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“Aporetic Possibilities in Catherine Keller’s Cloud of the Impossible”

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Catherine Keller’s Cloud of the Impossible: A Symposium


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by Carol Wayne White

Abstract. In stressing the beauty of ignorance, of not knowing in the usual manner, Catherine Keller’s Cloud of the Impossible evokes the death of a metaphysical (A)uthorial presence and the dissolution of closed systems of meaning. In this article, I view her text as part of a crisis of modernity that challenges dominant theological pathways, on which certain problematic views of the human have been constructed. In my reading, Keller’s Cloud enriches humanistic thinking in the West and I explore the themes it shares with my own work in religious naturalism: there is no escape from the radical relationality and the irreducible materiality that structure human existence. I also emphasize that textual strategies are mere seductive, disembodied abstractions without acknowledging the force of materiality. Materiality matters; and I explore ways in which religious naturalism demonstrates how it does. In light of Keller’s rich analysis, I focus on a “learned ignorance” that accompanies all of our limited interpretations emerging from the shifting, precarious positionalities as we rethink our relationality to each other and to all that it is.

Keywords: apophatic tradition; chiastic thinking; deconstruction; evolutionary biology; humanism; Catherine Keller; logocentricism; materiality; relationality; religious naturalism

I know that nothing has ever been real
without my beholding it.
All becoming has needed me.
My looking ripens things
and they come toward me, to meet and be met.

Rilke, Book of Hours: Love Poems to God

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manifold material world as the very explication of the complicans” (Keller 2015, 9).

In what follows, I first explore insights within postmodern textual strategies that challenge logocentric assumptions. I specifically inquire into readings that dispel illusions of an (A)uthorial presence and the notion of readers as atomistic, stable entities. I also emphasize that such strategies are mere seductive, disembodied abstractions without acknowledging the force of materiality. Materiality matters; and I explore ways in which religious naturalism demonstrates how it does. Accordingly, I focus on the ever-shifting interpretive strategies entailed in a conception of humans as value-laden organisms—nature made aware of itself. Human organisms are uniquely positioned to inscribe or give voice to our being here; put another way, I believe that we achieve our humanity through our awareness of being inescapably entangled with all that is. As such, we constantly reinvent distinct forms of humaneness with our rhetorical strategies, thereby contributing to the always-ongoing constructions of human relational knowledge. Through these constructions, I contend, we can support the idea that human organisms are more than mere by-products of genetic determinacy. In light of Keller’s analysis, I imagine all of our limited interpretations—fissures, openings, or cracks—emerging from our shifting, precarious positionality as we rethink our relationality to each other and to all that it is.

MINDING THE CLOUD

In the opening of Cloud, Keller asserts: “The very artifact of 'book,' biblia, the old bearer of the logos and its filial-ologies, seems to be dying—as I write or you read—into a cloud of virtual text. The clouds accumulate . . . . I mind them. I wonder. I feel the loss of a certainty that I never knew. And I notice a more subtle cloud” (Keller 2015, 15). As Keller demonstrates throughout various chapters, apophatic theological foldings in Cloud do not appear (or function) to explicate the logic of certainty as much as they become implicated in the undoing of reified constructions. The loss of certainty that Keller celebrates in Cloud is one that I both share and find invigorating as a reader of texts suggested by Roland Barthes. In the wake of Barthesian textuality, “we” read texts anew, with the recognition that we can never fully decipher or decode anything fully. More importantly, in Keller’s evocation of the Cusan cloud, I discern the Barthesian aspiration of liberating writing from the despotism of what Westerners have traditionally known as the book and its menacing (A)uthorial presence.

In announcing the death of the author in 1968, Roland Barthes encroached on traditional epistemological terrain in Western intellectualism (Barthes 1988). According to Barthes, the concept of the author has persisted as an alluring fiction in Western thought; as “a modern figure, a
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Minding the Cloud

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of—something else, or more than the word God. In its living contexts the practice of theology is always more and other than speech. So its theory has offered contemplative sanctuary in the face of the most dire uncertainties: a chance to re-group before the impossible, to practice an alternative possibility, to prepare for—no matter what. It works, when it works, to prepare its public, across manifold, shifting tongues and times, to confront suffering and death, injustice, catastrophe. (Keller 2015, 16)

I appreciate Keller’s insight here, which illuminates the apophatic tradition as a strategic ploy that disrupts traditional theology’s apparent unity, accentuating its heterogeneous and disorderly aspects, as well as stressing a plurality of meanings and voices. Furthermore, as her concept of theopoetics implies, such action is reminiscent of Derridean deconstruction, where language and its aims, limitations, and subtleties are the focal points. As it forsakes transcendental causes as guarantees, “the epistemic intensity of theopoetics as such, bound up with deconstruction, highlights what language itself does, makes, constructs” (Keller 2015, 309). Accordingly, not only can we not get outside of language, but we find ourselves only wandering about in it and exposing its inconsistencies and false assumptions regarding the existence of transcendental signifiers, or stable centers of meaning.

With deconstruction, Derrida challenged the traditional view of language and Western rationality that originates in the Platonic distinction between the rhetorical, imaginative, and irrational nature of poetry (and literature) and the epistemological and ontological truth inherent in philosophical discourse—a belief that eventually led to the modern view that saw literary language as the determinate other of science and philosophy. In “Supplement of Copula,” Derrida observes:

Our oldest metaphysical ground is the last one of which we will rid ourselves—supposing we could succeed in getting rid of it—this ground that has incorporated itself in language and in the grammatical categories, and has made itself so indispensable at this point, that it seems we would have to cease thinking if we renounced metaphysics. Philosophers are properly those who have the most difficulty in freeing themselves from the belief that the fundamental concepts and categories of reason belong by nature to the realm of metaphysical certainties. They always believe in reason as a fragment of the metaphysical world itself; this backward belief always reappears in their work as an all powerful regression. (Derrida 1982, 179)

Building on these ideas and returning to the Barthesian theme, I also stress the importance of the reader in the “writing” of a text—each reading writes the text anew simply by rearranging it, by placing different emphases that might subtly inflect its meanings. The ability for each reader to alter an open text opens possibilities of collective authorship that breaks down the idea of writing as originating from a single, fixed source. Any subject who enunciates is a creation of language itself, so that meaning belongs to
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metaphysically based views of language as a closed system. We do not simply read texts. We also enact distinct sets of discursive practices that presuppose radical alterity, materiality, and embedded relationality—all insights that our influential theological and humanistic discourses have failed to recognize. This is a shared assumption that Keller and I bring to our religious textual readings.

**IMPOSSIBLE PASSAGES/PASSING POSSIBILITIES**

Chiasmically speaking, I entitled this section Impossible Passages/Passing Possibilities. I do so to emphasize another compelling element (and perhaps one of the most subtle aspects) of Keller’s *Cloud*: the significance of chias tic thinking in understanding the entangled encounters of the non-separable and the nonknowable. In hinting at the possibilities emerging in the unlikely encounters between the affirmations of relational theolo gies and the (aporetic) movements of deconstructive philosophy, Keller observes, “And so the doubling of tensions—of a deconstructive apophasis and a prophetic relationalism—forms for the book a mobile chiasmus: a co-incident of opposites” (Keller 2015, 9).

In literary theory, chiasmus is a rhetorical device in which concepts, clauses, or grammatical constructions are repeated in a reversed order (ABBA) to produce an artistic effect. As William E. Engel suggests, it is helpful to think of chiasmus as “a rhetorical pattern that makes what is said stand out as being more memorable and, because of the wit displayed, more engaging” (Engel 2009, 3). In chiastic patterns, the repetition itself implies a change or a shift in meaning that is impossible without the specific rearrangement of the repeated words. As Engel indicates, a wonderful example from Shakespeare is “Richard II’s pitiful self-recognition, which, in effect, sums up the substance of his life and the true tragedy of this play: ‘I wasted time, and now doth time waste me’” (Engel 2009, 2). Here, as elsewhere, a basic function of chiasmus is to provide and project a signifying difference, allowing new meanings to emerge. Closely related to this important component of chiasmus is that it “is derived from the Greek letter χ (chi), which forms a cross. It signals and connotes a crossing” (Engel 2009, 5).

While appreciating its rhetorical effects in literature and poetry, I find the notion of chiasmus adding some new shade of meaning in crossing over quite compelling. This is what Keller seems to be suggesting when she discusses the inevitable tensions that arise in conjoining the demands of liberation discourses with contemplative apophosis. These relational theologies are crucial in maintaining a sense of materiality, and their appearance in Western intellectual thought cannot be underestimated. Yet, for Keller, “without the crossover, the chiasmus, to the apophatic, theology turns for many of us incredible” (Keller 2015, 6). Chiasmus crossing is
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classified as independent of its relations. This point is particularly significant when considering the normative discursive frameworks that often structure notions of gender, sexuality, nationality, race, and other markers of human existence. These discourses have often supported only one way of existing and being valued. Crossing over and passing into the other increases possibilities for yet another interpretation, another perspective, another possibility: instead of stasis, we continuously pass (appear and dissolve) into precarious, entangled modes of being. Crossing over—again and again and again—also repositions or destabilizes us, dissolving any illusions of a static sense of being. Here, we are mindful of Latina feminist philosopher Ofelia Schutte’s determination that the other is not only “that person occupying the space of the subaltern in the culturally asymmetrical power relation, but also those elements or dimensions of the self that unsettle or decenter the ego’s dominant, self-enclosed, territorialized identity” (Schutte 1998, 53–72).

In my humanistic framework, chiasmus mobility suggests the appearance of potential fissures and openings that may appear in one moment, perhaps disappear in another, as human animals recognize our messy, never-ending entanglements with all that is. These are the constant conundrums and perplexities we readers face in honoring and attending to alterity and asking who we are. Who are we? Again, Keller’s work inspires me onward in my reflections:

[The cosmological explication of an apophatically unfolding God ultimately brought the creation itself into theo-poiesis, expanding boundlessly and contracting relationally into each quantum of becoming. Attention to language was acute all along, but mainly in the negation, and double negation, of doctrines far from poetry. Hence the chiasmus that structured this meditation. It invites crossings between its material chaosmos, so vibrant with entanglement, and its linguistic chasm, so precariously, poetically charged—“in a bottomless abyss, Never could I come out of it.” (Keller 2015, 309)]

Enticed by Keller’s theopoetics, I, too, stress the impossibility of passing beyond entangled relationality—a key point that I develop in the next section.

**Strange Wonders of Materialist Textuality**

In *Cloud*, Keller raises a crucial question to her theological readers: How does the enfolding of the universe in God and the unfolding God in the universe cultivate a greater intercreaturely solidarity? (Keller 2015, 11, 114–15). When understood within the context of Keller’s acute apophasis, this question becomes an important one for me, as well. As a religious naturalist, I, too, ask about the possibility of enriching creaturely independence in the absence of a transcendental signifier. Addressing this question, however,
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Cartesian turn to subjectivity and lured by the desire for an Archimedean point or foundation. This episteme of representation has not only established the autonomous, bourgeois individual; it has also reduced the corporeal, relational, moral self to a pure object of knowledge. In denying our inescapable relationality with other sentient life, the scripts and writings of this modern humanistic textuality have been alarmingly violent. A preferable form of textuality expresses the desire to reinscribe our humanity as part of a complex web of cultural and cosmic meanings, as a texture of them—even as a text.

These insights lead me, as a religious scription, to raise a crucial question for contemporary readers and writers of religious textuality: What is this “human” that is generally implied or assumed in our cultural observations? I believe that religious discourse involves more than a recognition and description of ordinary human behaviors—it is itself an ongoing, constituted celebration of the conundrums, dreams, and desires of the irreducibly embodied, relational human organism. Thus, while acknowledging the inevitable processes of open-ended textuality, I stress a critical point: just as we should not participate in naïvely essentialist notions of selfhood, we must be careful not to construct insufficient modes of subjectivity. Specifically, we must not be lured by impoverished views of our subjectivity in which historical, material, relational biotic forms are erased by linguistic forces over which they can have little or no control. If we do so, we risk losing sight of those aspects of our embodied animality that are rooted in intimate and concrete social relations, and of something within and among human animals that is not merely an effect of the dominant discourse. Hence, I suggest we pay particular attention to the conventions and structures of writing about selfhood and the other. I also emphasize considering how different models of humanity are conceived and written about in our disciplinary fields of knowledge, as well as how our humanity is subtly expressed in the processes of writing. Additionally, it is also important to take notice of how later texts relate to previous texts, and to consider the ways we speak about various aspects of our human lives and experiences.

Moreover, chiasmus thinking inspires me as a religious naturalist to consider how other life forces, bodies, modes of being—infinitely multiplied—share in the capacious entangled web of life and the shifting, ontological orderings that Keller has alerted us to in Cloud textuality. Entangled materiality implies an irreducible “thereness,” always something more real than the objectifications of materiality that our conceptual abstractions create. Simply put, we are here even before we can begin to conceptualize how we are here. Accordingly, I introduce in the next section a quintessentially postmodern religious task: tentatively re-materializing the human as an important finite realm of possibilities within unfolding cosmic wonders.
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supernatural and no supernatural being or beings residing in such a realm. (Crosby 2008, ix–x)

I share with Crosby and other religious naturalists two fundamental convictions in understanding basic human quests for meaning and value: (1) the recognition that nature is the only realm in which people live out their lives, and (2) the sense of nature’s richness, spectacular complexity, and fertility. In this context, then, religious naturalism offers an eloquent rendering of human animals’ deep, inextricable homology with the rest of the natural world, and it honors the rich diversity of life in which we find ourselves constituted. These insights correlate with the following observations from Keller:

This book will consider how the cloud surrounding what we say about “God” here enfolds the entire crowd of our relations. In other words the ancient via negativa now offers its mystical unsaying, which is a nonknowing of God, to the uncertainty that infects our knowing of anything that is not God. The manifold of social movements, the multiplicity of religious or spiritual identifications, the queering of identities, the tangled planetarity of human and nonhuman bodies: these in their unsettling togetherness will exceed our capacities ever altogether to know or manage them. In their unspeakable excesses they press for new possibilities of flourishing. (Keller 2015, 5)

The religious naturalism I introduce here requires us to take seriously the idea of our humanity as an achievement, not a given. More specifically, my view compels many of us to reflect meaningfully on the emergence of matter (and especially life) from the Big Bang forward, promoting an understanding of myriad nature as complex processes of becoming. Its theoretical appeal is the fundamental conception of humans as natural processes intrinsically connected to other natural processes. This insight helps to blur the arbitrary ontological lines that human animals have erected between other species and us. With Loyal Rue, I endorse a portrayal of human beings as star-born, earth-formed creatures endowed by evolutionary processes to seek reproductive fitness under the guidance of biological, psychological, and cultural systems that have been selected for their utility in mediating adaptive behaviors (Rue 2005, 77). Humans maximize their chances for reproductive fitness by managing the complexity of these systems in ways that are conducive to the simultaneous achievement of personal wholeness and social coherence. Rue wrote:

The meaning of human life should be expressed in terms of how our particular species pursues the ultimate telos of reproductive fitness. Like every other species, we seek the ultimate biological goal according to our peculiar nature. That is, by pursuing the many teloi that are internal to our behavior mediation systems, whether these teloi are built into the system by genetic means or incorporated into them by symbolic means. For humans there are many immediate teloi, including the biological goals inherent in our drive systems, the psychological goals implicit in our emotional and
supernatural and no supernatural being or beings residing in such a realm. (Crosby 2008, ix–x)

I share with Crosby and other religious naturalists two fundamental convictions in understanding basic human quests for meaning and value: (1) the recognition that nature is the only realm in which people live out their lives, and (2) the sense of nature’s richness, spectacular complexity, and fertility. In this context, then, religious naturalism offers an eloquent rendering of human animals’ deep, inextricable homology with the rest of the natural world, and it honors the rich diversity of life in which we find ourselves constituted. These insights correlate with the following observations from Keller:

This book will consider how the cloud surrounding what we say about “God” here enfold the entire crowd of our relations. In other words the ancient via negativa now offers its mystical unsaying, which is a nonknowing of God, to the uncertainty that infects our knowing of anything that is not God. The manifold of social movements, the multiplicity of religious or spiritual identifications, the queering of identities, the tangled planetarity of human and nonhuman bodies: these in their unsettling togetherness will exceed our capacities ever altogether to know or manage them. In their unspeakable excesses they press for new possibilities of flourishing. (Keller 2015, 5)

The religious naturalism I introduce here requires us to take seriously the idea of our humanity as an achievement, not a given. More specifically, my view compels many of us to reflect meaningfully on the emergence of matter (and especially life) from the Big Bang forward, promoting an understanding of myriad nature as complex processes of becoming. Its theoretical appeal is the fundamental conception of humans as natural processes intrinsically connected to other natural processes. This insight helps to blur the arbitrary ontological lines that human animals have erected between other species and us. With Loyal Rue, I endorse a portrayal of human beings as star-born, earth-formed creatures endowed by evolutionary processes to seek reproductive fitness under the guidance of biological, psychological, and cultural systems that have been selected for their utility in mediating adaptive behaviors (Rue 2005, 77). Humans maximize their chances for reproductive fitness by managing the complexity of these systems in ways that are conducive to the simultaneous achievement of personal wholeness and social coherence. Rue wrote:

The meaning of human life should be expressed in terms of how our particular species pursues the ultimate telos of reproductive fitness. Like every other species, we seek the ultimate biological goal according to our peculiar nature. That is, by pursuing the many teloi that are internal to our behavior mediation systems, whether these teloi are built into the system by genetic means or incorporated into them by symbolic means. For humans there are many immediate teloi, including the biological goals inherent in our drive systems, the psychological goals implicit in our emotional and
have also sought, and found, religious fellowship with one another. And
now we realize that we are connected to all creatures. Not just in food
chains or ecological equilibria. We share a common ancestor. We share
genes for receptors and cell cycles and signal-transduction cascades. We
share evolutionary constraints and possibilities. We are connected all the
way down. (Goodenough 1998, 75)

The basic conception of the human as an emergent, interconnected life
form amid spectacular biotic diversity is a terrifying beauty that involves
seeking and savoring learned ignorance. Here, I emphasize the mystery of
human existence, even when utilizing scientific theories. In this sense, my
religious perspective is not unlike Keller’s in reminding us to aim not so
much for piercing cosmic wholeness as much as continuing to enfold in its
unfolding. In doing so, and in keeping with the ethos of uncertainty that is
a part of any interpretive strategy, I bring to mind physicist Chet Raymo’s
emphasis on epistemological humility as a basic driving force of scientific
exploration. While lauding its amazing discoveries, Raymo, also a religious
naturalist, nonetheless concludes that science can never deplete the mystery
of all that is. Nor can it exhaust reality, or even begin to encompass the
complexity of humans’ interaction with the more-than-human worlds that
constitute our being here.

For Raymo, acknowledging “I do not know” is part of a crucial legacy
of thinking that has often embraced the mystery of existence; he associates
this cultivated ignorance—“an ignorance that is aware of itself”—with
the methodological orientations of such iconic figures as physicist Heinz
Pagels, Charles Darwin, Blaise Pascal, Karl Popper, and physician/essayist
Lewis Thomas (Raymo 2008, 27–30). In doing so, Raymo augments a key
point that Keller ingeniously features in Cloud and I advance here: human
ignorance can be liberating in the face of the deeper mystery that we are
not at the center of all that is, but rather a constitutive part of all that is.
As Raymo suggests, “the more we understand about the universe, the more
we are faced with an ever-deep encounter with the thing seen only through
a glass darkly—the inscape, the absconded God who hides in a cloud of
unknowing” (Raymo 2008, 16). Raymo’s open-ended epistemology is
especially refreshing in the context of discussing human materiality amid
the mystery of our coming to be here: “Faced with the mystery of the
big bang—which remains as inexplicable as it was in Simpson’s time—the
empirical naturalist will say ‘I don’t know.’ Perhaps an explanation will
come along, perhaps not…” (Raymo 2008, 32).

**WHY MINDING MATERIALITY MATTERS**

Toward the end of her meditation, Keller reflects on the generative power
of cloud textuality, alerting us to the illusions of thinking we have arrived
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Equally important, in a wider cosmological context, this view of the material, relational human organism invites a peculiar form of religious reflection that adamantly advocates kindness, empathy, and compassion for all natural processes, not just for human others. With the capacity to influence one another and other natural processes, humans also have a responsibility to act in ways that promote the flourishing of all life, and to urge other humans who may be less aware of our interconnectedness to do the same. One possibility of our humanity that passes in front of us, then, is found in Raymo's sense that we are part of an interacting, evolving, and genetically related community of beings bound together inseparably in space and time. As such, "each of us is profoundly implicated in the functioning and fate of every other being on the planet, and ultimately, perhaps, throughout the universe" (Raymo 2008, 98). I daresay that Keller's *Cloud* does not pass by this passing possibility.

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References
