

S

Straysⁱ

Jack Kirneⁱⁱ

The stray¹ is an enduring figure through the environmental humanities and beyond. The stray goes by many names: the outsider, the maligned, the disenfranchised, the ungoverned or the ungovernable. They are those figures who are in some way unhomed, physically, psychically, or both—and inhabit a peculiar position in the 21st century. As Barbara Creed has insisted, in a time of escalating crisis, it is the stray who will be the first to suffer under the already existing nationalistic border policies, far-right ecofascist rhetoric, retreating social services and new surveillance technologies.² But conversely, strays, precisely because of their peculiar relationship with dominant systems; constituted both diametrically—because they are apart—but also in excess—because their behaviour cannot be entirely co-opted or tolerated—remind us that systems have boundaries that are neither natural nor inevitable in ongoing ways.

Where hegemonic structures compel most subjects to move through their lives as a freeway channels cars in singular, predictable directions (education, employment, marriage, reproduction, death), strays diverge in manners that might frustrate or confuse. This straying may be willing, or unwilling; either way, it will formulate a critique of the dominant mode. Contributing to Walter Benjamin's history of the flâneur,³ Ross Chambers has argued that to diverge suggests that the previous route "must have been in some sense inadequate or one would not have moved away from it."⁴ This straying, importantly, does not necessitate movement, as Ross insists, loitering, can pose and enable unpredictable meetings. Of course, there are different questions of justice raised by a stray that willingly becomes unhomed and those that are forced into homelessness. The flâneur who is an urban creature, not to mention a typically wealthy one, is defined by their idleness, and thus gives rise to a different imaginary to the refugee whose status is determined by their being in transit. Simply put, strays are diverse. Their identities and political subjectivities should not be flattened out; the specific nature of their straying will in turn structure the specific challenge they might pose to the dominant norm.

To loiter, to waste time, to stray from the path and to become an outsider is productive, as it enables strays to "look from below," as Jack Halberstam proposed.⁵ To fail and endure enables a subject to perceive a system's limits, Halberstam argues, because in failing, the subject comes to view the very mechanisms and limitations of systems from a non-positivist viewpoint. Put simply, the strays who have been ejected and survived, know an alternative is possible. Just as the queer subject might be understood as being able to acknowledge the

¹ Creed, *Strays: Human-Animal Ethics*.

² *Ibid*, 7.

³ Benjamin, *Reflections*.

⁴ Chambers, *Loiterature*, 15.

⁵ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 11.

policing and limiting factors of the nuclear family because they have been excluded from it; the stray unhomed by rising sea levels might be able to acknowledge the catastrophe of contemporary fossil-capital because they are not profiting from it. In failing, strays posit lives that denaturalise systems by posing an externality, whilst also forming subjectivities that counter capitalist positivism by revealing its underbelly.

To look from the underside of these shadow places⁶ —the tips, the treatment plants, the wreckage of mines, the coral reefs, the cleared forests the refugee camps, the prisons—is to see from the gathering darkness invisible from the centre. This may seem abstract, but think of it this way: you might not consider where your shit goes, but those at the treatment plant, analysing it for toxic concentrations such as arsenic ingested from grains in our diet, do. Shadow places, in which the wreckage of ecological catastrophe becomes evident, may provide generative sites for further considering the geoengineering of the Earth by thinking about which places should be preserved at the expense of others.

Shadow places are replete with strays. They haunt those zones we try to make invisible; they insist on the existence of those shadow places by not letting them be. In other words, they make trouble—to borrow a Haraway-ism.⁷ In moving away from civilisation, strays find vibrant company amid the non-human or more-than-human. It is maybe unsurprising that traditional narratives are replete with figures straying from paths and into unfamiliar relations; for instance, the woman who strays from the path to associate with a talking wolf, throwing respectable, familiar structures into chaos. I am being cheeky in this example, but what I suggest is that strays, in diverging, turn their attention away from the rational and risk encountering those things beyond the narrow realities of contemporary discourse. They open themselves to meeting what Haraway describes as the ‘chthonic ones’:

beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute ... they have no truck with ideologies; they belong to no-one; they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth.⁸

Encounters with these chthonic ones are replete in stray parables: Jonah cast from a ship for his disbelief is devoured by a leviathan⁹; Saint Mary of Egypt, after her death in the desert, is buried and laid to rest by a peaceful lion¹⁰; the Kraken meets the sailor in the wild unknown of the ocean.¹¹ To this day, there are persistent sightings of ghosts, trolls, giant dogs and cats—those entities that erupt from the environment as apparitions. As Jonathan Woolley has argued in his work on Norfolk’s Shuck—a giant shaggy dog with enormous eyes said to bring death to any that meets it—these creatures, more than being mere apparitions to exhausted minds or sightings of escaped zoo animals— represent the entanglements of lived histories, narratives and the geographies that evoke them.¹² Straying into the unknown (the alley, the marshland, the desert, the abandoned warehouse) can draw us into tangled worlds of the non- and more-than-human.

Put simply, shadow places can obscure and protect strays, but conversely, strays can also make shadow places visible. By working with dominant systems, but necessarily in them, strays might draw attention to those zones of waste wealthy consumers might wish to ignore.

⁶ Plumwood, “Shadow Places.”

⁷ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

⁹ Jon. 1:17 New International Version

¹⁰ Creed, *Strays: Human-Animal Ethics*, 38-41.

¹¹ Grann, “The Squid Hunter.”

¹² Woolley, “Hounded Out of Time.”

For instance, the stray who survives on the perfectly edible food deposited into a supermarket dumpster, draws attention to the ongoing perpetuity and profits generated by a high-waste food economy. This is not to suggest that strays need solely operate in the margins: the stray might work at once with and outside the dominant system. For instance, they might use the rights of the citizen—passports, healthcare, community housing, youth allowance—but in manners that may work to confuse or jam the State’s desires. Strays might be Jekyll-and-Hydes; men living respectable lives with wives and 2.5 children by day and cruising the park for dick at night.

As this may suggest, part of the stray’s power is to phase between legible and illegible subjectivity—they are queer in the deepest sense. They can benefit from systems, or experience the multiple discriminations dealt by them; strays must be encountered intersectionally. A white, Western, middle-class man unhomed by climate change is not a stray in the same way a Pacific Islander or a person of low socioeconomic status in Australia might be. They do not belong to predictable political positions or exist as activist figures. They might find themselves drawn to vote for a fascist political party, even after being estranged from politics their whole lives. Alternatively, they may be imprisoned for shutting down a major city for protesting live export.

All this is to say that what the stray is, what they do and what makes up their status as stray is diverse. Their subjectivities are not always to be celebrated, but can often be instructive of other modes of being.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Peter Demetz. 1st ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- Chambers, Ross. *Loiterature*. Neb: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.
- Creed, Barbara. *Stray: Human-Animal Ethics in the Anthropocene*. Sydney: Power Publications, 2017.
- Grann, David. “The Squid Hunter.” *New Yorker*, May 24, 2004. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/24/the-squid-hunter>.
- Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- . *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Holy Bible (New International Version), Biblica. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jonah+1&version=NIV>.
- Plumwood, Val. “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling.” *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (2008). <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-March-2008/plumwood.html>.
- Woolley, Jonathan. “Hounded Out of Time: Black Shuck’s Lesson in the Anthropocene.” *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2018): 295–309.

© 2020 Jack Kirne

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



ⁱ Kirne, Jack. “Strays.” *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).
<https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

ⁱⁱ Jack Kirne is a casual academic in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia <jackkirne@gmail.com>