



*Jeanne Boden*

# Into the Box of the Box



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## 1. Boxing the Elusive

### Structuring chaos and the nature of living things

We live in a flux of constant movement, together with everything around us. The forces of nature are part of our existence. There is no certainty. There is no protection. There is nothing to comfort us or take away our existential anxiety.

We humans however, like to pretend we can take control, of nature, of each other, of animals, plants, trees, fungi, microbes, viruses, genes. We need to see structure to survive and to deal with our deepest anxieties. Therefore, we create categories and frameworks, political, social, legal, scientific, cultural systems and institutions.

Taxonomy. Typology. Encyclopedia. We classify, outline, arrange, order, identify, allocate, designate, and institutionalize to prove we have control. We group and grade all things existing into neatly described 'discovered' human-fantasized categories. They help us to see order in chaos. Most of us seem convinced that the structures we create are real.

Fixed categories help us to live our lives, but they are the prisons of our mind. We see what fits in; we are blind to or unsettled about what does not. The moment we see things differently, new discoveries, we create new sections and divisions. We are locked into mental prisons of our own making.

We organize ourselves. We have schools to educate us, many schools of thought, with lots of food for thought. Each of us has their own indoctrinated framework that defines how we see reality. We have hotels for those who are traveling. We have hospitals for the ill. We have churches, mosques, temples for honoring the gods. We have houses, big, small, one large open space to share, or houses with functional rooms and a separate room for everyone to have privacy away from others. We have prisons for criminals. We have armies to defend ourselves and frighten others off. We have reservations to exclude minority groups. We have zoos for animals and zoos for humans. Minority Parks they are called today. We have camps to reset people's minds, reeducation camps to indoctrinate ideology, labor camps to make the 'uncivilized and sick minds' useful to powerful dominant systems.

We build walls to separate, the ill from the healthy, the criminals from the upright, the rich from the poor, the residents from the migrants. We build walls to protect us, to keep others out. We build walls around our houses, around our cities, around our countries, around huge parts of the globe. We plant our flags on planets in space, to claim them.

Like humans, animals organize themselves into groups and societies and flocks and schools, colonies, and armies. They have their hierarchies and competitions, instincts, intelligences, unique ways of communicating with one another and with the world around them. They mourn their dead and have their rituals. They dominate and submit. They have their territories and kill each other if this is not respected. Humans do the same. Not only when they feel threatened in their physical territories, but also in their perceived mental territories of ideologies and narratives. Humans with their rationality and their ability to imagine things find pleasure in torturing each other. Do animals ever go that far?

## A response to Jeanne's Box

The box is so many things at once. It contains diverse, often opposite meaning. What a linguist might call a contronym. Can we go beyond the box? What does it mean to traverse its walls? And what if we got rid of them? Fluid are the knowledges, the histories, the peoples, and fluid is the box and all it ex/cludes.

### Being (in) the box

At the very start of Kōbō Abe's "The Box Man", the protagonist describes the procedure to be followed to become a box man.

We are made to infer that he is not the first to launch himself in this enterprise and seems to have a clear idea of the process.

He lists the needed material

'1 empty box of corrugated cardboard  
Vinyl sheet (semitransparent)—twenty inches square  
Rubber tape (water-resistant)—about eight yards  
Wire—about two yards  
Small pointed knife (a tool)'

and points out some of the most important features a box man needs to pay attention to when building this bizarre costume, when constructing his new persona.

The observation window is particularly important; many measurements and precautions must be taken to ensure that the only channel of interaction between the man inside the box and the external world is adequately prepared. For a man that has decided to live in a cardboard box and be substantially invisible to others, the slit is not only a window on the world but also a form of communication, the substitute of the person's facial expressions.

'For a box man the slit in the vinyl is comparable, as it were, to the expression of the eyes. It is wrong to consider this aperture as being on the same level as a peephole. With very slight adjustments it is easy to express yourself. Of course, this is not a look of kindness. The worst threatening glare is not so offensive as this slit. Without exaggeration, this is one of the few self-defenses an unprotected box man has. I should like to see the man capable of returning this look with composure.'

The nameless protagonist decided to live his life concealed inside of a cardboard box, walking around Tōkyō and spying on people through their windows. A murder also occurs, but the details of the event are blurred and the culprit dubious. In "The Box Man" the gazes of the characters and the voices of the narrators are often swapped, overlapped, and merged. The identities of the men and women the protagonist observes are confused with his own; his voyeurism seems to be addressed to a version of himself, maybe from another time. Viewed and viewer are not clearly distinguished, the reader is sometimes asked to look into the window of houses and into boxes, we are left to speculate, maybe we are the box man now?

The novel is regarded as one of the author's most intricate explorations of identity and the alienation that was said to be pervading Japanese society at the time. However historically relevant these reflections were at the time, they also certainly expose a topical matter: the entanglement of gazes, the power intrinsic in looking from a position of power or of submission, and the possibility of putting this system of gazes in crisis.

Like humans and animals, plants compete and communicate. They make noise and breathe. They organize themselves, give room, light and space to protect each other, or take the light and kill each other. What dies and decays is food for new life, the never-ending cycle of nature, forms of life balancing, falling apart, rebalancing.

The belief that humans are rational creatures, capable of reason and logic has alienated us from ourselves and from the world around us. We claim ratio but ignore our passions. We take things for granted without questioning. We only understand fragments of the flux we are in. Insights come gradual, in small shocks, now and then a big shock, a paradigm shift that changes everything we have learned and know, and suddenly we arrive in a different reality, a new truth; our brain makes new categories.

We have unlearned to use our senses. Our lives are full of desires. We are passionate beings. We are animals. We feel and know intuitively. We have unlearned our connections and interconnections. We have forgotten that we are inside, entangled, intertwined, interconnected, interdependent. But we are. Human actions are part of nature, following the same dynamics of new life and decay, creation and destruction, growth and decline, power and implosion. Awareness and connectedness are what we need. We are inside of the cycling and turning and changing and moving.

### **Power, countermovement and the nature of control**

For a moment, humans thought they could control the political. We told ourselves that liberal rationalism was the way out. Rationality created democratic politics, a beautiful and fair system, everyone a voice.

We were convinced that if we could ignore affect and emotions and see humans as determined by rational interest rather than irrational emotions, we would become invincible. We want to believe in free will and human happiness. We pretend that happiness is here for us to grasp. The rhetoric of 'we' have a better life that belongs to 'us' and 'we' have worked hard for it, mirrors 'they' have no right to profit from what 'we have realized'. 'We' are strong; 'they' are weak.

When 'they' threaten our position as we; 'they' become enemies. But who exploits and who is being exploited? Who are the parasites?

In "On the Political" Chantal Mouffe argues:

'When political frontiers become blurred, disaffection with political parties sets in and one witnesses the growth of other types of collective identities, around nationalist, religious or ethnic forms of identification.'

This seems to be happening around the world today. The upcoming of far right in Europe and in other places endangers the existence of democracy and the rule of law. Its discourse is rooted in 'we'/'they' narrative, aimed at keeping the 'they' out and only the 'supreme', 'elected' 'we' in. An essentialist version of Freedom, Equality, Fraternity outlines a 'we' in Europe. Extreme right populists promise pureness, back to a past where this area and land was 'ours'. They use rhetoric like 'It will be ours again', 'We will be great again'. With slogans like 'Long Live Liberty'. Pretending to be reliable partners, they spread fascist ideas.

Let's take the image of a single man looking in a diffused isolation (the box man is alone everywhere he goes, he is always contained in himself, in his literal box) at the world, and let's enlarge it, stretch it to cover the gaze we are now preoccupied with: what we can call the male-Western-white-Eurocentric gaze. The box man is largely unseen, or at least unidentified. Everything that is observed by him is the passive observed, the object, often unaware of his gaze. He must be the average man, no need to give him a name. He is the standard. At the same time, and to the opposite effect, the box man is an outsider in respects to the society he is supposed to inhabit; it's figured is inspired by the houseless people Abe would encounter in his outings, creating a hybrid protagonist in which the identity of observer-insider-outsider-observed chase each other in a chaotic chiasmus. The box contains and excludes, it delimits in both directions. From the inside, a container, Sara Ahmed argues "can be turned into a page upon which you write. You write on it, fingers dripping, getting something out of yourself, a feeling, a thought, an idea. If you direct anger at something, your anger is in it, gets over it. There is freedom in that."

Naturally the box is a strong metaphor for the set of rules and borders that keep certain people in: in society, in safety, in welfare, in peace, intact, in community, in the books, in recorded history, inside, in the loop. But also in check, in line, often time the price to pay for conformity and belonging. However, the box is also the container that conceals what is inside. It's a carrier, a holder, of things we can't see. You don't know who gets to be in it until the rules are not made explicit: sometimes looking at what is left out can clue us in quite quickly, though. The box hides something defined by what is outside. You don't need to think about it. Everything around you state quite clearly who gets to be inside, through the public discourse, politicians' speeches, and the language of mainstream media. The un-named is so because it doesn't need to be named, it's already ingrained to be the standard, the Norm.

As Decolonial Aesthetic proponents argue in the context of art making and recognition:

'What continues to count is the 'universality' of art and artistic productions are profiled and analyzed solely with regards to their contributions to the modernist normative universe of 'aesthetics' and 'art'. That 'universe' and those norms were not originated in Zimbabwe, Bolivia or Serbia. Therefore the arguments of altermodernity are based on a self-explanatory, invisible and pervasive (white-male-Christian-Western) European identity. This silenced Norm offers the epistemic foundation for altermodern critique of identity issues while at the same time conceals its own identity as a (white-male-Christian-Western) construction

What deviates, on the other hand, needs a denomination, a definition, needs to be displayed and seen. It doesn't have the luxury to just be, it doesn't fit the box. Our box man himself could be anyone (but it must be a stereotypical man, with a certain voyeuristic, male-gaz-y tendency at that).

The box looks so solid, but it's just made up. It's made of cardboard, vinyl, rubber, and some wire. This might be of consolation. It's an illusion we can traverse, at least speculatively, even when its presence has very real consequences.

We humans are proud of our intelligence, consciousness, ability to think, to invent and to create. So proud that we have put ourselves above everything else, claiming the hierarchical top of all that exists like emperors on our thrones, like gods in the sky. And we seem to believe we have that right, that all that exists is there to serve us. We think of ourselves as superior, above all other life, with some humans claiming to be more superior than other.

We cannot overcome our control-seeking brain. We want to control knowledge, science, the world, the cosmos. We just want to control each other, each other's minds and thoughts. When people interact, power dynamics set in, organic collaboration becomes more complex, hierarchies and institutionalization come into being, insider-outsider ethics are installed, narratives are created, indoctrination is the cohesive force.

Human desire and fantasy underpin dictatorship and mass movements.

Humans want control, and at the same time they want to be controlled. They want a strong leader to follow. Leaders help groups to live in harmony, to work, to die, to kill opponents, outsiders, or insiders who suddenly have become outsiders.

Leaders take and receive power in an endless process of exchange. Power is addictive, never enough, never enough. Dictatorship seems part of a natural tendency. Dictators can only exist if masses of people support them. Their power is built on fantasies, stories, narratives. Each dictator builds a grandiose history to justify their position, usually his position. Their historical narratives are linear, made up, telling a selection of heroic events and grand dictators before them with the outcome that they are the chosen one. They call themselves gods, chosen by the gods, chosen by mythological heroes from the past. A fantasized past must legitimate their hunger for power and war.

Mishaps and cruelty are filtered out of propaganda narratives; people are forced to forget.

Who gets to lead? Who must submit? The power of dictators builds on creating a 'we' that the masses can identify with, can be passionate about. 'We' are the chosen people, in contrast to the non-chosen. 'We' have an ancient history, in contrast to others. 'We' have a superior culture, in contrast to primitives. 'We' are pure, in contrast to others. 'We' can only exist by a demarcation of a 'they'. The creation of identity requires the construction of difference, based on hierarchy and superiority.

We build physical walls to install control. Walls within walls create areas of control. We build mental walls. The panopticon enabling real and perceived control has become the model to which we shape our societies. Surveillance cameras lock us up in safe spaces we cannot breathe in. The more safety control, the more anxiety; the more anxiety, the more safety control.

Absolute power means absolute loneliness. As power expands, anxiousness within the powerful grows, until they fear the simplest poem and minimalist artwork. The one on top disconnects from existential networks and interaction. He becomes alienated, surrounded by people he is alone, trusting no one. Rarely we see a 'she' at the top.

## Traversing the walls

The box is often a prison, and people and other beings constantly find the most creative ways to escape from it. On the website of Born Free Foundation US you can surf a database of all the incidents that happen in zoo and aquaria, selecting by species, State, and category (like Animal Death, Injury to animal by other animal or by human, and Escape/Attack resulting in human injury or death). Surfing around the database you can find a number of animals taking advantage of the distraction of their guardians or inadequacy of the facilities meant to keep them in. Sometimes the confines are imperfect and porous to the advantage of what is kept inside.

'Kansas City, MO – Parents in the Northland area remain on the lookout for a missing alligator. Kansas City Animal Control confirms the alligator got loose from a school event and is still unaccounted for. The 14-inch alligator vanished from a petting zoo at Lakeview Middle School on Thursday morning. Apparently, the school district didn't have a permit for the petting zoo, and the district might get a citation for that.'

Some events reveal to us that 'exotic' animals are kept in private homes, sometimes illegally. When they escape they become visible to outside world and take up a real presence they were made to evade the rest of the time.

'Surf City, NC – A pet spider monkey that ran away from home in North Carolina this week was safely captured and reunited with the owner. The Surf City Police Department posted an announcement earlier on Thursday asking members of the public to report any sightings of the loose monkey. A video shared by the police department on Facebook showed the monkey, who appeared to be wearing some type of onesie, climbing in the dead branches of a fallen tree before noticing the observers filming and scampering away.'

Escapes from zoos and private breeding facilities are quite frequent, and they often involve caretakers. The escapes are deemed newsworthy by the media either because of the dangerousness of the animals roaming around freely in inhabited areas or because of the cleverness of the escapees.

Wild animals, especially if they are not primates, cause a certain surprised amusement when they manage to escape. What is considered extraordinary is their wit, the unexpected ways in which they have learned to operate a tool or gate to make their escapade, not their apparent need to make it out of there. As we don't ask ourselves why the inmates of a prison tried to run away, we don't often wonder why animals might find it worth it to venture into the unknown outside.

Let's take a page from the book of exotic animals reclaiming their presence in the world, even if in a part of the world they don't belong to. They will be seen; they will see.

But squeezing oneself through the net is not the only way out. Ovid's "Metamorphoses" are staple the Western canon, telling stories of people turning into plants to escape violence, like Dafne turning into a laurel tree while felling from Apollo.

These transformations are common in contemporary literature as well, often motivated by the submissive condition of women to the men in their life.



Consequently, as their power increases, repression expands; seeds of countermovement are planted and start to grow. People do not forget their pain and suffering. Having been forced to forget, their mourning has been stored somewhere in their brain and heart and will erupt in due time, as soon as the pendulum swings into another direction and everything turns around.

### Colonization, Decolonization, Recolonization

Our territories never seem large enough. Humans want more, more territories, more control. Individuals and groups of people compete with one another. Always and everywhere.

Discovery often means seeing something that already exists and claiming it, using it, making it ours. Columbus discovered America. Humans discovered other planets. Through human discoveries we fly into space and push nature into new directions. Underneath it all lies our endless desire for control. What humans discover, they claim and use. They colonize.

Colonization is based on superiority and indoctrination. Catholicism and modernization were catalyst of European-Western colonization.

During the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant played a pivotal role in spreading racist ideas. His belief is that: "In hot regions, people mature earlier in every sense, but do not reach the perfection of the temperate zones. Humanity is in its greatest perfection in the race of whites. Yellow Indians have somewhat less talent. Negroes are far lower, and at the bottom lies a portion of the American peoples." (1) This sort of narrative influences the way we look at each other until this day. European colonization has impacted the world for five centuries. Catholicism has been the vehicle of Infiltration, killing, stealing, indoctrination under the guise of civilization.

Civilizations around the world have collapsed under its pressure. The traces of recklessness will be felt for a long time to come.

The 'history of science' often starts with ancient Greece. Developments and discoveries list Western men only: Thales, Democritus, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Copernicus, Faraday, Maxwell, Gauss, Darwin, Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, and so on. That the history of science is based on the insight of western minds only means westerners have dominated the narrative. They only see themselves and are not aware of the existence of other knowledge systems. The western mind claims all discoveries. What happens in the rest of the world is called 'ethnic', superstition, and belongs to the 'they' outside of the 'we'.

What we call 'universal' is rooted in western-centric discourse. European history talks about ancient rock art in Altamira and Lascaux. Rock art exists around the globe. Indonesia has rock art from 44.000 years ago. Sada Mire discovered impressive rock art in the horn of Africa. A decade of research written down in "Divine Fertility" provides a non-western story, a different history.

In Maru Ayase's "The forest brims over" Rui, the wife of a writer starts growing leaves and branches until she turns into a forest, occupying the bedroom, and finally brimming over into the terrain around the house. Even as a forest, she supplies unauthorized and sexualized inspiration for his husbands' writings as she used to when she was his passive, human life. At this point, being a forest is much more of a peaceful, self-actualized perspective than the one passively dedicated to her husband's artistic production.

Ayase sees this metamorphosis to comment on Japanese society, which she describes as 'a society that's unfair to women and from which men are unable to escape.' The forest is a luxuriant escape for Rui. But her husband is not any less captive, entrapped in a capitalist, profit-focused industry. They lie in a comfortable cushioned coffin.

In more than one of her works the Korean author Han Kang presents to us women longing for vegetal life. In one of her novellas, "The fruit of my woman", the protagonist find his wife turned into a woman-plant abandoned on their balcony. In her most famous novel, "The Vegetarian", the protagonist, whose life is incidentally always narrated through some else gaze, stops eating meats and gradually starves herself, yearning for the woods. About these examples and many similar others in her essay "Death by landscape", Elvia Wilk argues:

"The story of person-becoming-plant is not about reversal or reversion to some imagined natural state. Instead it provides a counterpoint to any quick-fix, back-to-the-land fantasy, which sees nature as distinct, permanent, unchanging, passive, authentic, and fundamentally good. The idea is not that nature will heal what ails these characters, that they will become natural "again." On the contrary, it's about seeing people as always already plant, plant as always already human, and those distinctions as always already weird.'

Escape is possible not because we have the cleverness, the tools, or the desperation necessary. It's possible because we are already part of the outside, as fluid, "natural" beings. As we know, the confines are fictional.

### Being outside

People that in some way or another are not confirmed to the Norm are usually vocally and implicitly reminded of it. During the colonial dominion of Belgium in the Congo human zoos were established; one of the most infamous took place in Tervuren in the framework of the International Exhibition held in Brussels in 1897. To entice the support of the colonial project Leopold II ordered to build a village that tried to replicate the real ones, to function as a replica of the 'habitat' of the people shown as animal in a zoo. 267 people were taken to Tervuren. Given the inadequate conditions they were forced in, and the lack of care given to them, 7 people lost their life and were consequently buried in 'unconsecrated ground, destined for adulterers and suicides'. Another revealing aspect of the treatment of people in human zoos is the fact that African and black women were often 'displayed' unclothed, in a way that would have been considered scandalous for white, European women. Their removal from humanity was interrelated to their exclusion from the gender they would have been otherwise been perceived as. When you are outside of the box you are outside in multiple ways, entangled and interrelated. Being outside is often not an all or nothing and being inside means ticking a lot of different boxes.

Countermovement to Western dominance has been going on for a long time.

In 1955 a large-scale Asia-Africa or Africa-Asia conference took place in Bandung, Indonesia. The countries with newly regained independence wanted to promote economic and cultural cooperation to oppose colonialism and neocolonialism; it planted the seeds for the Non-Aligned Movement against Western dominance.

In 1978 Edward Said argued in “Orientalism” how the image of the East, the Oriental, is based on a contemptuous depiction by the West. Hamid Dabashi building on Said’s work uses the ironic title, “Can Non-Europeans Think?”

In 1988, Indian scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks of ‘epistemic violence’ in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” criticizing how Western scholars depict non-Western cultures.

In 1992, Anthony Kwame Appiah describing rituals in Ghana in “In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture” criticizes the fake distinction between ritual and rational knowledge.

In 1998, Kishore Mahbubani rhetorically asked, “Can Asians think?”

The list is endless. Senegalese writer Felwine Sarr pleads for the repositioning of Africa in the world in “Afrotopia”. In South America Arturo Escobar promotes *sentipensar*, to combine the rational with the senses, and for Argentinian scholar Walter Mignolo modernity is the flipside of colonialism.

Mignolo promotes pluriversality:

‘Freeing ourselves from the classification bequeathed to us requires us to break with the “unipolar” idea of knowledge, which in decolonial vocabulary translates into Eurocentric epistemic universality. Decolonial horizons aim at epistemic pluriversality; or, if one wishes to maintain some kind of universality, one might refer to “pluriversality as a universal project,” which today is one of the ultimate decolonial horizons.’

The world is waking up and moving into new directions. The dominance of the West is in decay. Countercurrents are at work. Around the world reaction to western dominance is growing steadily, expanding and become stronger, eroding the power of the powerful. The turning point is coming. Like the collapse of an ancient tree slowly eaten by organisms, the collapse of western dominance will arrive.

Other powers are upcoming. New power. New tremendous power. New narratives. New competitions. New colonization. All over the world dictators have their own versions of a glorious past. They want to go back to the Great Empire, rejuvenate, correct the current situation and make their place Great Again. They build selective stories of superior identity that the masses of people are happy to believe in collective identity of superiority vis-à-vis others who do not belong.

Seeing how unhappy the husband of the wives that turned into plants seem to be, and how arid and violent the Norm ‘or ‘universal we’ seems to be, it’s worth asking if is a spot in the Western-white-Eurocentric-cis-heteronormative inside is aspirational for anyone who doesn’t have one.

According to Rolando Vázquez

‘...the postcolonial is an important strategy for opening up and pluralising the notion of modernity so that other histories can fit within it, such as saying that Indian history is also modern history. However, the decolonial does not seek to open the canon of modernity to be inclusive of other ‘modernities’ in that way. Instead, it wants to overcome the notion of modernity that is inseparable from coloniality. The decolonial posture is about going beyond the modern, beyond the contemporary, and not about claiming a place in it or diversifying it.’

Excluding can affect peoples in disastrous ways, and it’s acted with the most deviceful means, like for example language.

The dehumanization of people is of course based on the superiority attributed to human beings according to the scientific-Western knowledge. As of the writing of this piece it’s hard not to let your mind wonder to the Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant claim that Israel was fighting ‘human animals’, while referring to Palestinians.

This unacceptable attempt at dehumanization (and an appeal to the ungrievability of certain kinds of people, as Judith Butler argues) is far from the sole. There is a Wikipedia page entitled “Animal stereotypes of Palestinians in Israeli discourse” where not only the occasions in which Palestinians have been compared to generic animals are presented but also specific animals are listed, such as rats, moles, crocodiles, roaches, grasshoppers, and salmon. Palestinians are considered outside the Western system of knowledge-making, to the point of evading humanity according to imperialists-colonialists.

How do we go beyond the dichotomy between animals and the uniqueness of human animals that would disarm these claims?

## Being the border

The outside to the Western-white-Eurocentric-cis-heteronormative inside also contains all the unclassifiable entities that puzzle scientists by escaping the Linnaean system of taxonomy. In theory, the crux of the scientific method is doubt and the discovery of a new species that forces us to reshuffle all known categorizations should be welcomed. But in practice, for most of history, rogue specimens and beings were not welcomed as warmly as you would expect, mostly due to the influence of political and religious dogmas.

Maybe the most radical line to tether is the one between living and non-living, a balancing act of which viruses seem to be masters. A close second could be whatever fungi are doing, being impossible to decisively include either in animalia kingdom or in the plantae kingdom. So much so that some experts, namely the Fungi Foundation (Let’s Become Fungal!) have coined a new word to describe their own wildly populated kingdom: *funga*. And in all of life, where one organism dies million thrive. From an ecosystemic perspective death and life are entangled and complementary, yin and yang complementing each other.



High-level competition between global players results in the sprouting of other players with global ambitions, new competitions and rebalancing; there is no universe. We are moving into the multipolar, pluriversal.

Will there be a multipolar, pluriversal world? Or will once again one Middle Kingdom try to control it all? In ancient times, Egypt called itself the Middle Kingdom. So does China, the Chinese term zhongguo means the Country at the Center, the Middle Kingdom, not a Kingdom but since ancient times an Empire.

Today, capitalism is the catalyst of colonialism. Globalization is built on exploitation. Cheaper labor, cheaper resources, and the idea of who needs us feeds us. Economic collaboration is intertwined with geopolitical forces. Win-win it is called, but it means one area is winning power, the other is going into decay. It also means the rich becoming richer, the poor more miserable. The gap becoming rich and poor becoming deeper, on a global level.

A large, tremendously powerful current is coming from China in full speed. China, the Middle Kingdom in the East has been the powerhouse of economic production for decades. It has acquired harbors and strategic locations around the world. It has sent representatives of its ideological party to every corner of the globe, building influence, tracing dissidents. Many places have become economically dependent on it. Economic development comes with ideology.

Andy Mok argues that China has demonstrated that it is 'neutral', 'pragmatic', and 'non- ideological'. A Party with one all-powerful leader, with one billion members of which many have sworn loyalty, with its own truth can impossibly be considered 'non-ideological'.(2) 'Non-ideological' does not exist. Power always comes with ideological indoctrination, whether there is a god, like in the case of Catholicism in European colonization, or there is a god-like human being like in the case of China.

Racial and cultural supremacy is not a purely white issue. In her book *Black Ghosts*, Noo Saro-Wiwa highlights racism in China. She recounts the testimony of a Ghanaian cardiologist practicing medicine in China for ten years. He reflects on racism in the West and East: In the West 'It's like a gaping trauma. An open injury. You would attempt as a surgeon to try to put sutures and approximate the ends, so that you see a linear healing, but you still know there's scarring. What happens in the oriental space... it is a closed trauma, like a closed injury and there is nothing to suture... there's nowhere your needle should enter the skin, and the sutures will not need to hold anything. It's much more like lots of ants crawling on your skin. They don't bite you – they're just crawling everywhere. So that very discomfort kills you.'

The Chinese call themselves peaceful, but Han-Chinese have moved into Uyghur families to break them at the core, to change what they think, what they eat, their closest family relations. The Han-Chinese infiltrators come to civilize, impose their own ideology. They call themselves peaceful, claim titles like 'sisters' and 'brothers' of the families they infiltrate.

Whale carcasses at the bottom of the oceans and dead sequoias in the middle of a forest are some of the most fertile environments on Earth, ghosts brimming with life. Fungi, algae, molds, and bacteria, in infallible synergy, start consuming and transforming their corpses to make them into food for other animals and plants. Wherever entropy increases in the universe, new life comes forth.

And when life wasn't yet present, at the beginning of the universe, even the atoms started aggregating thanks to their chaotic movement. Rocks are cold and static in our perception of time and movement, but life is also such at times. And rocks themselves are fluid and constantly in motion: but this notion is not a completely new discovery.

In *The Death of Nature* Carolyn Merchant mentions some of the ancient alchemic beliefs around the genealogy of rocks.

'In the liquid seed theory, the earth was a matrix or mother to the seeds of stones and minerals. The seeds of minerals and metals fermented water, transforming it into a mineral juice and then into the metal itself. Stones were generated from their own seminal principles or seeds, thereby preserving their species. Suitable nooks and crannies within the earth formed matrices or wombs for the nurturing and development of the infant seed. Neither the air nor the bodies of plants and animals were suitable mothers; only the rocks on the edges of ore veins, and special crannies in the earth's crust could act as matrices. Jerome Cardan (1550) and Bernard Palissy (1580) believed that metals reproduced by liquid seeds deposited by water; others set forth the thesis that mineral juices were formed into metals by degrees, expanding and taking on new matter until they grew into visible metals.'

As inaccurate as these theories appear to us now, they let us speculate about a beautifully complex conflation of living and non-living, of agency and chance alternating, of inorganic gestation. There seems to be a diffused awareness of the fact that static objects must also come and live in the same bubbling body of water that surrounds and makes us. In the case of Renaissance's philosophy wasn't adamant in establishing the differences between animals and inorganic matter

'due not only to the vitalistic framework of the period but to striking similarities between them. Like plants and animals, minerals and gems were filled with small pores, tublets, cavities, and streaks, through which they seemed to nourish themselves.'

They present like fruits of a convergent evolution across kingdoms. Entropy is life, chaos is fruitful, life is an unusual condition of order, and unbound movement is often a generative force in nature as it is in society.

The borders that keep beings physically or theoretically separated appear once again as illusory figments.

Before it ever seemed possible to completely dismantle these confines people and other beings have been dealing with them in surprising manners.

Children are taken away from their families and put into institutes to be reeducated, to be civilized. Xinjiang was not always part of China. Tibet was not always part of China. Taiwan was not always part of China. Sovereignty was not always linked to clearly defined nation states. Vietnam, Japan, Korea have been under Chinese influence long ago.

Expanding power is always based on ideological narratives of superiority. Propaganda and narratives are the basis of war and conflict and of tremendous power. Colonizing tactics are the same everywhere, kill or brainwash.

Now that the Middle Kingdom under the leadership or dictatorship of Xi Jinping is closing off after a period of relative openness introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 and is building new virtual walls around itself, money and production start to move to other regions. As a result, India and China rivalry is growing. China and Russia claim to be friends. Underneath the surface, tremendous competition awaits surfacing. One of them will become stronger, the other is in decay. Money flowing in, money flowing out. Power building up, power in decline. The collapse of one sort of balance gives way to another.

Ideological narratives of superiority and propaganda are the basis of war and conflict. Power comes and goes, is given or taken. The forces of nature, of growth and decay, underpin the dynamics of power like everything else.

### **Production, exploitation and the dynamics of power**

Economically, we speak in terms of growth and development. Our mind sees development; we are blind for the destructive consequences of our actions. Too much plastic all over, there is enough clothing for six generations to come, but we want more, and cheap, so we can buy even more. Money is addictive, never enough, never enough, never enough. Material stuff is addictive, never enough, never enough, never enough.

We cannot create things from nothing. To create things we need resources, minerals, and humans. We discover resources, name them, claim them, control minerals and rare earth elements because of their chemical or magnetic properties. We use them for electronic components, magnetic materials, semiconductors, industrial applications.

To obtain growth, we need workforce, cheap labor, exploitation, slavery. Humans become resources, 'Humineral'. Humans are in the exploitative rat race of 'people mining'. Fellow humans are being mined and abused; they live their life in service of others promoting growth.

Creation and destruction go hand in hand. Our greed is the source of exploitation. In our hands, exploitation of the planet and its rich diversity contaminates planet earth and other planets and galaxies. We all have our share and responsibility; each time we buy something we touch an object that is made from something by someone. Immediate, short-term satisfaction for some is based on extensive long-term slavery of others.

'Funga' and other lifeforms present hybrid characteristics, evading our scientific order, some animals physically evade captivity, and some people cross borders in every way, infringing on fictional and concrete bounds.

Smuggling in all of its forms is one of them. The art of smuggling is more than a defiance of laws: it can be a way of conceiving of the world and of shaping it. At the core of the technique there is concealing, obscuring. What is not seen does not exist and cannot be intercepted, so it can cross borders undisturbed.

Smuggling is effective because it exists within and not in conflict with the system enforcing the borders. It functions through the concealment of intentions, "through the embodying of a state of precariousness which is characteristic of many facets of our current lives." Smuggling comes natural to borderless beings in a constant state of surveillance.

Seeing and being seen, monitoring, observing, being shaped and named by a specific gaze are again the central mechanisms that dictate the existence and identity of beings. Gestation (even the alchemic one happening in rocks and metals) is also a concealed process, a 'bringing forth' that happens away from our eyes. Is gestation then a form of smuggling?

Alexis Pauline Gumbs describes a peculiar case in her book "Undrowned. Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals."

In 1971 a hybrid baby dolphin, with characteristics in between two different dolphin families, was born in captivity in Sea Life Park in Hawaii. The animal died at only four years of age with no explanation given by the staff of the facility. Hybrid animals that are not very common or at least detectable by us in nature happen to be gestated and born in aquariums.

The birth of such a specimen is treated like quite a feat and publicized to the public as an attraction. All eyes on the novelty of the month. In this case though, something must have gone horribly wrong: since no trace of the cause of death was disclosed all we can do is imagine and speculate. That individual hybrid was invisible in many ways, even in the spectacular nature of his detention in an aquarium made to attract the masses: it was invisible in its categorization, in its gestation, and finally in the concealment of his death.

It evaded all borders in every step of his documentation by people, of their useless stare: an instance of smuggling. Alexis Pauline Gumbs finds cases like this and relates them to human affairs and sorrows, learning from marine mammals how to mourn and how to survive in controlling, hostile environments. That's possible because empathy is not born from the absence of a border but from the acknowledgment and acceptance of it. Gestating bodies (in every sense, even in the holding that is always part of kin-making) are membranes, permeable as sites of interaction and mutual affect (as beautifully advocated by Astrida Neimanis).

Our skin, organs, and the membranes that surrounds our cells are not barriers: they are channels to connect, they are permeable and generous. We are the border, but we don't keep out, we are the box, but we won't keep in.



The whole world seems to strive for growth, rapid growth, endless growth. Areas compete with one another for more and faster growth. Who grows fastest, gains power, and as soon as that happens the addiction sets in. Who grows fast needs resources, so they occupy and buy land, chasing away whoever lived on it. Planet Earth is seen as an endless source for material, to be exploited, to be used, for growth, for production of what we often do not need.

Nothing can grow forever. What grows endlessly becomes too large and is bound to implode. The dynamics of coming and going, pulling and pushing, building and destructing is a simple logic of nature. What becomes too strong must collapse. The flipside of globalization starts to show. The limits of capitalism have been reached.

## 2. Out of the box anything is possible

### Reality is not what it seems

Categories and institutions are human made. They are built on stories, narratives and fantasies, ideologies, power structures. Time concepts, linear, cyclical, holistic, the way we organize space around us, based on egalitarian or hierarchical dynamics is rooted in human patterns and interests. Linear historical narratives tell us that the current version of the human being is 'developed', 'civilized', in contrast to the 'primitives' of the past.

Alternative non-linear historical narratives tell us that humans in what we call the past were the same as us today, with civilizations, societies, in some cases better versions than what we know today. Quantum theory tells us that things are not how we perceive them. Everything around us is constantly moving, and all things are interrelated. Everything changes and moves in interaction with one another.

Carlo Rovelli explains:

'The world is a sequence of granular quantum events ... An electron, a quantum of a field or a photon does not follow a trajectory in space but appears in a given place and at a given time when colliding with something else. When and where will it appear? There is no way of knowing with certainty ... Due to this indeterminacy, in the world described in quantum mechanics, things are constantly subject to random change. All the variables 'fluctuate' continually, as if, at the smallest scale, everything is constantly vibrating. We do not see these omnipresent fluctuations only because of their small scale; they cannot be observed at a large scale, as when we observe macroscopic bodies.

If we look at a stone, it stays still. But if we could see its atoms, we would observe them constantly spread here and there, and in ceaseless vibration. Quantum mechanics reveals to us that, the more we look at the detail of the world, the less constant it is. The world is not made up of tiny pebbles. It is a world of vibrations, a continuous fluctuation, a microscopic swarming of fleeting micro-events.'

Nature tells us how things really work, entangled, intertwined, relational. We tend to think about death as the end of life; it is the beginning of new life. That is what Yasmine Ostendorf-Rodriguez recognizes in how fungi behave; it is also how holistic cosmic viewpoints look at life and death. Taoist Zhuangzi sees death and life as different stages of the same.

## Finally, melting

To find farther inspiration, let us go back to the long tradition of animals escaping captivity, and concentrate on a particular but somewhat frequent case: animals taking advantage of extreme weather conditions to exit their enclosures.

To name two examples, the polar bear and two seals that escaped their enclosure due to the heavy rains flooding the Lake Superior Zoo in 2012 and Sally the sea lion who took a swim around the Central Park Zoo carried by water during a storm in September 2023.

In these instances, to which climate change is contributing, the confines melt, becoming a liquid medium. It's quite inevitable at this point that the erosion of the coastlines and increasing sea levels will gradually affect all beings and systems, from the ones inhabiting coastal regions all the way to the most remote inner areas.

We can learn from animals in captivity and their strategies of clever exploitation of adverse situations: we'll all have to get better at them. Emergent strategies like the ones collected and propagated by Adrienne Maree Brown in her book "Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds" represent the way through the precarious ecosystem people (and other beings) on the borders are navigating.

In a constantly changing world, accompanying the flux might be the only coping mechanism realistically at your disposal. In liquid times borders ought to be liquid, in a constant state of change. The coastline is such border. Astrida Neimanis describes the coastline (as she would a membrane or any other body of water) as a "zone of relationality".

Neimanis:

'The coast is only a 'line' if you pull the aperture out; in this way, you artificially fix it as a 'line'. The line is a snapshot that extracts the coast from the flow of time where it cannot be weathered or eroded. But in a thickness of time, the line is actually a blur. The line is a zone in which things happen. Passage, transition, becoming, transmogrification: these are the labours of the coastal zone.'

When twigs and branches and shoots start to grow from our body, that means it is transforming into something else. The dead body is a different format, a different stage. We are part of an ever-changing organic flux in which we are born and to which we return. All life, including what humans call non-life like stones and rocks and sand and shells, is in constant movement. No human being can control this transitional flow.

Cells and atoms incessantly interact with their surroundings. Humans, animals, trees, plants, insects, water, mountains, the stars, the moon, the planets, the milky way, the black holes in the universe are all made from the same building blocks and fluctuate, vibrate, swing, flutter, rush, wind, twirl, ripple. Degeneration, regeneration, new life, new decay, other life, more decay. The shape waves leave on the beach when the water retreats are like the contours a breeze leaves in a summer corn field, and the patterns the wind leaves in the sand after a desert storm, and as the waves we hear. All things are subject to continuity in transformation. It is ongoing in time and space, in simultaneity, everything happening at the same time in the same space because time and space are no more than human categories. Endless centers and peripheries interact with centers moving into peripheries and peripheries moving towards a center. Cycles enter cycles, waves alter into waves.

In this ongoing flux all kinds of knowledges and ritual and scientific and energetic realms co-exist. Different shapes take place simultaneously. Elements dissolve and blend in endless stirring. Without restraint things come and go, are born and die, decay feeds new life. Endless flux and locomotion. That is where we find ourselves as human beings, interacting with ten thousand things around us. We cannot retreat. We cannot control. We cannot alter the state of things; we are part of it. Looking at human life and our actions in this way has a different dynamic. In studying how power works, we see the same dynamics of interaction, control, submission, life, death.

### **Reconnecting into the Interconnection**

We cannot escape the endless flux, but we can make choices. We can relearn to use our senses, relearn to establish interconnections with other people, with animals and plants and with the world around us. Reality is relational. Our brain is capable of so much more than how we use it.

In the interaction between peoples there is not only power and exploitation. There is also inspiration. We learn from each other. We can passionately inspire each other. Art and creation are a continuous process of exchange of possibilities and out of the box interactions.

Creation is the drive that pushes us forward. There is no hierarchy in art or philosophy. Curiosity and creativity are a drive of life, everywhere. Away from the doom and gloom of power dynamics and control, there is the bright world of creation, of art, of inspiration and passion, of innovation. We are capable of so much more if we learn to use our senses again, if we are aware of the endless possibilities around us, our interconnection with all things and with each other. Creation helps us to find a place in the chaos surrounding us. To think out of the box, is the deepest pleasure in our existence. Out of the box, anything is possible.

Like animals that use floods as escape routes, people who need survival strategies in the current climate will have to go with the flow and adapt as best they can. Which does not mean meekly accepting your fate. On the contrary, being vocal and present are the survival strategies for this climate crisis.

Let us learn from 'funga', slime molds, bacteria... and appreciate their invaluable efficiency in decomposing and liquifying, blurring all distinctions in a prolific, yeasty, moldy, bubbling soup.

Let us stay in this uncertainty, in this state of becoming, where we are both inside and outside, both border and beyond.

Let us be the portal that becomes a road, the membrane that gestates new worlds, the flux that defies all categorization. In this space, we are not just crossing boundaries—we are dissolving them.



## Notes

1. Kant Immanuel, *Physische Geographie*, Gottbrief Volmer, Mainz 1801-5, Quoted in Mignolo, 2011, p. 199
2. Aljazeera, Inside Story, Asia's top security summit is under way in Singapore, 31 May 2024 <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/inside-story/2024/5/31/asias-top-security-summit-is-underway-in-singapore>

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