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Seeks-Zoos: some recent correspondence with animals

Writing from a disciplinary base in an ostensibly post-disciplinary department of Visual Cultures, deconstruction seemed to have had its day, relegated to the dead-end of a formalism that cannot serve renewed faith in creativity (a reading that may be slight but has nevertheless held some ground). Yet stories of Derrida's cat now abound in discussions of what must now mark one of his most influential, even applauded, essays, and the reception of 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)' now readjusts the picture of who or what deconstruction addresses.¹ Derrida's essays, now published in book form as *The Animal That Therefore I am*, track the animal/human distinction as it has infected so much of philosophical discourse. This distinction, in the shadow of Descartes's influential distinction between reaction and response, banishes 'the animal' to the reactive outside of the distilled responsive inner circle of 'the human.' Where animal figures do show up in centre court they are yoked to an allegorical leash, constrained to play the human in another guise. This paper assumes some knowledge of Derrida's steps in *The Animal That Therefore I am* and follows these in light of the grounds criss-crossed by less commented contemporaneous works. These works also affirm animal responses as they differently impact on questions of the autobiographical – works by Donna Haraway, Hélène Cixous and Carolee Schneemann. They are themselves after Derrida in various senses of that phrase, not least in relation to Derrida's redirection of the Cartesian question 'but as for me, who am I?'

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1) Conference proceedings were published as *L'Animal Autobiographique: Autour de Jacques Derrida*, Mallet, Marie-Louise, ed., Paris: Galilée, 1999. Derrida's address is published in English as Derrida, Jacques, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. The section cited here is 'The Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow)' trans. D. Wills, in *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Winter 2002), pp.369-418.

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Playing on the present tense of 'to be' – indistinguishable from 'to follow' in the French, a simple '*Je suis*' thus installs a non-priority and a non-presence in the would-be thinking subject. This transformation is intensified through the substitution of 'The Animal' for 'I think': no more the quarantine of 'I think therefore I am.' What leads me to follow the figure of the interspecies kiss is the way that it solicits a related question: 'who are my kin?' The interspecies kiss exacerbates, moreover, what we should already know from Derrida: performativity is neither confined to acts of speech nor to the ability to intend.

In her recent book of encounters, *When Species Meet*, Haraway appreciates the mundane quality of Derrida's morning encounter with his cat, his vigorous efforts to maintain the daily particularity of this cat and to hold at bay the allegorical lure that would dissolve her catness, as well as his recognition that the cat was responding and not only reacting to him, she yet finds a failure of curiosity in 'The Animal That Therefore I Am'. For Haraway, so much effort goes into addressing the pitfalls that philosophy has entrenched in the discourse of species that when it comes to this cat, if Derrida is curious about what her response might entail, he can find no way to write about it and she vanishes from his text as surely as if she were allegory.

Play, and all the incalculable risks it entails, surfaces theoretically when Haraway modifies the register of the question Derrida uses to reset *our* relation to *them* and disband any further variation on the rhetorical theme of 'can they do what we do?' – the line that Heidegger's work has so entrenched. Citing Jeremy Bentham, Derrida asks 'can they suffer?' while Haraway

asks 'can they play?'² Yet 'can they suffer?' doesn't simply replace something like 'can they speak? (No? Oh well, let's kill them).' Rather it joins with Derrida's reversal and displacement of the philosophical refrain of a privation, or lack of an ability as contrast to the proper possession of that ability as mark of the human. It works the ground of transforming privation into ability troubling the sovereignty of power (ability) – they *can* suffer, they can *not be able*. Thus the grounds of Derrida and Haraway don't quite square, but they should be read together, staggering, supplementing each other's work, especially since play too might also trouble the sovereignty of power.

When the cat that therefore Haraway is following disappears, she finds it substituted by the repetition of a philosophical trope trapping Derrida in a scene dominated by its visuality, and punctuated by his naked body. He is naked before his cat. Naked and ashamed. Yet for all of Haraway's acknowledged Catholic inheritance and transposed secular sense of the word made flesh, following his visual emphasis she loses track of its equivocality – the disappearance of the cat hovers between a failure of curiosity and an ethical refusal. On the one hand, she's right – this is about Jacques and not his cat about whom we learn very little – but the way it is about Jacques makes a difference. Derrida's phrasing is odd. He writes:

I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am* and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat.³

This 'just to see' (a repeated phrase) may seek but cannot seize. Its curiosity cannot calculate. Later in the essay it is echoed

2) Haraway, Donna, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008, p.22.

3) Derrida, 'The Animal' p.372, italics as original.

in the scene of Biblical naming. There God lets man (without woman) name 'in order to see' what happens. This God has both an 'infinite right of inspection' but also the 'finitude of a god who doesn't know what is going to happen to him with language.'⁴ Derrida too does not know what is going to happen when he looks 'just to see' into the eyes of this cat and in so doing asks after himself. Derrida's being – being present – is troubled not confirmed by this other. Who am I? Such an autobiographical question might expect to point the self out, point for point 'in the present' 'and in his totally naked truth'.⁵ Whether by hand, by word, by lips or by gaze this pointing does not so much fail to deliver but delivers difference not identity. Derrida does not look in order to cancel the other by seeing only his own re-confirmed reflection. Rather, the response of the other always surprises. For where autobiography habitually imports a mirror to figure its reflective function and lead automatically, autoaffectively back to the signing self, 'The Animal that Therefore I am following' sees itself in the eyes of a cat. It is habitually through the reflected other that the subject is staged for itself as such, misrecognition of that subject's capacities is part of the allure. What if the other is wholly other, and not a brother in advance? If this other is a cat? Jacques Lacan's protestations in defence of the human purchase on the image notwithstanding, Jacques Derrida is himself an autobiographical animal, and he is not alone.

Haraway nevertheless drops the frame of the mirror stage, of a strictly specular autobiographical transit, and risks not just naming her dog but insists on a non-totalised history of animals including those we call domesticated such that domestication cannot be defined by the ends of 'man' alone. If Derrida's field

4) Derrida, 'The Animal' p.386.

5) Derrida, 'The Animal' p.418.

of research exposes two opposed types of discourse (that of science, theory and philosophy reflecting upon the animal but never registering the address of one, versus that of the poets or prophets collapsing into identification with animals), Haraway catalogues, and therefore impacts on, a different archive calling on a range of less discursively regimented work from the sciences that adapt or abandon the flawed concept of the neutral observer. Bioanthropologist Barbara Smuts, for example, finds that her observation of a baboon colony can only proceed when she gives up the attempt to be invisible – better put as hostile, and learns to adjust her behaviours to those of the baboons who certainly are taking note of her.⁶

Alternating between diaristic while poetically incisive extracts from what she names as ‘Notes of a Sportswriter’s Daughter’ and more a comparatively more straightforward theoretical address Haraway’s *Companion Species Manifesto* begins somewhat provocatively. The very first line tells us that ‘Ms Cayenne Pepper continues to colonise all [Haraway’s] cells – a sure case of what the biologist Lynn Margulis calls symbiogenesis’.⁷ (Symbiogenesis I take to refer to new ways of thinking about genetic transfers that do not necessarily involve linear sexual reproduction). Starting off on the other foot – it is Donna Haraway that is ‘colonised’ by Cayenne Pepper, by the saliva from her ‘darter-tongue kisses’.⁸ It is the tongue of the other that signs. This figure is biological but not in a fashion familiar to the devaluation of the mutability of that zone in its more normative guises - guises that many a feminist may still fear as discourse that cuts destiny to the whim of those in power. Indeed Haraway’s work has persistently demonstrated that while the biological may be a field riven by power, this field is

6) Haraway, p.24

7) Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003, p.1.

8) Op.cit.

not therefore forever anterior or otherwise inaccessible. Biology is not destined to inertia, flat earth as springboard to culture. ‘Ms Cayenne Pepper’ presents a flash of the irony familiar from the first lines of Haraway’s earlier ‘Cyborg Manifesto’.⁹ That marital blank ‘Ms,’ rather than the anachronistic ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs,’ might initiate the scent of the spectral terror of monstrous lesbian reproducibility (in addition to raising ‘Cayenne Pepper’ to the level of a name proper to something – someone? – other than a spice). And if there is terror, it may only be compounded by the line by line realisation that Cayenne is a dog and she is not transformed into a man by the humanising virtue of the kiss. They have had ‘forbidden conversation’: they have had ‘oral intercourse’.¹⁰ The wet medium of Cayenne’s rich saliva produces an uneven figure of co-constitution and of reproduction exceeding the dog and the woman as transfections pass – or communicate – through viral vectors. In so figuring unlicensed reproducibility and in so figuring co-constituting contact as a contingent rather than appointed moment within the dialectical narrative foretold of the human subject, Haraway bypasses the necessity to surmount any dead fathers in the telos of the law.¹¹ This is not the de-humanisation of the sadistic pornographic standard called bestiality, but the de-humanism of life.

The interruption in and of the kiss is underlined in Cixous: she doesn’t see it coming even though her eyes are open and the cat’s determination is flagged by its ‘clear and decided gaze’. For that matter she doesn’t see the cat coming either: ‘in the meantime the cat arrived’.¹² Pure event, and as such astonishing. Not ‘in the beginning’ though this is her first line, rather ‘*in the meantime* the cat arrived.’ Arriving without an article as the

9) Haraway, Donna, J., ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology & Socialist Feminism in the late 20th Century’ in *Simians, Cyborgs & Women: the Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books, 1991, pp.149-182.

10) Haraway, *Companion Species* p.2.

11) Bracha Ettinger’s work revises the psychoanalytic understanding of the unfolding of human subjectivity through theorising a ‘we’ within the formation of the human subject traced from inter-uterine experience. This is but one model that the range and impact of Haraway’s work outpaces. See Ettinger’s *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2006.

12) Cixous, ‘The Cat’s Arrival,’ in *parallax*, 12:1, 2006, p. 21.

chapter of her novel *Messie* (1996), 'Arrivée du chat' stresses arrival even over the cat in a sense that slightly dissipates in its recent English translation as a discreet essay called 'The Cat's Arrival.' Even so, published in a special issue of the journal *parallax* on 'animal beings' 'The Cat's Arrival' has been interjected into a field rippling with the after effects of Derrida's work on animals but which has not (yet) kept pace with that of Cixous. Cixous's cat does not subsequently fade from view, or atrophy in allegory, but the stress is on the surprise: she writes 'I'd also never have imagined [...] That the Event would be a cat.'¹³ And since arrival is a feminine noun in French, this force of arrival is perhaps stressed as feminine while the cat of the title is in the generic that is masculine form until the first line of the essay when 'la chatte' is specified.¹⁴

A similar sense of arrival arriving prior to any assignation is used by Derrida in his ambiguously wrought term *l'arrivant* – forgetting, he tells us in a footnote, that Cixous had made use of 'arrivant' in her novel *La* (1976) and the next year produced a play based on that book called *L'Arrivante*.¹⁵ On the one hand this footnote frustratingly contributes to the play of precedence between Derrida and Cixous whose works echo each other so much anyway not least in the context of deconstruction's troubling of precedence itself – who am I following?¹⁶

The door and the shore ('*la rive*') marking the arrival of the *arrivant* – repeating throughout Cixous's text - redouble this problem, as Derrida remarks: 'this border will always keep one from discriminating among the figures of the *arrivant*, the dead, and the *revenant* (the ghost, he she, or that which returns)'.¹⁷

13) Cixous, p. 21.

14) Had the French used 'arriver' as a verb (*Le chat est arrivé*) it would have both emphasised the cat and had agreement of the masculine gender across cat and verb.

15) See Derrida, Jacques, *Aporias*, trans. Dutoit, Thomas, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, footnote 14, p.86.

16) For a useful - though modest - discussion of these overlapping themes in their work, see Cixous, Hélène, 'Jacques Derrida as a Proteus Unbound' in *Critical Inquiry* 33, Winter, 2007, pp. 389-423.

17) Derrida, *Aporias*, p.35.

On the other hand it is also fraught in the general context of work by women so rarely cast as paradigmatic rather than derivative – and in dating from the mid-1970's *L'Arrivante* like *La Jeune Née* marks a time when it was most pressing to challenge alleged sexual neutrality.¹⁸ The one who arrives should be unmarked because unforeseen, a neutral if not neuter arrival. Elsewhere Derrida himself reminds us how often the neutral masks the masculine: here he remains content with the *arrivant*.

Cixous, of course, can and does write through the literary liberty of free indirect style enabling rapid shifts between 1st and 3rd person voices, dissolving easy identification or solidity of 'character' and frequently provoking the question 'who speaks?' Both 'she' and 'I' are surprised by the arrival of the cat. The question is intensified given the shift in context, the grafting of '*Arrivée du chat*' from an ambiguously fictional book to a journal context in which we expect the first person singular to vehicle the author's voice, to sign for the author. Provoking 'who speaks?' or 'who signs?' usually goes some way towards skewing the machinations required for rendering and retaining the human subject as central. Here it enables Cixous to pose and repose all the clichés of anthropomorphism without falling into enunciating them herself, while interjecting with autobiographical authority that she had never thought that a cat would show up 'in one of my stories'.¹⁹ In Cixous the cat can speak – but to demonstrate projection, to reveal the error of 'exaggerating' love.²⁰ In Cixous the ruse that the cat is really an allegory of the displaced human partner is voiced to try and ward off the animal's difference and the possibility that the cat is a rival.²¹ When comings and goings have already circumvented his post,

18) *La Jeune Née* usually translated as *The Newly Born Woman* though only the feminine not the species is strictly specified, was jointly authored by Cixous and Catherine Clément, first published in French in 1975, Paris: Union Générales d'Éditions, and in English in 1986, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

19) Cixous, 'The Cat's Arrival' p.21.

20) Cixous, p.32.

21) Cixous, p.24. For Anglophone readers 'the cat is a rival' clearly arises from 'The Cat's Arrival'.

that displaced partner – his improper name a literary quotation – is reduced to attempting to reinstall proper boundaries. He grasps pointlessly at the functioning of doors, hence laws, and who should remain before them as a limitless amount of women and fantastic beasts traverse this open house, a hippopotamus marking the hyperbole.²² Meanwhile the woman comes to offer unconditional hospitality to the others to whom she is hostage, in spite of Emmanuel Levinas for whom the animal has no face and hence no relation to the ethical.²³

A mirror crops up in Cixous as a technological supplement of shame. The mirror moreover is personified – or ‘animalified’: the mirror ‘squawks’ like a parrot, it is ‘perched’ on her shoulder, it is repetitious: ‘Naked naked naked see you see you see you,’ exacerbated in the phonetically close French: ‘Nus nus nus vus vus vus’.²⁴ See you both plural, you both are seen naked, no difference: unlike that usually reserved for the animal as naked but not knowing it and thus not naked. Cixous is naked in front of an animal – the cat and a mirror that speaks like a parrot - and like Derrida is ashamed. A moment later the mirror derides her in terms that redresses her nakedness as a type of clothing ‘a get-up’: ‘look at that get-up it isn’t pretty’ and the mirror installs a modesty.²⁵ It is unclear however, that this derision isn’t also being addressed to the cat.

For Schneemann, every morning the camera was there ‘just to see’, without determination over the image. She had it there, ready to hand, by the bed, ready to turn towards her cats, as well as toward herself. The ensuing sequences start when Cluny first begins to greet Schneemann this way every day, then continued by Vesper, culminating in two large sequences of images (*Infinity*

22) The persistence of doors and their surprising traversal inevitably suggests – and revises - Kafka’s well known formulation of the condition of the law. Unlike the ‘man from the country’ the cat passes the door and thus retouches the law. See Kafka, Franz *The Trial*, trans. Willa & Edwin Muir, New York: Modern Library, 1956, pp. 267-69. Sue Golding first drew my attention to the air of Kafka marked by Cixous’s door.

23) Numerous writers have commented on the glimmer of recognition offered by ‘Bobby the Dog’ to the dehumanized prisoners in the camps only for Levinas to erase an ethical maxim from his barks since the animal is ‘too stupid, *trop bête*’ to be able to universalise this relation. John Llewelyn cited by Cary Wolfe in his ‘In the Shadow of Wittgenstein’s Lion’ in Wolfe, Cary, ed. *Zoologies: The Question of the Animal*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003, p.17.

24) Cixous, Hélène, ‘The Cat’s Arrival’ in *parallax* 12:1, p.33. Cixous, *Hélène, Messie*, Paris: Des Femmes, 1996, p.79.

25) Cixous, ‘The Cat’s Arrival,’ p.33.

Kisses I, 1981-1988, *Infinity Kisses II*, 1990-1998, whose dates auto-bio-graph the lives of the cats) and now re-edited into a short film (*Infinity Kisses – the Movie*, 2008). Schneemann is in the photographs, Schneemann signs as artist: *Infinity Kisses* is legible as autobiographical work as it is traditionally identified – as an index of ‘my own,’ and legible within an artist’s work known for its investment in the personal, in experience, in a ‘hand-touch sensibility’. Does that hand point back to the signing subject, and point her out, point for point in her naked truth? ‘Nudity perhaps remains untenable,’ remarks Derrida.²⁶ It cannot be held in the hand, gathered in a moment of presence. In Schneemann, the trope of the mirror is no trap of the same nor agent of shame in this work: the eye of the camera so often tropes the I of a directing subject but here each blink of the shutter releases an other image - image after image of - what? As Cixous writes: ‘Woman with cat? Or Woman belonging to cat? Or Cats? Or Woman? Or Women? Or the foreigner?’²⁷ Who mirrors whom? This is a mirror of technical reproducibility, a mirror that iterates – and Schneemann has produced various articulations of these photographs re-citing them in different contexts – using her own work as a found object. Their eyes are shut in most images, even where they are open the inability to predict frame or point of focus renders the visual field contingent, no gaze anchors a hierarchy. *Infinity Kisses* names the work, emphasising the performative kisses without consolidating their content. The kiss brings to crisis who responds and who reacts without dissolving those who kiss into a pool of sameness: kissing is of the edges, of contiguity not continuity²⁸.

In the kiss, who am I following?

26) Derrida, ‘The Animal,’ p. 418.

27) Cixous, p. 22.

28) It should be noted that both Haraway and Derrida explicitly argue for a proliferating field of differences, such that questioning the way in which philosophy has posed the human/animal divide does not result in a disavowal of difference. I take this field of differences to also characterise the works by Cixous and Schneemann.

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