the uncertain mystery of life.

While Westerners can take inspiration from the practices of indigenous animist cultures, new animism should not seek to recreate them, singularly or in the aggregate, due to an inability to understand. Instead, new animists can intentionally engage in what John Briggs calls “magical thinking,” employing imagination, empathy, and compassion within a natural creative process to feel another being or the land itself as if all were alive (2015, p. 483). This imaginative process facilitates an escape from humanist thinking. Invoking performance theory, a means of analyzing human societal behavior as if it were part of a performance, moved me further towards creating a suitable definition of new animism. Performative new animism would include practices which create experiences with situational and temporal boundaries and that are produced by collective action of human and more-than-human persons (Enstedt & Moberg, 2023). This echoes Karen Barad’s theory that agency arises in joint performances and that matter is in continuous performative transformation (Barad, 2007). New animism may then be defined as the understanding that the world is animated through performative practices that enforce a sense of

interrelatedness, rather than the application of another culture's beliefs about who or what is alive.

New animism is a perspective turn towards non-logical, sensorial, embodied ways of interacting with the more-than-human world. As an analytical tool, new animism's examination and meaning-making require new methodologies and hands on epistemologies (Laack, 2020). Applied analytically and in practice, new animism has the potential to disrupt essentialism and the human-nature divide, to challenge or, eventually, transform ordinary, day-to-day relationships between species and other sorts of matter, and to provide additional context in which to examine significant uncertainties such as the environmental crisis. But can new animism provide a way to work with uncertainty? By examining my experience with fog through a multidisciplinary, animistic frame, I suggest new ways of relating to both fog and uncertainty.

Three definitions of new animism arose from the preceding analysis. New animism as an attempt to recreate an indigenous culture's meaning and practices of interrelatedness outside of the context in which that culture exists is problematic and should be avoided. New animism, for this inquiry, is then either Briggs' "magical thinking" that imagines life into all matter so that mystery can be felt, or experiences of interrelatedness that are co-produced with other beings and matter. The latter two will be employed for the purpose of further exploration.

Fog as Metaphor and Symbol

In creative media, fog often stands in for the feeling of uncertainty. Confusion, as in "the fog of war" or "in a fog," secrecy, doubt, otherworldliness, gloom, mystery, eeriness, unearthliness, and heaviness are all associations with fog I have encountered. There is uncertainty around fog itself, especially in how climate change and rising surface temperatures will affect fog, and the related impacts on coastal ecosystems, agriculture, and fresh water supplies. Some bacteria, fungi,

protozoa, and pollen, parts of the living world even without a new animistic frame, are important to fog dynamics and are other potential victims of climate impacts on fog (Torregrosa et al., 2014). Folklore contains references to fog hiding evil spirits, an animistic suggestion, and associates it with mourning and absolute silence (Platon, 2023). Fog's silence is referred to in Carl Sandburg's poem, "Fog" (1916):

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

Poetry offers animistic perspectives on fog. The poet, in the imaginative description of it, performatively imparts an aliveness to fog, so that the writing of it becomes an animating ritual, perhaps brushing against the rituals of the Sami but more likely arising from experience. Poets may be employing magical thinking in personifying fog, creating a phenomenology based on words that invoke feelings like what may be felt in an actual encounter with fog. Sara Teasdale, in "Gray Fog" (1918), calls fog a ghost and grants it the power to change perception and emotion:

A fog drifts in, the heavy laden
Cold white ghost of the sea—
One by one the hills go out,
The road and the pepper-tree.

I watch the fog float in at the window
With the whole world gone blind,
Everything, even my longing, drowns,
Even the thoughts in my mind.

I put my head on my hands before me,
There is nothing left to be done or said,
There is nothing to hope for, I am tired,
And heavy as the dead.

Teasdale animates the fog and describes co-produced feelings of gloom and heaviness, touching on both working definitions of new animism. As another example, silence, confusion, as vagueness, and feeling lost are attributed to an experience of fog in “Fog” by Amy Clampitt (1997):

A vagueness comes over everything,
as though proving color and contour
alike dispensable: the lighthouse
extinct, the islands' spruce-tips
drunk up like milk in the
universal emulsion; houses
reverting into the lost
and forgotten; granite
subsumed, a rumor

in a mumble of ocean.

Tactile

definition, however, has not been
totally banished: hanging
tassel by tassel, panicked
foxtail and needlegrass,
dropseed, furred hawkweed,
and last season's rose-hips
are vested in silenced
chimes of the finest,
clearest sea-crystal.

Opacity

opens up rooms, a showcase
for the hueless moonflower
corolla, as Georgia
O'Keefe might have seen it,
of foghorns; the nodding
campanula of bell buoys;
the ticking, linear
filigree of bird voices.

Fog as a Materiality

The sensorial experience of fog such as is imaginatively described in the poems invokes a new animist perspective shift. Experiences of interrelatedness, however, also exist materially in the way that fog is very much entwined in ecosystems and supports their biological life. In parts of coastal California, for example, the California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*) migrates to and disperses from breeding sites without desiccating under the cover of summer fogs (Fellers & Kleeman, 2007). On other parts of California's coast, as well as other locations along the eastern edges of the Pacific Ocean, such as Chile and Peru, coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*), already imperiled as a species, depend on coastal fog to fill streams with cool water during late summer's spawning if they are to have a chance at recovering (Torregrosa et al., 2020). The coasts of Chile and Peru are also home to an aerophyte plant, *Tillandsia landbeckii*, which has no functional roots and depends on marine fog drip to bring water and nutrients from the Pacific Ocean to them in the dry Atacama Fog Desert (Alfaro et al., 2021). On the African continent, the undersides of translucent rocks in the Namib Desert host microbial communities dependent on the cool drizzle from low, fog-like stratocumulus clouds (Warren-Rhodes et al., 2013). As climate change makes the occurrence of fogs more or less certain, so too will these lives be made uncertain. In these cases, beings are animated in the relationship with fog, their existences entangled with it.

What beings, substantial or microbial, existed in relation to the fog I floated in? I do not know, but I can guess some being must rely on the fog. I wonder which tiny existences were suspended in the drops of water that touched my skin. What might I have come to know if I imagined myself in conversation with them?

Encountering Uncertainty

My immediate reaction after the fog rolled in was to feel fear and doubt associated with uncertainty. Why were those emotions my reflexive response? Humanism and individualism are prevalent in modern Western culture and contribute to the expectation of certainty (von Stuckrad, 2023). The narratives of Abrahamic religions contribute as well, based on supposedly irrefutable truths, directly revealed and meant to counter randomness and unpredictability (Randall, 2022). Certainty, however it arises, leads to intolerance to differing ideas that challenge the certainty, and a diminishing of intellectual humility and the collaborative process of inquiry. Bruce Grierson (2023) calls certainty a trap, as it prevents thinking from being done communally, such that it divides the labor of cognition. Staring with uncertainty, some present truth may be arrived at collaboratively. Collaborative truth-making is reminiscent of Barad's (2007) situational agency wherein knowledge is created within the entangled world, not by standing apart from it. The relational turn of entanglement put forth by Barad, Donna Haraway (2016), and other animistic thinkers critiques the centering of the human perspective and the expectation of certainty. Surely the trouble Haraway asks us to stay with is always uncertain. Haraway (2016) begins *Staying With the Trouble* with the idea of trouble itself, which is "agitation of the mind" (*Trouble* | *Etymology of Trouble by Etymonline*, n.d.), perhaps interpreted as uncertainty. Haraway notes the etymology of trouble, from Old French, "to make cloudy" (2016, p. 1), or, as I think, to fog it up.

The desire to be certain has alienated humans from the unordered, phenomenological world. To reconnect is to admit we are powerless to know anything with certainty and drop into a creative unknowing (Hahn, 2024). Climate change, despite thorough research to support plausible theories of life in the decades to come, has made the future more uncertain for humans and most other beings. Some potential futures are imponderable, because we cannot or will not

think on them, and it is likely that the outcome will be something no one person on Earth has thought of; collective thinking adds to rather than reduces what is possible. It is, however, essential that we continue to be creative in addressing the problems climate change creates. New animism and other relational epistemologies are tools for shifting outside the limits of Western capitalism, humanism, and religious beliefs, and make a perceptual turn toward pro-environmental attitudes and meaning made in a more-than human context (Boughton, 2020). Applying the magical thinking definition of new animism, imagination and compassion invite the more-than-human world to contribute to the solutions. In the relational model of new animism, potential futures are brought into being through an intricate web of entanglements, by humans plus more-than-humans, alive or not, and sometimes without the humans. In the fog, I experienced both.

Conclusion

Having lived more than five decades already, my experience in the fog on the lake was not, of course, my first such experience. There have been countless drives when fog settled over the road, slowing my progress. I have a powerful memory of my father on an evening when we were traversing New York's Long Island Sound on a boat and the thick fog necessitated that he navigate by chart and compass. The feeling of uncertainty in the fog arises in me in each experience comes from, I believe, a sudden sense of being out of place, disoriented from the landscape which, even if not known to me, likely has familiar visual elements such as lined pavement and street signs. On the inlet my father and I were crossing by boat, lighted buoys marked the dredged channels across the salt flats; that night, the grey haze was so thick it hid even their bright lights. It is no wonder that poets Teasdale and Clampitt both equated the loss of what had been visible with feelings of hopelessness or death-like heaviness. Fog cuts off those

visible clues and impairs the ability to choose what will happen next, thereby interfering with a feeling of certainty about, at least, the immediate future. I was, in each case, at the mercy of the fog, adding a shit to the power dynamic usually enjoyed by humans in the world, from dominance to subservience, to the perceptual shift of the experience.

Was the early morning fog I encountered animate? My Western-trained, reductionist thinking jumps to the conclusion that it is not. After all, is fog not just water in its cloud form, floating low to the ground? Of course, the Sami, the Warlpiri, and other indigenous thinkers might come to the opposite conclusion, which I, an outsider, cannot grasp, although I believe the felt sense is available if not its deeper meaning. Based on what I have learned of fog dynamics and the upswep of bacteria, protozoa, and the like in its formation, it can be argued that the fog contains life. Is fog animate? That fog was, for the time I spent standing on my paddleboard lost in it. For those few minutes the fog and I were co-creating reality; animation arose out of our shared experience of relating to one another. David Abram might argue for “sensorial empathy,” (1996, p. 69) such that I am the fog perceiving itself in the moments I am enveloped by it. Cut off from the visible clues to my position, I am also transformed, uncertain of even my identity because I have never existed except in relationship to the world around me, a world I could not currently see. The eeriness felt when stripping away my knowing, my certainty, to a state of not just unknowing but also of feeling myself becoming known by millions of tiny drops of water.

The perceptual turn to a phenomenological epistemology necessarily moves one into a state of uncertainty. Being lost in the fog is a good example of the phenomenon, because it is an experience that creates both the shift in perception and a resulting embodied experience of uncertainty. Both definitions of new animism elucidated earlier provide ways to relate to the fog

and the experience of it and facilitate a sense of collaborative world building. Being lost in the fog that morning was, as Haraway would say, troubling, and I shall endeavor to stay with it.

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