

Thinking in Animal Signs: Tracking as a Biosemiotic Exercise, Ecopsychological Practice, and a Transpersonal Path

Jorge Conesa-Sevilla

Jorge Conesa-Sevilla is an associate professor at Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin. jconesa@northland.edu



Chitola

The human mind came into existence tracking, which for us creates a land of named places and fosters narration, the tale of adventure. Perhaps the quest began as food search. But in scrutinizing the details of the potential prey, competitors, and predators upon ourselves, and all the signs they leave, it seems more abstract, like scientific curiosity, communicated in art and narrated in myth...The whole sequence of brain and mind evolution by attention to animals constitutes a unique twist in the primate obsession with the self and society.

--Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*.

Introduction

Tracking is literally following some creature's footsteps, but the perspective-taking act, a *theory of mind in action*, also becomes, if artful and effective, following some mind's footsteps. In that ultimate predator-prey *venatic* game or dance, and as Paul Shepard alludes to in the opening quote, the human mind *jumps tracks*¹ and the abstracted

game is over-regularized toward, yes, a one-to-one totemic identification with the mind afoot, but also with an extended ground of natural philosophy and myth. The *transpersonalization* sequence (alchemy, or association) moves Zen-like from the ABCs of toe sounding; from the practical and intellectual “bear is hungry,” to the mythical; and then back to the commonality of the universal human mind. *All archetypes can be chased after in this way and all dreams are vectored movements toward something or some mind expressing truths.* The multiplicity of signs associated with “minds thinking something,” creates a *biosemiotic coda* where scat, tracks, hair, plumes, sounds, blood, wind direction, ground texture, and weather communicate in gestalts to a person who, wittingly or not, will, at the end of the chase, think in ecological “wholes” and be forced out of their human shell, sooner or later, to become something better.

The “wholes,” as Levi Strauss noted,² in addition to assisting the individual tracking mind, become the seeds for totemic kinship relational systems that structure societies the world over.³ The seamless ecology of creatures afoot or on wings, mythical SELF, and a sustainable and meaningful society begin with the sensuous caressing of a concavity of soil and blood in snow or dust. Human language, and its cognitive envelope, reflects like a historical mirror, whether the mind is in synch or not.⁴

As we humans became increasingly literate, we both lost and gained tracking skills, or traded quarry. From an ecopsychological perspective, it is no coincidence perhaps that as we began making and reading signs or marks on paper, we did less and less foot tracking. It might have begun almost innocently with cuneiform writing: it seemed to be almost the same thing, imprinting little marks on soft clay as if playing at chasing big game. But then, the writing became very boring and monotonous—all that record keeping of how many cattle one had, and never seeing the variety of species and tracks. This is the *synnomic evolution* of language trading functions as it went to, finally, being impoverished to an act of singularized false propaganda.⁵

However, foot tracks never lied. What we lost with the de-evolution of language we gained when “new trackers” rediscovered and co-opted foot tracking, once again, in the service of life. While tracking the origins of life itself, Maurice Wilkins and Rosalind Franklin used the basic inferential skills of an able scout, and with X-ray crystallography as mud, allowed others to tell the story of the serpent of life: DNA. The same inference abilities (and using the same medium as the previous researchers, photographic plates) helped Edwin Hubble prove Einstein's

insights. Stars left their own tracks, and a red shift meant, like a fading print in the desert sand, that they were moving fast away from us. Moreover, an entire soup of exotic subatomic particles and their behaviours are also inferred, post hoc, as if they were strange animals themselves. Their beautiful and short-lived arcs and collisions may someday help tie the big cosmos to the micro-universe. Recently, a host of new exo-planets have been discovered, and while using similar tracking techniques as Hubble's, it may be possible to know whether life exists elsewhere. It is not a trivial point that the same basic set of perceptual-cognitive skills has allowed for so many other discoveries. But all this looking “out there” and “down here” has also limited and distracted its original use—from looking inward.

When I worked for the California Department of Fish and Game in Humboldt County, tracking was more or less a mundane job skill that was useful in explaining the behaviour of predators, such as the otter. On the muddy riverbanks of the Klamath River, we interpreted tails swashing, webbed weasel feet, and steelhead body parts as “one kill,” wrote it down on a chart, and moved on to the next sign and checkmark. Before setting up salmon weirs, it was wise to check for signs of black bears and their cubs. The human-like tracks of bears gave me the same feeling as when I found human tracks in a lonely grove where I wanted to be alone: cautious annoyance. Encountering bears face to face never gave me the same feeling. Many times I tracked our exuberant Australian Sheppard through the redwoods while she was giving chase to Roosevelt Elk. There, I saw bobcat and knew its mark. I saw skunks and knew their marks. I once saw, and then confirmed with her tracks, a deadly ghost: puma. Since then, infrequently, I have seen puma tracks and the same first animal comes to mind, every time, looming larger in my dreams.⁶ That was many years ago and thousands of tracks before I started to understand their minds and mine.

The “fish and gamer” was after all, only a worker who, yes, was having fun, but who was also getting paid. It was, however, the tracks of a chamois two years ago that consolidated all this perfunctory tracking into *totemic doing*. The tracks were of a large male chamois with an asymmetrical right front hoof.⁷ The longer right toe was similar to my longer middle finger. So I began *animalizing* his print and his human-like hoof marks began *humanizing* me. When I encounter his track still, his unique signature, I bring my own right longer middle and index fingers upon it, and “hoof” in the snow the movements of his legs. Sometimes, if I am really stealthy (hard to do at 50 with an arthritic left knee), I find him resting under a Jurassic rock overhang. He looks down from his sunny perch and probably thinks, “So, you are the scent I smell

touching my tracks, what do you want?" If I walk on a higher ridge, his fleeing distance is shortened and I only get to see the fat tail end of a mass of muscles tumbling down like a soft avalanche, but surer of itself.

It is true that I am anthropomorphizing but that is the point: This particular chamois is an ambassador of sorts to a mountain I hardly know at all and knowing him allows me, if not safe, at least a passage through it because I know where and how he walks that space. More importantly, I am no longer an unknown human crisscrossing a frigid landscape on his hurried way to beer or chocolate, but a slow and purposeful "knower" who has shed the human to become a chamois or a red fox. Their tracks, chamois' and red foxes', mean that and much more. The red fox in particular assists the chamois with his instruction and adds a mind much more feline-supple than goat-like: pouncing here, mating there, hiding around here somewhere.

Incidentally, the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) is the only canid, out of 35 known species, that leaves a unique sign: a paw pad print with a chevron pointing in the direction of its walk. The chevron is made by a callous formation, again, not found in any other *Canidae*.⁸ For as long as the human mind has wanted to know the mind of the red fox, imprint with it, and recognized its "arrow" paw prints, the human mind has interpreted and reinterpreted even more abstractly this chevron sign, one presumes, as the prototypical vector of direction. Even more, the fox being one of several animals, as Paul Shepard identifies, that are "at the edges" of human animal cognition, neither cat nor dog, neither friend nor foe, it also represents a cunning magical trickster.⁹ That the ambiguous trickster is also able to point to a precise destination for the human mind to follow is equally the subject of biosemiotics and of ecopsychological unfolding that eventually leads into a transpersonal quest.

To the degree that I interpret the tracks of others, the landscape as a whole is revealed to me in a way that a compass and binoculars cannot disclose it.

The Biosemiotics of Tracking

Tracking is a *biosemiotic* endeavour and skill to the extent that animal behaviour leaves "signs" that can be later interpreted. Being primates, and obsessive about *seeing*, we see the "signs" and read their syntax. In this sense, tracks are like words and sentences that inform, when correctly interpreted, a great deal about the authors of these prints.

Tracks are *text* in a truly semiotic sense, and more accurately, they are an example of biosemiosis, or *natural signing*.¹⁰ It makes sense, at many levels, to begin an *ecopsychological practice* by learning how to track humans and non-human animals, by accepting this task as biosemiosis. There are at least *three aspects of the interplay between the need to start and deepen an ecopsychological practice and its biosemiosis*.

First, individuals committed and starting an authentic *ecopsychological unfolding practice*, especially if they do not have a lot of experiences in the wild, find that *nature is mute or silent and does not transmit meaningful or comprehensible messages*. In city life, humans are used to “reading,” (being bombarded really¹¹) interpreting, and acquiring meaning from the written word from multiple sources. Their transit through cities is full of information. In contrast, the apparent silence of nature, or the mysteriously sonorous, or the immensity of nature, can be, at times, foreboding because it does not seem, at first, to convey these meanings, or even any meaning at all. *Nature looms silently and we escape to the comforts of our home*. By learning how to track, an entire new universe of natural gossip, potentially useful information, and new meanings are clearly understood and can later become significant elements of a transpersonal journey.¹²

Second, *knowing what other animals “say” with their tracks, and how their behaviours engage the behaviours of other animals, immerses human cognitive and affective processes in a kinship with their lives and life histories, allowing for the opportunity of rediscovering the totemic power of the animal spirit*. From here on, identifying with an animal's choices, pursuits, and overall pattern of decision-making, not only informs our own intelligence and teaches us specific skills and useful bits of information, but in time, it becomes part of a genuine transpersonal exercise: I am no longer the human that follows signs but a red fox on its way to its den. Through their tracks, non-human animals become the ambassadors of a world that may once have appeared forbidden and mute. They avoid unsafe trails and so must we, they find great places to stay dry and so we invade their homes, they find food and share it with us.

Third, animal tracks not only inform us about the meaning of the particular attitude or personality of an individual creature, or of its immediate pursuits, or of a group of animals, but as an ensemble, tracks crisscross into meaning-paths and thus generate a *biosemiotic coda*, a more complex and grander story that is dependent upon the ecological situation of a particular bioregion. *Through tracking, we also learn*

about geology, topography, weather, hydrology, botany, predator-prey relationships, food items, and a host of other natural phenomena, interrelated into a greater knowing of a place. Afterwards, we can never feel “out of place” in nature because we will be able to read *Her* signs.

Tracking *is, literally, following life, step by step.* At the end of the trail, at the end of many trails, we might begin to understand the tracks we ourselves make. Tracking is an intense perceptual task that combines exercise with the deciphering of many *koans*. It can be akin to walking meditation while deciphering a *koan*: What is the sound of coyote walking backwards? If one is focused on the track and in trying to understand the animal brother/sister, then one is no longer focused on little self, on selfish self. If we forget about little self, everyday, then there is a chance that big self will come-a-visiting, wearing a coyote, fox, or a wolf mask, dancing.

How tracking is really “signing,” how signing is really becoming

In the context and intent of the arguments made thus far, an animal does not leave tracks so we can find them—we follow tracks so that we can find ourselves. Equally, the tracks are normally the means to a kill or for setting a clever trap; but the killing that counts is putting out of its misery the distorted ego, and the trap is for capturing defunct personas acquired during an over civilized and pampered life.

Tracking is, like other complex human and enriching endeavours, both art and science. The front paw prints of the beaver, raccoon, muskrat, and opossum are so human like: gnomes playing in the mud. Their miniature “us” are industrious, adroit, fussy, and manipulative, but we know, empirically, that these are not busy gnomes but creatures with their own natural histories. And yet, during their tracking and recognition, the human mind fantasizes and imagines fairy tales, forgets about the furry creatures and imbues their prints with the magico-realism of Irish and Finnish tales.

The ease with which animal tracks, the written word, and human imagination easily trade cognitive spaces with each other is Paul Shepard's¹³ strong argument for the necessary co-evolution of the human mind in tandem with the minds of all the other animals.¹⁴ To him, this was an indispensable argument for the development of human cognition above and beyond what any other cognitive-linguistic theory might have said about the origins of our intelligence. It is hard to find

counterarguments to many of his theses. But while tracking, the realization that human and non-human animals have pushed their original reptilian and shrew-like cognitive spheres to their present limits is plain to see. *Biosemiotically* speaking, nature is inter-semiotic and thus inter-interpretative from the molecular to the air-water-broadcasted communicative levels.¹⁵ But hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling (a combination of *autocentric* and *allocentric* sensory skills) did not signify enough for the primate who abandoned the forest or was forced to forage out yonder in plain sight.

This ancestor began life in the plains, working from the capital accrued in arboreal, three-dimensional, and color-vision life, and “saw for a living.” The ancestor stood up and was able to see a texture gradient of art prints disappearing into the open horizon. Who could resist such an invitation? It also *saw* for a heart and for his or her spirit. And *saw* in the savannas they did, the hooves of so many hoofed animals: curving inward, dancing outward, digging deeper, sprawling, pointing, or forever resting dead in the air, which signified the gold of nutrition: bone marrow. These primates also *saw* each other in malcontent, in sex, in nurturing, and in war. And they always *saw* other non-primates doing the same while leaving their tracks. And it must have been very easy, not only to *see* the visual cacophony of multiple beasts cavorting on the African soil, but to *see* their own prints doing the same dances. And it must have been very easy to continue to dance and to continue making marks on the sand, all sorts of marks, and to replicate these for other primates. Who among them could resist the tracing and re-drawing with nimble fingers around the edges and inside the profundity of wildebeest tracks, so geometric, so safe to touch? As if saying, “Here I am, touching your soul and there is nothing you can do about it.” Of course, they must have also touched their own tracks and felt, by comparison, the same intuitive depth. If I can touch your soul, couldn't I touch mine as well?

And during those dances, who remembers under what song, a primate learned about a spirit that was grander than all the soil marks put together. It did not have to be a complicated thought, just the intuition that my footprint is one among so many others, no more, no less. *And that is the beginning of transpersonal psychology; first I acquire a self or a centre, then I crowd it or delude it, and, finally, I transcend it.* The hydrology of redemption and forgiveness helped too; the rains always came and washed the sin prints, all the errors of visual cacophony away. The earth as soil was renewed. There was clarity once again and new prints to step into and to follow. Physical anthropologists make us share their sense of awe when discovering humanoid prints fossilized

on ancient “fresh” volcanic ash. A line of dainty feminine steps is boldly walking into a vast psychological vault. With the clarity of hindsight we gasp at her courage and almost warn: stay!

It is almost an obligation to be impressionistic when describing a primal and very distant past. But what yokes their *seeing* to ours is a common primate visual predisposition to read signs on surfaces. To spot fleas doing their own jumping dances on skin-soil and to remove them is to be like them. To read these very words on paper is, as the American aboriginal peoples described, reading *tracks* on paper. *Their primate ancestral ecopsychological wellness was almost guaranteed by their perilous sustenance and total reliance on perceptual gifts.* Our ecopsychological wellness seems, more and more, to be a re-inventing and co-opting of their ways. *Thus tracking is all things true: historical glue, enduring dirt art, perceptual and cognitive challenge, physical exercise, encyclopedic and ecological knowledge, dirt cheap, a source of self-esteem, a diet for an obese self, and a vanishing act of human turned into a fox-like creature: neither cat nor dog, neither friend nor foe, slit-eyed and slicing through forests. All ambiguity is embraced, all contrasts erased, all pointing toward individuation.*

Tracking is, once again, the semiotic art-act that binds the eye to the heart, to the self, to the mind, and to the other.

In the book of the Sioux it is written:
they have gone away into the earth to hide.
Nothing will coax them out again
but the people dancing.”

-Mary Oliver, “Ghosts,” from *New and selected Poems*



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Notes

¹ The above passage is used as a metaphor for higher and more abstract forms of understanding. Technically speaking, it refers to inferred and projected tracks or the easy and lazy way of tracking.

² And Paul Shepard brilliantly expanded in *Animal Intelligence* and *The Others*, 1996.

³ Levi-Strauss, 1966.

⁴ Conesa-Sevilla, 2005a.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Conesa-Sevilla, 2005b.

⁷ This animal is the biggest chamois I have seen in Switzerland.

⁸ A close relative of the red fox, the gray fox, does not have this feature, making the tracking of both foxes fairly easy.

⁹ Shepard, 1996.

¹⁰ Conesa-Sevilla, 2001.

¹¹ Conesa-Sevilla, 2005.

¹² Conesa-Sevilla, 2006.

¹³ Shepard, 1996; 1998.

¹⁴ Conesa-Sevilla, 2007.

¹⁵ Hoffmeyer, 1996.