

On slow reading and slow violence: slow reading to recognise and address violence done to nature

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Abstract

Could reading about nature in a different way aid us in recognising and addressing the damage humans are doing to it? In this paper, I argue that Michelle Boulous Walker's theory of slow reading can help us recognise and address climate change, radiological violence, deforestation, and other slow violences done to nature. Reading slowly, and taking one's time to dwell is an open, understanding, and embodied concept, one that values returning, again and again, to uncover anew the wisdom that lies within a text. Slow violence, conceptualised by Rob Nixon, is a pervasive and seemingly uneventful violence, where its effects are temporally and spatially removed from its cause. With slowness being a common factor between these concepts, I argue that one must first slow down to recognise slow violence. I will defend this view by discussing three aspects of slow reading and analysing how those three aspects connect to slow violence and aid in recognising and addressing slow violence. These three aspects of slow reading are openness, understanding, and embodiment. Through these aspects, slow reading not only aids in recognising slow violence, but it also aids in holding space for the other, therefore holding a twofold approach; both recognising and addressing slow violence.

About the author

Robin Bruce (she/her) is currently studying for her Master of Arts degree in Philosophy focusing on feminist and aesthetic philosophy. Her research focuses on the way that feminist depictions of body horror and monstrous feminine identities are disruptive to patriarchal narratives about women and therefore have the potential to be liberating to women. Her interests lie firmly rooted in continental philosophies, aesthetics, and the liberation of marginalised communities. Robin's hobbies mostly revolve around relaxing activities such as art, crocheting, reading, and sewing.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will be exploring slow reading as a slow, understanding, embodied, and open process that can help recognise and address slow violence done to nature. Slow reading is a theory introduced by Michelle Boulous Walker in her book, *Slow Philosophy: Reading against the Institution* (2017). Her book focuses on feminist writers and their connection to slowness and transformation through their rereading of classic philosophical texts. Slow violence, as Rob Nixon discusses it, is violence that is temporally and spatially removed from its effects. Slow violence is climate change, displacement, and deforestation, to name a few. To combat slow violence, we need a slow approach which is the opposite of the instrumentalised, speed-and-efficiency-obsessed one that placed us in this ecological predicament. Slow reading is in favour of taking a slow, understanding, embodied, and open approach leading me to the conclusion that by changing the way we read and experience nature there can be an opportunity to recognise slow violence done to nature. My findings imply that a more open, understanding, and embodied approach that works with nature instead of exploiting nature is the way forward.

I first discuss slow violence as conceptualised by Rob Nixon. This discussion will take place in the section titled “Slow Violence” where I will systematically lay out what slow violence entails as well as why it is difficult to recognise and address. I will then move on to discuss the aspects of slow reading that I believe will most aid in the recognition of slow violence. This discussion will take place in the section titled “Slow Reading and Slow Violence”. Additionally, I discuss how Aldo Leopold’s writing in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) is an example of a slow reading of nature. Slow reading in this paper extends past the traditional sense of reading; reading expands to observation and experience, therefore going beyond reading as only connected to literature.

2. Slow violence

There has been a slow but steady progression in the destruction of nature. A violence is being done that is unnoticed by many and is not even believed by others. Stretching from climate change to chemical and radiational violence, it is insidious and stretched out over time and space, resulting in its inability to be recognised and addressed by our technologically adjusted attention spans (Nixon, 2011:6). Rob Nixon calls this “slow violence”, which is a “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2011:2). Slow violence is so temporally and spatially removed from its effects that it is not recognised as violence.

Slow violence is overshadowed by a more spectacular kind of violence. Violence is usually categorised as a catastrophic event, one which can be sensationalised and broadcast. As stated by Nixon, violence, “is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (2011:2). This spectacular violence is the normative concept of violence that is broadcasted by media outlets, commodifying these acts of violence for monetary gain, inevitably using it as a means to some end.

Within the inability to commodify slow violence lies the difficulty with its recognition: its spatial and temporal removal from its effects gives the media the inability to sensationalise it. This slow violence, therefore, is not able to be recognised or addressed in the ways that spectacular violence is. Nixon draws attention to this kind of slow violence, “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2011:2). Moreover, instrumental reasoning, the belief that nature and humans are there to be used, and the rise of the technological age is one of the reasons for the beliefs we have about violence. Our

shortened attention spans and inability to think of others have led to the inability to pay attention long enough to others to recognise the slow violence being done to the environment.

Slow violence has the ability to hide, appearing invisible to the arrogant and inattentive eye which accompanies instrumental reasoning. The inwardly driven nature of slow violence can be seen in chemical and radiological violence done to human, animal, and plant bodies (Nixon, 2011:6). Nixon asserts this nature by stating that:

In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie theaters and boost ratings on TV. Chemical and radiological violence, for example, is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation (2011:6).

Here, embodiment and time are factors that need to be considered. Slow violence is “somatized into cells”, causing an embodied suffering that is stretched out over time. The recognition of this slow violence is dependent on our ability to consider the body and its changes over time. The effects of this slow violence can be recognised if there were more attention given, attention that is exclusively being given to spectacular violence.

The attention given to spectacular violence, however, is still fostering a separation between the self and catastrophic events happening. There is a separation between the viewer and the event because there is merely an observation of the event and no embodied experience to accompany it. Within the Western world there is a hierarchy of senses, “a hierarchy that works to position sight alongside the noblest activity of the mind” (Boulous Walker, 2017:104). Michelle Boulous Walker speaks about the hierarchy of the senses. She states that “the ‘wandering glance of attention’ is able to hold numerous things at once in order to relate and compare them. In the process, it remains detached and distanced from the things it surveys” (ibid.:105). In so doing, sight can be fast-moving, taking many things

in at once while the mind sifts through the most important parts (ibid.).

Following this observation, the connection between sight and instrumental reasoning (the belief that things and others are there to be used by the individual) becomes evident. There is not only a picking of which information is the most important but also a separation between the subject and the thing being observed. There is no true embodied experience taking place, but merely a detachment, such as the viewing of spectacular violence. Slow violence on the other hand cannot be viewed in this way, it needs to be experienced to be recognised. One needs to experience the change in weather patterns year after year which is becoming more and more difficult (Renouf, 2021:3). Nevertheless, there is an embodied experience of slow violence that cannot merely be observed; it needs to be recognised through embodiment, beyond sight.

We do not experience nature in an embodied way anymore. The way we think about nature is as separate from us, not something we are in relation with. Jaquelyn Cock holds that for most people “nature” holds a connotation to wilderness, it is associated with the wild and experienced indirectly (2007:1). Therefore, ecological problems, such as climate change, are hardly recognised. Renouf states that we lack a climate “baseline” because most of the world’s population lives in urbanised environments (2021:3). Nature is seen as separate from us, a place we can visit and return from, a place where even when we interact with it, we protect ourselves with sunblock and mosquito repellent (Cock, 2007:1). The problem of this comes in when we see ourselves as separate and therefore superior to or transcending nature and allowed to use nature as we please without thought of the consequences of our actions on nature. There needs to be consideration of our relation to nature.

Nonetheless, even when we think of nature as separate from us it is not something we can completely remove ourselves from. As Cock states, “we live in nature and interact with it every day in the food we eat, the water

we drink and the air we breathe” (2007:1). Nature in this way is understood as that which is naturally occurring outside of the human subject, the elements, plants, and animals. The human connection to nature is not something we can sever. There is an embodied connection to nature through the nourishment we receive from it. Nature keeps the human body alive, without food and water there would be no embodiment (Cock, 2007:1). Even when we believe ourselves alienated from it or superior to it, nature is still needed. Through the merely instrumental mindset, however, it is impossible to consider ourselves within a reciprocal relationship with nature.

In separating ourselves from nature the economic subject (that subject who benefits from using nature as merely a resource) becomes incapable of recognising and addressing slow violence. There is an inability to address slow violence through the normative use of video media. There is a temporal disconnect between the fast-paced visual media and the slow, invisible, complex, and embodied violence. Nixon states that “casualties from slow violence are, moreover, out of sync not only with our narrative and media expectations but also with the swift seasons of electoral change” (2011: 9). How can we then recognise and address slow violence within our sensationalised media age?

Slow violence needs a different medium and narrative structure in which it can be recognised, a slower narrative that is temporally closer to slow violence itself. Instrumental reasoning is also still creating a separation between the self and nature, resulting in the inability to truly recognise the other as having intrinsic worth. Therefore, in order to not only find a correct medium to recognise and address slow violence but also be able to consider others as more than resources, there is a need for a different method with which we can read.

3. Slow reading and slow violence

I, therefore, assert the view that Michelle Boulous Walker’s slow reading as a slow, understanding,

embodied, and open approach provides a better method with which we can recognise and address slow violence done to nature. Nixon (2011:15) asks, “how do we both make slow violence visible yet also challenge the privileging of the visible?”. Slow reading does just that. In this section, I will first outline the more obvious ability that slow reading has to recognise and address slow violence. Slowing down allows us to see more, to sit with and dwell within the problems of the world. With slowing down also comes a more deliberate action, one which has been evaluated as the most effective and far-reaching (Brozyna, Guilfoos & Atlas, 2018:10).

Michelle Boulous Walker refers to Heidegger’s thoughts on being and dwelling within the world as a philosophical method that slow reading emulates. Boulous Walker discusses Heidegger extensively, incorporating him for his discussion of technology and being, within his seminal work, *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays*. Heidegger makes the connection between instrumental reasoning (the belief that nature and others are merely resources to be used) and technology. Botha writes that for Heidegger, “being is an unconcealedness or disclosiveness” (2013:158). Being for Heidegger, and as Boulous Walker sees it, is an openness to be influenced. Therefore, slow reading is an openness and a making known of previously unknown knowledge. Michelle Boulous Walker states that Heidegger “acknowledges that good art and good philosophy urges us to stop, to reconsider, to rethink everything we think we know” (2017:9). Therefore, Heidegger’s being and dwelling is to take one’s time, to slow down and be open to that inspiration or understanding that might come to you. Following this, slow reading possesses three components that can explicitly be connected to the recognition of slow violence. These three components are slowness, understanding, and openness.

Slow reading is firstly an intentional slowing down; it is temporally closer to slow violence than it is to sensationalised violence. Nixon asserted that slower

narratives, such as those in writing, are temporally closer to slow violence and therefore help to recognise slow violence (2011:15). Nixon states that “violence, above all environmental violence, needs to be seen – and deeply considered – as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labour, or resources, but also over time” (2011:8). There is a need for the recognition that slow violence is a contest over time and attention.

Boulos Walker recognised this contest and aimed to address it with slow reading. She aimed to change the temporal nature of how we interact with reading and information, aiming to fix our attention spans to more fully grasp and sit with complex ideas. Instrumental reasoning has broken our attention spans, constantly interrupted our thoughts, and resulted in meaningless and sporadic efforts to fix ecological problems. Our inability to recognise slow violence is in part because of our degrading attention spans. Nixon states that “it becomes doubly difficult yet increasingly urgent that we focus on the toll exacted, over time, by the slow violence of ecological degradation” (2011:13). Slow reading answers this call for recognition by trying to correct attention spans through taking up the practice of slow reading. Boulos Walker advocates for giving our full attention to reading and returning, again and again, to be newly acquainted with its complexity and nuance (2017:xv). She encourages a reciprocal relationship between the self and others, allowing the reading of others to change the self.

Along with this reciprocal relationship also comes attention. If we only paid enough attention to others and dwelled for a while, there would be an understanding that makes the seemingly invisible, visible. This brings me to the second connection that slow violence necessitates slow reading. By dwelling in a text, making yourself comfortable with the content of the text, and coming to a deeper understanding, you are able to see more clearly what might be invisible to others who merely speed through the text. There is a “disclosiveness” to the text (Botha, 2013:158). One uncovers that which was hidden. Through this

uncovering, that which was once hidden is now made clear.

This brings me to the third connection to recognising slow violence: slow reading and dwelling are to be open to what is found. As stated before, slow reading is not only about dwelling through the text but also about returning. Returning to a text helps one to take one’s time to fully internalise information in order to fully understand (Boulos Walker, 2017:9). Through a returning to and a rethinking, a slowing down to contemplate the information we have just received, we experience more of someone else’s existence, someone else’s thinking process, and beliefs. Slow reading as a returning teaches empathy and understanding (Fisher, 2022:239). It is needed to expand one’s view of the world. Nixon states that:

In an age when the media venerate the spectacular when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? (2011:3).

The recognition of slow violence can happen through the consideration of others. Reading slowly about nature, returning to the subjects to be inspired by the otherness of nature, the differences between humans and nature can be ethically considered. The need for the recognition of slow violence that is being done, not only to the environment but also to marginalised others, is why slow reading as a methodology is so appealing. Slow reading is not only temporally closer to the natural progression of wild nature itself, which progresses at its own slow pace, but it is also a methodology that is both ethical as it considers the other and is temporally different from merely instrumental reasoning.

In contrast to instrumental reasoning, slow reading aims to understand instead of merely accumulating

knowledge. It is a much-needed approach within the fast-moving, efficiency-driven modern world. It is also stated that slow reading is “an openness to the other that is made possible through an attentive relation that allows us to sink into the world” (Boulous Walker, 2017:178). Slow reading has an element of kinship towards that which one is trying to understand. The economic subject only understands to the point where they can use information, they understand to the point of assimilating the other into their realm of understanding (Irigaray, 2004:5). Slow reading on the other hand is attentiveness to understand the perspective of the other, who is a fully realised agent (Callicott, Parker, Batson, Bell, Brown & Moss, 2011:121). Slow reading is an attentiveness to an other or a problem, in order to realise a meaning outside the realm of the self and contemplate the realm of the other, as an other who has lived a completely different existence to the self. In the application of slow reading to our reading we change the way we think about taking in information and in doing so we are able to break the beliefs of instrumental reasoning.

Through a certain slowness we can cultivate a simpler and more understanding way of life. To fully grasp the complexity of nature and its interwovenness with human lives:

we must find our way to seeing the mineral cycles, the water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles as sacramental...the expression of it is simple: feeling gratitude to it all: taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of energy that flow into your own life (namely dirt, water, flesh) (1995, cited in Cock, 2007:35).

We should recognise our relationship with nature as one of immense importance, and one that has been neglected for some time now. Through Boulous Walker’s slow reading, we are able to slow down and see the interconnectedness of nature. One of these interconnections is our embodied experience of nature.

4. *A Sand County Almanac* as an example of slow reading

In this section, I aim to illustrate, through the works of Aldo Leopold, how the elements of slow reading of nature help to recognise and hold space for others. As I have already shown slow reading’s connection to slow violence, this section merely adds to the argument of slow reading inspiring a relationship between the subject and the other. Aldo Leopold’s conservation ethics and his essays in, *A Sand County Almanac*, are examples of how slow reading holds space for others. He asserts the philosophy towards conservation ethics that we should recognise nature and land as something more than something we own; we should believe it to be an entity of its own which we are in community with. Leopold states that “we abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us” (1949:6). Slow reading, as I have discussed, moves beyond this instrumental thinking of others as mere resources.

Leopold’s writing, as an example of slow reading, also moves beyond the instrumental thinking of others. *A Sand County Almanac* is a series of short essays, which all hold the theme of nature. Leopold, in asserting that nature, or land, is something we need to consider ourselves in community with, brings forth a connection to others. This belief that nature is a community we are a part of is the central idea on which I wish to focus. It is the opposite of the belief that we as humans are detached or far removed from nature. Being in relation to nature is an extension of the discussion of being in relation to the other which is being carried over from Boulous Walker’s writings. Nevertheless, I would like to illustrate how Leopold’s writing holds all of the components of slow reading, and how they interconnect through his writing.

Most evidently, Leopold’s writing is related to slow reading in the sense that it takes a slow and contemplative approach to nature. He writes as nature exists, slowly, unfolding what he perceives with the connection to others in mind. Leopold questions what

the animals and landscape must be experiencing, placing himself within the mind of the other. He follows a skunk, “curious to deduce his state of mind and appetite, and destination if any” (Leopold, 1949:11). This taking up the perspective of the other is done through empathy for what the other experiences, but still holds the objectivity of nature taking its course. This reading releases control in order to experience how the animals deal with hardship as they wait for the flowers to bloom.

Leopold shows a slow and contemplative experience of nature through his writing. The things to be known about nature are learned through experience, year after year. Leopold brings forth those things that might be invisible or insignificant to others as “the trail leads past a meadow mouse (a usually unnoticed being if ever there was one)” (Callicott *et al.*, 2011:120). It takes a long time to come to understand nature deeply. Leopold’s slowness and interest in the animals and landscape are sustained by curiosity, a wonder at the natural world. It comes from a love of nature, not from a need to know everything there is to know. This relates to Bouldous Walker’s main objective, to foster a love of wisdom, above all else. Being in line with nature through the lens of love instead of instrumentalisation is what makes Leopold’s writing slow and contemplative.

In addition to his writing’s slow and contemplative nature, Leopold holds a high regard for the interconnection between humans and nature. Leopold writes about living close to nature and states that “there are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace” (Leopold, 1949:14). The line that “the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery” refers to the detachment people feel when it comes to the food industry. This results in the detachment we have around the discussions of meat production. A slow approach would give us the time to contemplate the best outcomes for all involved not only the best outcome for the economy. Leopold’s

point is that we need to understand that the source is not man-made and that it should not be taken for granted.

Leopold’s writing holds space for the animal other while simultaneously being changed by it. Callicott *et al.* state that they “suggest that the descriptive encounter with animal others provided by Leopold in the *Almanac* serves to redefine and transform the self – the self of the book’s ‘implied author’ and, through the familiar progress of reader identification with the author, this encounter also transforms the self of the reader” (2011:116). Leopold’s writing inspires a self-transformation through a relationship with others. Callicott *et al.* state in line with this transformation that “Leopold’s oblique description of these Others leads not only to his reader’s transformation of their perception of animal Others, but to a transformation of the author’s own subjectivity” (ibid.:124). There is a transformative urge, just as Bouldous Walker talks about the transformative urge that love of wisdom inspires, not to transform others but to be transformed by others.

This transformation of the self also links back to Bouldous Walker’s discussion of embodiment, as we consider the embodiment of the other. Leopold encounters animals as embodied others, not only as mindless automata (ibid.:121). Leopold also emphasises the differences between differently embodied living beings within his writing. An example of this consideration is in an essay titled *Arizona and Mexico*; he considers that for each animal, the call that announces spring means something different, and for each, it is just as important because “to the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet” (Leopold, 1949:115). This reading of nature expands on the idea that differences within nature should be respected. As we engage in a relationship with the other, we should be able to be open to how our perspective is different

from theirs. The same gesture might mean something completely different to them.

Most importantly, however, Leopold's writing is in line with slow reading because it holds community and our relationship with others as important. Leopold states that "when we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect" (1949:6). His discussion also adds to the discussion of love of wisdom as Bouldous Walker discussed it, as a method to understanding. He recognises however that "the land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations" (Leopold, 1949:1). He believes the idea of interconnection to nature to not be a new one, as he states that "individual thinkers since the days of Ezekial and Isaiah have asserted that the despoliation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong. Society, however, has not yet affirmed their belief. I regard the present conservation movement as the embryo of such an affirmation" (Leopold, 1949:1). It is merely that society has not developed its connection to nature fully. We can nevertheless foster this connection to nature with slow readings about nature.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that slow reading, as a method, sets us up to take a slow, understanding, and embodied approach, one that is closer aligned with the temporality of slow violence. Slow reading, therefore, gives us a better means to recognise and address slow violence; specifically, that slow violence that is done to nature. I have showcased this through using an example of writing about nature and how, through slow reading, we can take into consideration nature as an entity, different, but still important to the subject. I have highlighted three aspects of slow reading, slowness, understanding, and embodiment, and considered those as a through line of connection between slow violence and slow reading.

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