



Towards the (Im)Probable Ecocentric Encounter: Isabella Lucy Bird amongst the Tibetans

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the way in which Isabella Bird tries to overcome her preconceived ideas of what constitutes the South as exotic “other”; ideas that, at first, shape her response to her encounter with the Tibetan people. There is a sort of masculine, dominant voice at work in her writing that often pervades her descriptions of peoples and places, a voice that is entangled with culture-bound colonial discourses of Englishness, even though her travelling experience offers a compelling example of a woman who resists discriminatory ideas about class, race, gender and civilization. *Among the Tibetans* illustrates the dualistic tensions that inform Isabella Bird’s life and writing, and it embodies her continuing struggle to overcome a dominant perspective. Despite her initial difficulty in presenting Tibet and the Tibetans as anything other than a projection of conventional Western ways of seeing and thinking, there are moments in the travelogue when she cuts away the clichés, and provides the reader with less structured, more immediate insights into her sense of place, her entanglement with the reality around her, and her attempts to establish a vital relationship with the non-human. It is because of the importance she attaches to these “earthly sensuous” experiences in nature that she succeeds in challenging her own ethnocentric and anthropocentric bias, thereby rediscovering an open-minded capacity for wonder, and an ecocentric grasp of this world’s constitutive importance.

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Daughter of a clergyman, wife and soon widow of a Scottish physician, Isabella Lucy Bird (1831-1904) became the first female fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1892, and with her strong temperament, she travelled to the farthest regions of Asia and America. “I am doing what a woman can hardly ever do, leading a life fit to recruit a man” (Bird 2002, 110), she wrote during one of her early voyages in 1873; and it was in this spirit that she set out on an arduous and exacting journey to Tibet, later described in the travelogue *Among the Tibetans*, published in 1894. As its title suggests, the focus of Bird’s narrative is the cultural encounter, an encounter experienced in terms of continuous negotiations of difference and similarity.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the way in which Bird struggles to overcome her preconceived ideas of what constitutes the South as exotic “other”; ideas that, at first, shape her response to these same encounters. There is a sort of masculine, dominant voice at work in her writing that often pervades her descriptions of peoples and places, a voice that is clearly entangled with culture-bound colonial discourses of Englishness, even though her travelling experience throughout the world offers a compelling example of a woman who resists discriminatory ideas about classes, race, gender and civilization. As Susan Kollin observes in her analysis of women travel writers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “white women, in claiming a larger cultural role for themselves as travelers, frequently did so by reproducing the same discursive tactics used against them” (Kollin 1997, 106). Isabella Bird encapsulates this contradictory stance: officially she undertook her adventurous travels to find a solution to her declining health. For Kay Chubbock, “[s]he was, in Victorian terms, a ‘neurasthenic’: a woman bedevilled by physiological symptoms that arose principally from psychological problems” (Bird 2002, 6). However, the sense of freedom she experienced when facing the wilderness without any companion, the satisfaction she got when “she triumphed over her own limitations of health and strength” (Stoddart 2011, vi), helped her overcome her problems, further underlining her reputation as an icon of resistance in the emergent women’s struggle against the precepts of domesticity and patriarchally-imposed gender roles. Moreover, Bird’s reputation as “a serious scientific writer” (Wagner 2015, 184) grew consistently; her travel accounts were considered an invaluable contribution to the ethnographical debates of the time, and far from representing an outlier (as merely an unconventional lady-traveller), she was progressively re-assimilated by the very Victorian society from which she was trying to escape. Hence, on the first edition of *Among the Tibetans* her name is given as Isabella Bird Bishop, and Honorary Fellow of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society; being the wife of a practitioner (Dr John Bishop), and the member of a recognized scientific institution, she is now an acclaimed figure, a leading and respected female voice testifying to the British imperialist project.

The complexity of Isabella Bird’s personality was recognized by her contemporaries. Soon after her death, the *Edinburgh Medical Journal* described her as a sort of “anachronism”: how could such a fragile creature survive the challenges of her innumerable and extraordinary voyages? How was it possible that at home she was “the invalid, the delicate, gentle-voiced woman”, but as a traveller she turned into the “pioneer” who “laughed at fatigue”, and was “indifferent to the terrors of danger”? (“Mrs Bishop” 1904, 383)

Among the Tibetans illustrates the dualistic tensions that inform Isabella Bird’s life, and underpin her often contradictory position in society. One of these tensions is made explicit by the title of the travelogue itself, which only partially implies inclusivity and

communion with the population. In spite of her efforts to suggest that her experience in Tibet is an immersion in the life, space and culture of the place she is visiting, the preposition “among” cannot easily dissolve the implicit polarity and the fundamental separation of the subject (the traveller) with the object (Tibet and the Tibetans) – a separation that is only momentarily filled by the spatial contiguity associated with travel itself. Elsewhere Isabella tries to reject the systematic dichotomization of a colonial self and of a colonized other, in which the self is necessarily “civilized” and lives accordingly. As she writes in a letter to her sister Henrietta during her journey to China, “I like Hongkong, though so civilized a life does not of course suit me and I don’t like travelling in palanquins” (Bird 2002, 206). Again, while in Hawaii, she emphasizes how she “feel[s] energy for anything except conventions and civilization!” (Bird 2002, 110). And even at the start of her Tibetan journey, when Isabella tries to describe the Vale of Kashmir, she realises to her disappointment that the British colonial enterprise has already redesigned this remote place, thus reducing it to a reproduction of the Western world:

English tents dotted the landscape, there was no mountain, valley, or plateau, however remote, free from the clatter of English voices and the trained servility of Hindu servants, and even Sonamarg, at the altitude of 8,000 feet and rough of access, had capitulated to lawn-tennis. To a traveller this Anglo-Indian hubbub was intolerable, and I left Srinagar and many kind friends on June 20 for the uplifted plateaux of lesser Tibet. (Bird 2010, 8-9)

Isabella Bird’s reaction is categorical. This process of diminution at the expense of the people of Kashmir, enacted through reification and normalization, is unacceptable. The only solution is to press still further into the uplands, in the hope that she can find places and people still unaffected by this imperializing process. This desire is integral to her sense of self as a traveller, and to her sense of what being a traveller is and means. But we can also surmise that it is a reflection of her own endeavour to avoid the self-same respectable society that sought to constrain women identities and roles.

However, despite her resolution to escape the gendered restrictions and the canons of everyday life, when she is in the South, her language is still imbued in clichés, and her narrative overtly encodes the very same strictures, transforming her in a kind of restatement of a patriarchal, white, dominant, Western society. Thus, in her description of the Tibetans, Isabella Bird activates a process of *othering* of the population she has just encountered. As Sara Mills observes, this happens when a people is not described “as fully individuals, but as composed of several parts of the body” (Mills 2001, 89), or in terms of their “abhorrent smell and filthiness” (90). And this is precisely what happens in Bird’s account:

They have high cheekbones, broad and flat noses without visible bridges, small, dark, oblique eyes, with heavy lids and imperceptible eyebrows, wide mouths, full lips, big, projecting ears, deformed by great hoops, straight black hair nearly as coarse as horsehair, and short, square, ungainly figures. The faces of the men are smooth. [...] The Tibetans are dirty. They wash once a year, and, except for festivals, seldom change their clothes till they begin to drop off (43, 45-46) [...] the revolting odours [...] of unwashed woollen clothes which drifted through the doorway, were overpowering. (120)

Bird’s physical representation of the Tibetans seems to deny individuality to this population, reducing them to a catalogue of features, to a taxonomical system that

inevitably suggests a hierarchical structure, and that positions the colonisers above the colonized. Thus, Isabella Bird's descriptions of Tibet and the Tibetans become a projection of conventional Western ways of seeing and thinking – ways that call into question values and categories such as beauty and ugliness, decency and rudeness. What the traveller notices among the inhabitants of Lesser Tibet is that they are “ugly, short, squat, yellow-skinned, flat-nosed, oblique-eyed, uncouth-looking people” (40). Her narrative emphasizes the “irredeemable ugliness” (43) of the natives and, in so doing, it obviously assumes pseudo-objective aesthetic canons through which peoples and places are perceived, and against which they are evaluated. The South is thereby domesticated and subsumed within the predicable matrix of Western values. Even Leh, the capital of Lesser Tibet, which Isabella Bird reaches only after a long journey of twenty six days, is defined as a “Venice of the Himalayas, with a broad rushing river for its high street and winding canals for its back streets” (12). In the village of Kylang, built on the side of an immense mountain of about 6000 metres, what she emphasizes, instead, is that “rooms are papered with engravings from the *Illustrated London News*”, that the bare rooms of the missionaries remind her of “the very poor pastors in the Fatherland”, and that the garden is “brilliant with zinnias, dianthus and petunias, all of immense size, and planted with European trees” (153).

Even the lens of the picturesque through which Bird perceives the Tibetan space is meaningful here. A picturesque enjoyment of landscape is not based on an instinctual and emotional appreciation of nature itself, but on an “aestheticization of landscape to extremes”, in the sense that it is “the spectator who engages the machinery of the picturesque aesthetic, mentally manufacturing a work of art where before there had been a work of nature” (Byerly 1995, 55). In *Among the Tibetans*, both buildings and natural scenery become objects of aesthetic contemplation, and they serve to express the traveller's tendency to see the exotic as a form of “domestic wilderness” and an attractive commodity: everything in Lesser Tibet is so regarded. Thus, Isabella writes of a “picturesque wooden architecture” (15); a picturesque fort (49), and the “picturesque irregularities” (115) of the imposing Castle of Stok, constructed on a lofty rock. The Tibetan Buddhist temples built on “lofty isolated rocks or mountain spurs”, are “enchanted” in their “picturesqueness” (47), and the bazaar – crowded with people, animals and objects, with its plurality of voices, tongues and colours – is depicted as a “picturesque confusion” (60). Likewise, the almost inaccessible monastery of Deskyid (“[b]uilt on a spur of rock rising on one side 2000 feet perpendicularly from a torrent”), becomes “the most picturesque object I have ever seen” (84).

Thus, Isabella brings a European frame of mind into Tibetan surroundings, and while painting her pictures of nature and society, she creates a version of Tibet that is the expression of an inherited scheme of Western values and education. In this process of appropriation of a foreign culture, Isabella Bird reduces her subject matter to specific patterns of thought, conceptualizations, tropes or visual frames that objectify both the Tibetan space and its inhabitants. The picturesque is one; the grotesque and the sublime two more. Therefore, the mountains are depicted as abhorrent and fearful; they are “monstrous protuberances” (122) or “giants” (136), whose sight awes the traveller, and in their “grim nudity and repulsive horror” (49) they evoke the category of the sublime. Similarly, the ugliness of the Tibetan population is characterized by the grotesque, insofar as the traveller's reaction is marked by distaste, and relies on the “fundamental element of disharmony” (Thompson 1972, 20). The same paradigm of

repugnance connotes descriptions of Tibetan food: Bird cannot escape some anthropological generalizations when she defines a meal she is being offered by the natives as a “broth of abominable things”, the “*Chang*”, as a “dirty-looking beer”, a piece of butter as a “rancid” substance, having a “rank flavour from the goatskin in which it was kept” (83), or “the stale smoke of juniper chips” emitting the most “revolting odours” (120). In highlighting the ugly or the deviant, and the rotten – and in noting the processes of putrefaction – Bird inevitably falls prey to those standardized values and codes that reduce the other into an anatomically, socially and culturally inferior being.

As these examples suggest, Isabella Bird codifies her Tibetan experience in a series of literary topoi such as the sublime, the grotesque, and the picturesque, and in so doing she inexorably reifies exotic peoples and places, while transforming herself into a feminized version of the imperial I, an ethnocentric, privileged, dominant subject. Yet, this process is itself the means by which she becomes an “object,” a thing-not-herself. Quite paradoxically, in her attempt to elude the restrictions imposed by her gender, she is soon re-appropriated by them. As I discuss below, she becomes entangled in those very frames and constraints that differentiate the traveller from the tourist, and is entrapped by the very tools and techniques she uses in order to commodify the reality she encounters.

Here it is useful to introduce the philosophy of Terminal Realism, which was theorized and advocated by Guido Oldani. Even though he defined it as the religion of the third millennium, its outset unavoidably coincided with the development of the Industrial Revolution. According to Oldani, the expansion of the cities and the progress of capitalism altered the perception of reality in Western society, a society which is made up more of objects than it is of nature. Thus, “[t]he surviving nature gets wasted to the advantage of the artificial one in a process in which the artificial looks natural and nature seems to exist only to the extent that it is waiting to become artificial, perhaps in its totality” (Oldani and Behr 2011, 303). Timothy Morton’s highly influential object-oriented-ontology (OOO) shares certain of these themes. Morton’s OOO is expressed in his ecological approach to contemporary thought and action, centred on the idea of “hyperobjects”, and it reflects on the pervasive presence of “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Morton 2013, 1). For Morton hyperobjects are “entities” (Morton 2013, 120), “agents” (29). “They are indeed more than a little demonic, in the sense that they appear to straddle worlds and times, like the [...] electromagnetic fields” (Morton 2013, 29). From different angles, both Oldani and Morton express the same concern: that the world is becoming “more or less a container in which objectified things float or stand” (Morton 2013, 99).

In Isabella Bird’s textualization of the South, the striking presence of Western modes of objectification – and of the objects she brings with her, mentally if not physically – inevitably shapes her approach and her perception of the foreign country she is visiting. This process of objectification of the real, this attempt to represent the natural world in terms of artificial elements is a notable feature of Bird’s travelogue, and this is stylistically rendered by what Oldani defines as “the inversion of similitude”, that is: “no longer does an airplane resemble a seagull, but vice versa” (Oldani and Behr 2011, 303). Such conceptual restructuring often occurs when, in mapping the

Tibetan environment, Isabella Bird resorts to inverse metaphors¹ and similes: a stylistic device that determines an anomalous shift in the conceptual ground of the metaphor itself. As a consequence, elements of the natural world of Tibet and Kashmir are associated with objects and images entirely suited to the colonial ideology, and to a Western topography: “The valley, lying in shadow at their base, was a dream of beauty, *green as an English lawn*, starred with white lilies, and dotted with clumps of trees which were festooned with red and white roses, clematis and white jasmine” (26-27, my italics). Evidently, even amidst the remotest areas of the South, in the lofty pass of Toglang, among “precipitous” and “gigantic mountains”, in the valleys, gorges and chasms, “guarded by nearly perpendicular needles of rock flaming in the western sun” (144), Isabella Bird employs images that are known and comfortable to her, insofar as they recall the British space, which is both accessible and comprehensible. This attempt to tame wilderness, and to create a “picturesque framing of landscape” (Byerly 1995, 58) inevitably involves an appropriation of the landscape itself, that “ha[s] more to do with the attitude of the viewer than the inherent qualities of the scene” (Byerly 1995, 56). Therefore, in the midst of the highest peaks in the mountain pass of Lachalang, Isabella Bird finally finds a place to camp, and she describes it as “*a velvety green lawn* just large enough for a few tents” (144, my italics). When facing the exotic lands, she seems never to abandon a Western perspective in which nature is beautiful because perfect, as perfect as English gardens or lawns which are equated to velvet, an artificial element that often appears in Bird’s text, and whose metaphorical use itself has epistemological implications². Both the simile (as green as an English lawn), and the metaphor (grass is velvet) presuppose a conceptual reorganization in which Tibet’s wild territory is forcibly assimilated into the category of the picturesque, and made beautiful because tidy. Thus, Isabella Bird describes the environment using a figurative language that tends to deny specificity and essence to this “foreign” wilderness, reconfiguring it in terms of the familiar, recognizable, and domesticated. Even Gyalpo, the “quite untameable” horse that accompanies Isabella Bird during her journey throughout Tibet was “as light as a greyhound and as strong as a cart-horse” (9). If in the first simile the creature is paralleled to a breed of dog that was familiar to the nobility of Victorian England, in the second the analogy equally recalls a cultural sphere that pertains to the society she belongs to (and to the objects related to it), and therefore to the relevant function of the horses in agriculture, mining and transport.

Yet crucially, *Among the Tibetans* is more than this. It also embodies Isabella Bird’s continuing struggle to overcome this dominant perspective – a perspective from which she actually yearned to escape throughout her life, as her nomadic experiences testify.³ There are moments in the travelogue when she cuts away the clichés, and provides the reader with less structured, more immediate insights into her sense of place, her entanglement with the reality around her, and her attempts to establish a vital relationship with the non-human. In her continuous struggle to elude those tenets with which she is imbued, and which place her amongst the exponents of Western civilization within the colonial discourse, Bird allows the material and the more-than-human world to speak to her senses. It is a process that, as David Abram notices,

¹ On the features and functions of inverted metaphors see Deane 1993, 111-26.

² Significantly, there is another example in the text: “I [...] travelled to the grand ravines which led to Kashmir [...] reaching Srinagar at the end of April, when the velvet lawns were at their greenest [...]” (8).

³ On Isabella Lucy Bird’s experience of travel writing as a way of resisting the tenets of domesticity, and reconstructing her own identity through her contact with wilderness, see Ettore 2018, 41-52.

“draws our attention to things”, and “enables our senses to really engage and participate with them. [...] And we find ourselves not above, but in the very midst of this living field, our own sentience part and parcel of the sensuous landscape” (Abram 2011, 44, 47). So, in *Among the Tibetans* there are passages in which the narrative does not conform to a mere process of reification of an autochthonous population and constructed “landscape”: instead, it somehow blurs the ordered hierarchies in favour of a kinship with the more-than-human, thus allowing the traveller to perceive the dynamic pulse of nature with its inherently “chaotic [and] stochastic” features (Scott 2014, 1). In the village of Shergol, camping on a steep slope, Isabella feels so completely immersed and lost amidst “[t]he chaos of rocks and sand, walled in by vermilion and orange mountains” (40, 39), that she almost forgets the considerable perils and risks she is continually facing. Isabella can feel the magnificent disorder of nature, with its colours and the “deafening noise of a river” (33); she can enjoy “the *living waters* which create [a] delightful oasis” (113-114, my italics), and relish in “[t]he rush of a herd of bellowing *yaks* at a wild gallop” (64); in her descent to Shayok River, when she is among the icy ravines, she is impressed by the melting process of the snows and by the river that, “roaring hoarsely, was a mad rush of grey rapids and grey foam” (69). Significantly, then, the synesthetic games activated by the view of a natural scene seem to highlight the fact that, for Isabella, wonder is not only a visual spectacle, but it “may be experienced in tactile or acoustic experiences” (Willmott 2018, 19): “a clear swift stream made fitting music, [...] the air was cool, a lemon light bathed the foreground, and to the north, [...] the great mountains of the Leh range, with every cleft defined in purple, or blue, lifted their vermilion peaks into the rosy sky. It was the poetry and luxury of travel” (114).

On these occurrences the narrative points to something that goes beyond Terminal Realism: the traveller is no longer (or, not simply) a spectator, an ethnographer or a feminized version of an imperial I/eye; she is entangled with the real – a reality which appears to possess agency. The mountains, the rivers and the rocks are alive, they express their own energy, and act as “quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010, viii). And Isabella seems able to participate in this liveliness, in these “intra-actions”⁴ with the vibrant materiality of the earth:

With every mile the surroundings became more markedly of the Central Asian type. All day long a white, scintillating sun blazes out of a deep blue, rainless, cloudless sky. The air is exhilarating. *The traveller is conscious of daily-increasing energy and vitality.* There are no trees, and deep crimson roses along torrent beds are the only shrubs. But for a brief fortnight in June, which chanced to occur during my journey, the valleys and lower slopes present a wonderful aspect of beauty and joyousness. Rose and pale pink primulas fringe the margin of the snow, the dainty *Pedicularis tubiflora* covers moist spots with its mantle of gold; great yellow and white, and small purple and white anemones, pink and white dianthus, a very large myosotis, bringing the intense blue of heaven down to earth, purple orchids by the water, borage staining whole tracts deep blue, martagon lilies, pale green lilies veined and spotted with brown, yellow, orange, and purple vetches,

⁴ I am using here Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism that on the one hand draws attention to the liveliness or agentiality of matter, on the other insists on our entanglement with it. Barad’s use of the neologism “intra-action” to denote “*the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*” stresses the fact that we exist as individuals in a constant and continuous process of becoming, which necessarily has consequences for other foundational concepts such as objectivity and subjectivity (see Barad 2007, 33).

painter's brush, dwarf dandelions, white clover, filling the air with fragrance, pink and cream asters, chrysanthemums, lychnus, irises, gentian artemisia, and a hundred others, form the undergrowth of millions of tall Umbelliferae and Compositae, many of them peach scented and mostly yellow. The wind is always strong, and the millions of bright corollas, drinking in the sunblaze which perfects all too soon their brief but passionate existence, rolled in broad waves of colour with an almost Kaleidoscopic effect. (30-31, italics mine)

It is a description which saturates the reader in its subject matter, even as it refuses to make any concession to the general reader's (Western) ignorance: not many would be familiar with all the flowers and plants to which Isabella refers, but then, the reader has been forgotten in the immediacy of her encounter with what she is seeing and experiencing, and in her haste to communicate that sense of enchantment in all its detail and liveliness. This long descriptive sequence insists on the polychromy of the shrubs and on their pervasive scent: it is an explosion of colours, effects and smells that testify to Bird's capacity to see, convey, and respond to the fascination of these living landscapes. Moreover, the narrative frequently attributes agency to the plants, lifting them out of the ordinary as entities that are more than prettified backdrop, but themselves active and alive, and in that dynamism, irreducible to any generalization. The related point is that, in narrating this encounter, the figure of "Isabella Bird" escapes her own objectification, her own figuration as alien or colonial emissary, or the projection of an alien, masculine superiority. We encounter Isabella herself, in all the immediacy of her intra-active and co-constitutive encounter, and through that encounter – that subject/object blurring encounter – we also glimpse what would seem most improbable in a travelogue such as hers: the possibility of an ecocentric re-evaluation of self in relation to an immersive totality, which in itself constitutes a complete reworking of her anthropocentrism.

Significantly, Isabella also seems to be more affected by the space around her when animals are involved; curiously, they somehow engage her more than do the humans, as here, in this lengthy and impassioned description of her horse:

Gyalpo, my horse, must not be forgotten [...] He was a beautiful creature [...] He was *higher in the scale of intellect* than any horse of my acquaintance. His *cleverness* at times suggested *reasoning power*, and *his mischievousness a sense of humour*. He walked five miles an hour, jumped like a deer, climbed like a *yak*, was strong and steady in perilous fords, tireless, hardy, hungry, frolicked along ledges of precipices and over crevassed glaciers, was absolutely fearless, and his slender legs and the use he made of them were the marvel of all. *He was an enigma to the end. He was quite untameable.* (9-10, italics mine)

This is only a small part of a longer description in which – despite her undeniable impulse to normalize the exotic through the two similitudes I have previously analysed – Isabella empathizes with him in a way that allows her to interpret his expressions, his behaviour and feelings, whilst nevertheless acknowledging his alien strangeness, his incomprehensibility; he cannot be tamed, and cannot therefore be tamed by the frames or meanings that she might seek to impose upon him. Gyalpo, the "clever, plucky fellow" (28), represents a loyal and inseparable companion during her hard and often solitary voyage. When she started on her Tibetan journey, the "slender stock of Hindustani, and two men who spoke not a word of English" (28) who accompany her, are not even named or described; they are simply a functional part of her dangerous adventures amidst wide valleys, torrents and precipitous cliffs. While

crossing the great Kailas range, whose highest peak is about 6,600 metres tall, and when altitude sickness affects the whole group, Isabella is mainly struck by the sufferings of her faithful companion: “Gyalpo stopped every few yards, gasping, with blood trickling from his nostrils, and turned his head so as to look at me, with the question in his eyes, What does this mean?” (62).

Despite her evident difficulties in negotiating this literary transaction, Bird refuses to relegate the non-human world to the background; it is never merely scenery in her travelogues. Instead, it is thanks to the importance she gives to these “earthly sensuous” experiences in nature that she challenges her own ethnocentric and anthropocentric bias, thereby rediscovering an open-minded capacity for wonder, and an ecocentric grasp of this world’s constitutive importance.⁵ And it is here that her narrative offers a more intimate and confessional mode of writing, when, “while journeying through the paradise” of Tibet, she begins to see it as a thing in itself that speaks to her through its dynamic forms, and that metamorphose through the seasons, as she reveals at the very end of her narrative: “shutting my eyes to the possible perils of the Rotang, I remained until the harvest was brought home with joy and revelry, and the flush of autumn faded, and the first snow of winter gave an added majesty to the glorious valley” (159) – and in so doing she reconceives and reconstitutes her own self. Crucially, therefore, Isabella’s travelogue – in many ways so conventional and in its conventionality self-defeating – embodies an act of encounter which is also a mode of self- and species-liberation. Suddenly, we see more, and that glimpse is of a totality that subsumes its narrator and in turn, us, as readers; it is a glimpse of the ecocentric, realized through the most improbable encounters of the imperious Isabella Lucy Bird.

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⁵ On the dynamics of ecocentric encounters, see Abram 2017.

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