Archives Beyond the Human

Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on what it might mean to think about archives "beyond" the human, specifically in relation to animals and their archives. Interdisciplinary and disciplinary "animal turns" have brought animals into social science and humanities spaces – as both subjects and collaborators. In archival research and studies, encounters with animals and, more broadly, non-humans both complicate and extend contemporary debates: on how we research in the archives, on ethics and politics, and even on what constitutes an archive. Drawing on three different case studies from my research with historical animals – in a traditional archive, in the digital archive, and in a speculative archive – I reflect on some of these contemporary debates to ask how we might meaningfully extend archives beyond the human

Bio

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Introduction

Contemporary cultural theory has recently been experimenting with ways to resist and challenge anthropocentric knowledge production and, in this intervention, I explore what this might mean in relation to archives. Drawing on three different archival projects, I consider how encounters with non-human animals complicate debates in archival studies, particularly around how we work in archives, who is centered, and what, exactly, might constitute an archive. In this intervention piece, I move between speaking from my own archival experiences and reflecting on wider archival transformations and literature pertinent to these themes. To begin, I briefly introduce the archives that I will be referring to throughout this intervention, before offering a short summary of how the intervention is structured. While the content of the archives is not directly relevant to the discussions that I raise in this intervention, they have nonetheless been indispensable in my shaping my still-forming understandings of the archives and archival research. I then explore my archival experiences in relation to contemporary debates in archival studies and historical knowledge production, before moving to think across the three themes of this piece: loss, secrecy, and estrangement. I conclude this intervention paper by speculating on the importance of challenging archives to move beyond the human.

In 2016, during my PhD, I began a placement at the British Library working in the archives of animal advocate, writer, and psychologist Richard D Ryder. Prior to this moment, I had never engaged with historical documents in my research, nor did I have any formal research training in archival practice. Ryder (b. 1940) donated his archive to the British Library in three tranches, with the first arriving in 1999. The acquisition of his archive sits in their growing collection of contemporary archives of political and public life and is one of the most significant archives of

animal rights history, akin to the papers of philosopher Peter Singer, held at the National Library of Australia, and Tom Regan's archive at North Carolina State University in the USA. During the six months I was working in Ryder's archives, they were in the midst of the cataloguing process, with some materials having been moved into archive boxes but not sorted, and several boxes having been stored directly on shelves in the library's basements without being 'touched' by the organising gaze of the archivist. This allowed me a somewhat unique first encounter with the archive, whereby I bypassed the institutional processes of searching catalogues, ordering and waiting for documents; instead, I swiped a card, entered the cold basement of the British Library, and worked surrounded by the archive in its entirety. In this intervention, I draw on these experiences to think about affect, emotions, and animal archives, with the aim of rethinking and expanding our archival imagination beyond the human, following recent debates around the limits of caring in more-than-human cultural theory.

The second archival experience that I'll be drawing on here is a short digital fellowship that I undertook in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers, RGS-IBG). The RGS-IBG is a learned society and professional body for geography, based in London, which was founded in 1830. In its early days, the Society was closely associated with colonial 'exploration' in Africa, India, and the polar regions (a history they and geographers have recently been reflecting upon, see Esson et al, 2017). The RGS-IBG also publish journals, meetings, and pioneered the study of geography as a teaching and research discipline. Their archives, dating throughout their own history, but also encompassing earlier materials and materials from other organizations, are representative of the world's largest private collection of maps and charts, along with atlases, globes, world gazetteers, and original manuscript mapping

dating back to the 1400s' (Wiley, nd). The collections at the RGS hold over 2 million items: journals, maps, diaries, photographs, artefacts, films, and books from the last 500 years of geography. In 2018, The Society in collaboration with Wiley began the work of digitizing its whole collection. The collection is now hosted on Wiley's Digital Archives platform. In 2021, I was supported to undertake research in their online collections (again, in the context of lockdowns and restrictions on research activities) on the history of animals as workers, collaborators, victims, and workers in the history of geography. From this project, I reflect on the materiality and movement of changing archives, to argue that contemporary changes to archives, particularly through the digital, offer new opportunities for novel engagements with archives and therefore history.

My early archival explorations in the Ryder archives and the RGS digital archives transformed the way that I thought about my research, with historical emphases becoming increasingly central to my approach to the production(s) of knowledge. When I moved to a research position focused on urban chickens in London, I hadn't proposed historical research as part of it, but (in part due to pandemic lockdowns), the history of chickens in the city became the central focus of my initial research period. Moving between books like Andrew Lawler's *Why did the Chicken Cross the World?* (2016), *The Chicken Book* (Smith and Daniels, 1975), and digitized newspaper archives, blogs, science and technology studies writing on the chicken (e.g. Boyd, 2001) and historical urban animal-keeping and housewife manuals, I began to build a genealogy of the chicken, and their central place in the city not only in the form of food, but as companions and ecological workers. Later, when lockdowns lifted, visits to places such as the chicken coop at Kensington Gardens, London, and the Garden Museum in Lambeth, London materialized these histories of the chickens in the city. My historical research with chickens, then, was far less tied to

any singular archive and instead challenged me to read across different archival sources, both formal and informal. In thinking about the history of the chicken, my understanding of what *counts* as an archive expanded, eventually leading me to wonder if chickens are themselves archives. Here, archival research broadens into questions of planetary archives and the beyond-human, with the aim of challenging and expanding ideas of archives, particularly in the context of environmental crises.

This paper moves between reflections from these three archival projects and archives and broader discussions around what I'm tentatively terming 'beyond-human archives.' I am here defining the beyond-human archive both in relation to my subjects (animals and non-humans) but also to the extension of the archives beyond the human - in their materiality, their affects and emotions, their relationships with technology, and their diversification. The intervention begins by reflecting on what an archive is, before moving to think about affect and materiality, digitization, definitions, embodiment, and, finally, to environments. Academic-style writing is interrupted with ethnographic archival notes, seeking to replicate the multiple pulls of archival work, before I end with short reflections on our overlapping themes of loss, secrecy, and estrangement. The intention of this intervention, in conversation with the *unfamiliar archives'* pieces, is ask what it means to think of the archive as beyond-human for humans, animals, and archives themselves.

What is an archive?

What, then, is an archive? Mike Featherstone (2006) has described it as a place for the storage of documents and records, from which national memories are constructed - a space familiar for those of us working in national or institutional archives. Achille Mbembe (2002), also writing of institutional archives, argues that the archive/s refer to the building, its documents, and its

symbolic power. Thomas Osborne (1999) conceptualizes the archive more broadly as organized around three principles, of publicity, singularity, and mundanity - a definition of the archive that expands to include smaller and less formal archives. Harriet Bradley (1999), on the same question, argues that the 'archive can take many forms but all are marked by a connective sequence: archive, memory, the past, narrative', drawing on her own experiences in four different kinds of archives. These constructions of archives are multiple - sites of disposal (Hetherington, 2004), creation (Ibrus and Ojamaa, 2020), speculation (Meltzer and Thorne, 2007), and affect (Cifor, 2016) - as unique as each archive is. There is, perhaps, no way that archives can be imagined as a collective, and yet this impulse to talk about *the archive* remains, as Arlette Farge (2013) might put it, *alluring.*

Archives are expansive and endless places, each one unique and with infinite relations to it. The work in and of the archives is, therefore, often deeply personal and emotional. Douglas and colleagues have written about the particular role that grief plays in the working lives of archivists in their relationships with donors, records and documents, and that this is often overlapping with 'anger, boredom, frustration, guilt, shame, hope, inspiration, joy, happiness, loneliness, pride, sadness, and reverence' (2007, p.15). Archival materials have the power to move, and this affect has been increasingly acknowledged and discussed across the social sciences, refusing long-held prioritization of objectivity in archives and history (Cifor and Gilliland, 2016). The affective power of the archive is not contained to those working within it as researchers or archivists, but, as Wilson and Golding (2016, 95) have shown through their work on the significance of institutional records on the lives of people who experienced out-of-home care as children, archives can have affective power in 'restoration of fragmented life narrative and, crucially, vindication.' While archives

might be thought of as documents of life, they have taken material forms that undoubtedly have the power to move and connect to personal histories, but also collective histories and embodied histories (see Cifor, 2015 on embodiment in trans archives). In the Richard Ryder archives, I repeatedly experienced this affective power.

Ryder's archive was extensive, and lots of the folders that I worked through were letters and documents - revealing but not necessarily revealing. There was, however, one object in the archive that seemed to pop up in many of the boxes and, because the archive wasn't ordered or catalogued, I never knew when I might come across it again. This object was a leaflet which outlined and defined "speciesism." On the leaflet was a photograph of a small chimpanzee, sat hunched over and in pain, their body totally covered in sores. The chimpanzee had been involved in lab experiments on the effects of syphilis, with which they'd been injected repeatedly.

Ryder's coining of the term 'speciesism' in 1970 was part of a renewed interest, for him, in the relationship between humans and animals. Ryder (1998) reflected on his earliest memory of seeing a dead blackbird on the street igniting a moment of recognition. His 'mixed and inconsistent feelings towards animals' inevitably turned him towards the animal cause. Ryder's oral history of his development of speciesism as a concept begins in a bath in his Dorset estate, and the first time he shared this was when he first published in the leaflet *Speciesism*, circulated around Oxford in 1970[1].

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[1] A copy of the Speciesism leaflet can be found in Ryder, R.D. (2010) Speciesism Again: The Original Leaflet, Critical Society, Issue 2, 1-2

Every time I found another copy of the leaflet, I was jolted out of my archival work and into a visceral moment of pain. A tiny chimpanzee, curled over, weak, emaciated and covered in scabs from the injections of syphilis. I can see their pain, I empathize and his distress breaks through the archive, with a sudden kick in the stomach. This chimpanzee, long dead by now, is not forgotten; their pain (still) matters, and it is the archive, and all its relations and histories, that has made this possible. Although the chimpanzee is a devastating loss, their story has affected and moved me, their presence moving through time to the present.

This affective power of the archives sort of shocked me when I experienced this first time. Having little to no historical research experience, I hadn't been prepared for the emotional power of archival documents. This experience with the chimpanzee raised questions, for me, over how historical animals exhibit agency, even if it is not intentional. In animal studies in particular, the idea of nonhuman agency is one that has been promoted and defended for decades, with the perspective of animals themselves becoming more common in animal histories (see, for example, Howell, 2018). The archive itself was shaped by these very same animal agencies, that moved Ryder to collect and advocate for animals, but who have perhaps been absent from histories of activism that have focused on human agencies. In the archive, the traces of these animals re-center their agency, albeit in an all too human institutional space.

Beyond the human archive

Arlette Farge wrote in *Archive Fever* that 'the reality of the archive lies not only in the clues it contains, but also in the sequences of different representations of reality …the archive always preserves an infinite number of relations to reality' (2013, p.30). More recently, in her book *Archive Everything: Mapping the Everyday*, Gabriella Giannachi (2023, 2) follows the historical

development of archives - and related archival impulses and fevers - to argue that it 'is symptomatic of our obsession with the augmentation, documentation, and transmission of our own presence'. This archival impulse has morphed over time, so that archival production has expanded from the hands of the powerful and colonial (Shetty and Bellamy, 2000) into a fundamental experience of contemporary everyday life, where 'we incessantly archive our lives, primarily, but not exclusively, through social media, and use a plurality of archival materials to orient ourselves within our everyday lives' (Giannachi, 2023, 182). The collecting, sorting, and curating of material in our online spaces conveys meaning, produces affects, and creative and conscious processes. Are they not, then, archives of the self?

Rita Gayle's (2020) work on and in the Black British archives explores how Black (British) feminist millennial creative collectives are embodied with pasts, presents, and futures. This "archival work can also situate and provide a narrative for present and future redefinitions of what it means to be Black and British" (Noxolo, 2020, 510), and engages with the challenges of archiving digital movements and cultural production. While the digitization of archives (the conversion of material into digital forms) and digital archives (the production of new virtual collections) have been touted as potentially democratizing the practice of history (Bolick, 2006), the reality is more complicated and remains shaped by hierarchies of power and access. There is no doubt, however, that the rise of digital and social technologies has transformed understandings of what an archive is and, crucially, who might create one. Daniel Palmer has explored how emotions are archived on photo-sharing websites such as Flickr, with new social media technologies offering 'a space for an ever-accumulating archive of personal visual experience, memory and emotion' (2010, 155). Framing social media archives, whether images or text, as

archives of the self has the potential to democratize the practice of archiving, offering spaces for creative production (Kelly, 2018) and for exploration of the self (see, for example, Rawlins, 2021). The expansion of the archive beyond the institutional thus has the power to reframe archives, but working within more open archives through digitization also offers new opportunities to think beyond the human, as I experienced in the digital archives of the Royal Geographical Society:

In the Herbert Ponting collection of the archive was a series of photographs from the Terra Nova (British Antarctic) Expedition 1911-1913, which ended with the death of Captain Robert Falcon Scott and the four other members of the expedition team after reaching the South Pole. The subject of these photographs were Adélie penguins, a small, googly-eyed species of bird, living at Cape Adare on the northeastern most tip of Victoria Land, East Antarctica. The Adélie penguins have been described as the most human-like of birds and images from this series were used to advertise Lyle's golden syrup, with a penguin perched on top of a tin.

The study of the Adélie penguins was an attitude study, looking at their behavior and life cycle. However, in 2012, a previously unpublished pamphlet of the expedition's surgeon and zoologist, George Murray Levick, was found at the Natural History Museum at Tring. Douglas Russell, William Sladen, and David Aigley (2012) published a paper in Polar Record on Levick's pamphlet, titled Sexual Habits of the Adelie penguin, which was printed in 1915 but declined for publication. According to the authors who "rediscovered" the pamphlet, it "commented on frequency of sexual activity, autoerotic behaviour, and seemingly aberrant behaviour of young unpaired males and females including sexual coercion, non-procreative sex and homosexual behaviour."

It's perhaps no surprise in the aftermath of an expedition that had ended in disaster, that the publication was halted from release, particularly given its finding about sexual activity in the penguin world. The authors of the 2012 rediscovery report wrote that Levick "made no attempt to interpret or explain [the behaviours]; indeed he largely dismisses them as "depraved"'. According to an article in The Guardian in 2012, Levick wrote his observations on the sexual habits in Greek, "so that only an educated gentleman would understand the horrors he had witnessed" (McKie, 2012). Only through the digital archives did I have the chance to happen upon a picture of an adorable little penguin and, following their story, open a can of syrup onto a world of secrets and suppression.

Working in the digital archives of an institution like the Royal Geographical Society can be overwhelming. There are infinite ways of navigating and approaching this archive, but every entry point to this archive is heavy with the historical and global significance of colonial power and violence.

The story of a penguin is, in comparison, not the most important story to tell from this archive but it is revealing of relationships with the world beyond the human: who has access to them, how scientific knowledge about the non-human world is shared (or not), and how societal values, such as those related to homosexuality in this case, are reproduced and extended to the non-human world. On the same Terra Nova expedition, the scientific team also visited an emperor penguin rookery at Cape Crozier, because the chief zoologist on Terra Nova believed that the emperor penguin was the most primitive bird alive and it might hold the link to his proposed connection between birds and dinosaurs (Nicholls, 2013). Reading the RGS archives beyond the

human opens up questions about the violence between human exploration and the non-human world, and through the archival process, these stories from the margins can be foregrounded to emphasize non-human histories, in relation to and separate from human ones.

Everything is an Archive

In an essay pleadingly titled *Please Stop Calling Things Archives,* B.M. Watson defends the expertise and practices of professional archivists against a contemporary fascination with declaring a plethora of things as archives: "a flash drive is not an archive, a website is not an archive, and the internet is not an archive" (2021, np). They continue on to argue that the production of historical knowledge would be, if not impossible, then much more difficult, without the skills and work of professional archivists, notably in the categorization and naming of archives to ensure they are searchable and accessible. This *archival turn* has occurred across the social sciences and humanities and has reconfigured the archive from a straightforward source to an active and relational research subject, or assemblage (Brilmyer, 2018), both material and discursive. Within this flourishing field of interest, it's perhaps no surprise that non-historians and non-specialists have been compelled to translocate ideas of "the archive" into and onto other spaces. After all, none of us is immune to the *archive fever* (Derrida, 1996).

André Lepecki, in The Body as Archive (2010), echoes this archival impulse into a "will to archive" dance through its re-enactment, where the body becomes an archive, the archive a body, albeit an unstable and temporally bounded one. Lepecki is not reducing the value of the traditional archive, but instead asking 'how can we access the archive, enter the archive, if the archive is not as "storehouse" … but indeed a system' (37). As Etienne Joseph and Connie Bell write on expanding and understanding the Black Atlantic archive to (but also beyond) the body,

ideas of 'living archives and the living of the archive are not in themselves new' but … 'the body has, however … been disqualified from serious consideration as an archive' (2022, 521). The body as an important source and site of knowledge, history and trauma has been a focus especially in Native and Indigenous art and scholarship, where the body becomes a site not just of individual knowledge, but of inter-generational trauma - and joy (see Dietrich, 2018, in conversation with writer and poet Deborah A Miranda).

The best-selling neuroscience book The Body Keeps the Score (van der Kolk, 2014) has sold two million copies and is often recommended on "bookstagram" and "booktok" (book-focused Instagram and TikTok content) self-help reading recommendations, appealing to readers who want to understand the effects of trauma on their bodies - although its dense, science-focused writing is perhaps less social media friendly. The idea that the body is shaped by and responds to our life histories is clearly an idea in which popular culture is interested. Despite calls by some archivists to protect and preserve the sanctity of the archives, the morphing of meaning is perhaps beyond our policing. In my final reflection from the archives, I explore how archival thinking can recast chicken bodies as important sites of political and historical knowledge.

On Earth today, the chicken is one of the most populous animals. The biomass of chickens is greater than the total mass of all other birds on the planet. There are around 26 billion chickens alive on the planet at any one time, not including the bodies and bones of those killed for meat. In the year 2000, there were around 14 billion chickens, representing an almost doubling in less than 25 years. Over the last 50 years, not only has the number of chickens on the planet skyrocketed due to increased consumption, the bodies and skeletons of these chickens have transformed, with

birds being much bigger and growing much faster due to selective breeding, growth promoters, and industrial farming environments.

In Volume 1 of the Fourth Edition of the Cassells Household Guide: A Complete Encyclopedia of Domestic and Social Economy (1884), a manual designed for housewives, there is an extended entry on the keeping of poultry by women in the home. Amongst details of how to build a coop and raise chicks, the guide proudly proclaims that, when following their advice 'poultry-keeping is within the reach of all' (p.31). This guide predates the globalization of food systems and agriculture and showcases a vision of chicken-keeping as a family endeavor.

In 2018, a team of researchers led by Carys E Bennett declared the contemporary broiler chicken 'a distinctive new morphotype … a marker species of the proposed Anthropocene Epoch' (p.180325). The billions of chickens raised and killed for meat each year have their bones disposed of and fossilized in the Earth's crust through sites of landfill, and these skeletons represent a new object in the planet's geological archive. While their bones leave a historical mark on the planet, an archival object of the Anthropocene and the ways that humans have transformed and distorted nature, chickens don't just have a natural history. They have a rich cultural, social, and political history entangled with human life. Domesticated 10,000 years ago, the chicken has been part of medicine, folklore, language, and valued companions, as well as a source of food (see Smith and Daniels, 1975). Only in the last century has the intensification of chicken production seen them cast out of small-scale farming and into vast industrial settings, estranged not only from humans, but from ecologies, one another, and their own histories.

As I worked through the multi-layered histories of the chicken, it began to become clearer that not only is the chicken part of the planet's archive and part of human history, but their transformed bodies are themselves archives of human transformation, holding heavy a history of human exploitation of nature. Thinking about the chicken as an archive crystallizes why it matters to expand and reconsider what we think of as archives: if we can expand our archival imagination to non-human histories, then we can also expand it to non-human archives and knowledges. The history of the chicken is included here to point towards creative ways of engaging history beyond the human, which is what I move to discuss in the conclusion of this paper.

Conclusion

The planetary archive is changing, permanently reconfigured through human and technological objects. As well as the changing chemical make-up of soils and oceans, novel entities such as plastics, synthetics, radioactive materials, and technological waste are being landfilled and literally encrusted into the Earth's surface and absorbed into its waters. Geologists study the planet's archives, fossil records and sediments, and it is here that they declared the Anthropocene, but it is also present in the cells, bones, and bodies of human, animal, and plant beings. The historical context for the Anthropocene is as important as its geological evidence, and to bring these two together and fully comprehend this period in the Earth's history requires us to open up to more-than-human, beyond human and speculative kinds of archiving.

In this way, the archive can be constructed as a lively quasi-object (Latour, 1993) in dialogue with the present doings and beings of humans and animals and imaginations of future worlds. The archive as a quasi-object - an object which is not passive but an active component of the world - is made clear in these different examples from the archive and allows for space to

understand how the archive produces an ethical and political engagement with the past that is multiple and complex, but also firmly rooted in the present. Despite, or perhaps because of, the unique and important skills of traditional archivists, the importance archives that *aren't* archives is becoming increasingly salient. The expertise and experience of archivists and archival researchers aren't redundant if everything becomes an archive, but rather offer unique skill sets important for the future value of historical knowledge. In particular, expanding archives beyond the human challenges how and where we see sites of historical knowledge, in turn transforming or at least disrupting the anthropocentrism of the archives.

The archives have, with good reason, been the realm for human history, storage, and memory. While these have begun to take on alternative environmental forms and analyses, such as social and cultural approaches to the planetary archive or my own work thinking of the chicken as an archive, the animal archive remains read through and by the human. Meillassoux's concept of the 'arche-fossil' describes 'a remnant of the universe confirmed by *science* as existing before the beginnings of terrestrial life … provid[ing] information about a pre-historic condition' (Barikin, 2017, 263) and has been used to think about history without the human. Rather than nothing existing without the human, a non-human reality persists. Yet, this non-human history can conflate everything that is not human, flattening and erasing the nuances of how life differs, ethically and epistemologically, from non-life. To critique this, Alaimo (2014, 14) has proposed that instead of thinking *of* the stuff of the world, we should think *as* the stuff of the world: 'the subject [is] already part of the substances, systems, and becomings of the world.' This leads me to my concluding on archives beyond the human: what would it mean to think of an archive *beyond* the human, and how might this differ from an archive *of* the non-human?

More-than-human analyses trace encounters between human and non-human others (Isaacs, 2016) and they have been taken up to think about animals, ecologies, technologies, affects, and all manner of non-sentient matter and materials. However, casting the whole realm of the "non" or "more-than" human as subject to the same kinds of analyses undermines and does damage to those non-human others who are sentient or living. More-than-human analyses tend to focus on the flourishing and relationality of life and co-existence, paying less attention to the violence and power that underpins these assemblages or networks. In the archives, this means not only that a human perspective, somewhat unavoidably, dominates, but that the stories of animals are made akin to those of the matter of the archive itself, obfuscating not just their suffering but also their agency and voices. This flattening of power and relations is what an archive *beyond* the human, my work in the archives suggests, should refuse: the archives that I have discussed here provide opportunities to understand and challenge the power-laden relationships between human and nonhuman animals.

Archives beyond the human have, in this essay, highlighted how politics, environment, science, culture and technology have created particular siloes of memory – and power. They are, of course, *not* non-human archives. On a human-altered planet, is there anything untouched by the human? Animal activism, in my first example, attempts to push back against human exploitation of animals and, often, ends up forgetting altogether about animals themselves. In the digital archives of the Royal Geographical Society, scientific and social prejudices work together to hide a story of a species for over a century. And, in the final example of the chicken, these ubiquitous

birds have become part of the planetary archive and their bodies archives of human intensification, but only under the auspices of the Anthropocene.

Yet, animals do make archives, of a sort, and not in Meillasoux's sense of fossils, or traces left on the planet. There are familiar examples: magpies famously collect shiny objects and display them to attract a mate and squirrels gather acorns and plant them into the earth to rediscover over winter. Lacewing larvae, or "junk bugs", collect vegetation and the carcasses of other insects on their spiny backs to hide from prey; the satin bowerbird in Australia collects only blue objects as part of ritual courtship, and decorator crab species collect materials from around their environments, including other living creatures, to create disguises for themselves (Lotzof, nd). Returning, then, to the first question I asked in this essay, "what is an archive?"; if it is a conscious creation for storage or connection with others of the same species, then many of these animal formations (and others, such as the building of homes or the leaving of scent trails) may need to folded into an archival ethic that is truly *beyond* the human. The place and time for extending archives beyond the human to meaningfully include the animal complicates debates around history and archival practice, but it may also allow us to view time and memory through an important beyond-human lens.

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