

Creaturely Migrations on a Breathing Planet

by David Abram (for the conference: Animals in the Anthropocene)

Abstract:

Sandhill cranes vibrating the sky with their bugling as they drop toward a tiny patch of peat bog in the broad tundra, monarch butterflies fluttering north toward specific clumps of milkweed that only their great-grandchildren will reach, ocean-going salmon dreaming their way back through gradients of scent and dappled sunlight into the same river, then into the same tributary, and from there into the same small stream where they were hatched years earlier – like other migratory species, all of these animals appear to avail themselves of somatic skills far beyond our bodily ken. The only way contemporary science seems able to fathom their uncanny navigational powers is by likening the abilities of these animals to technologies of our own, human invention. We are told, over and over again, that these migratory creatures make use of internal maps and internal compasses, of innate calendars and inborn clocks. Yet clocks, compasses, and calendars are by definition *external* contrivances, ingeniously built tools that we deploy at will. Metaphorically attributing such instrumentation to other animals has confounding implications, suggesting a curious *doubleness* in the other creature – a separated sentience or self that regularly steps back, within its body or brain, to consult the map or the calendar.

It seems unlikely, however, that organisms interact with an internal representation of the land in any manner resembling our human engagement with maps, calendars, or clocks. Our reliance upon such instrumental metaphors seems to stem from the modern assumption of a neat distinction between living organisms and the non-living terrain that they inhabit, an unambiguous divide between animate life and the ostensibly inanimate planet on which life happens to locate itself. This presentation will propose a fresh way of think about the dynamics of animal migration, one which suggests new solutions to the puzzle of how such varied creatures accomplish their remarkable navigational feats, and sheds new light on our own animal relation to the animate earth.