

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.

### **After Species Meet**

**Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*. Posthumanities series. U of Minnesota P, 2008. 360 pp. \$24.95**

The publication of Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto* [CSM] in 2003 was a powerful signal that Critical Science Studies and Science and Technology Studies were moving toward embracing ecofeminism and "the question of animality" in a big way. Haraway's intellectual authority guaranteed that the shift in emphasis from cyborgs to companion species would immediately affect the mainstream of critical thought, and help to redefine posthumanism in a manner more friendly to living beings than the technocentric trends that Haraway's earlier manifesto had, rather contrary to her intentions, helped to support. It was also a puzzling document — for some because of its apparent abandonment of the cyborg, for others because it seemed to offer rather little in the cause of animal liberation. Haraway's focus on working dogs as models for companion species, and companion species as models for a new paradigm of ontological and ethical relationships, seemed in some ways to sentimentalize the relationships among human- and non-human animals by privileging one of the most unusually tight human-animal bonds in cultural evolution; in other ways it seemed to downplay the most urgent political problems posed by the human domination of animals by escaping into metaphysical vision and playful anecdote.

With *When Species Meet* (WSM), Haraway has elaborated on CSM, not so much through detailed engagements with her critics or defenses of her positions, but by enfolding them in an enormous sweeping embrace, defending the open-endedness of her new model by demonstrating the complex interconnections of experience, science, and philosophical speculation that demand such a quasi-metaphysical scale. WSM displays not so much an argument, as a distinctive *design*. For few North American thinkers is the unity of manner and matter as significant as it is for Haraway. And in this sense, Haraway's project is as aesthetic as it is cognitive and political. From the outset, she makes clear that she argues through figures — since only figuration captures the double reality of things as simultaneously actually physically existing beings and also signs. Her animal figures in particular appear as "creatures of imagined possibility and creatures of fierce and ordinary reality," in whom "the dimensions tangle and require response" (3).

The privileged trope of Haraway's work until now has been the network, figured in a myriad knots, nodes, skeins, cat's cradles, entanglements, and connections. The cyborg gave the net-trope a certain avant-garde authority. In the age of the world wide web, neural nets, cyberspace, the matrix, DNA strands, and the expanding array of countercultural affinity groups connected by burgeoning electronic communications systems, Haraway's version of the cyborg caught the attention of every group surfing the wave of communications technology. Her "ironic myth" immediately struck a chord — outraging the naturalists, flummoxing the patriarchal architects, but inspiring tech-savvy youth hoping to subvert the brave new tech world for liberatory purposes.

Haraway made clear in that founding manifesto that the network was a medium constructed of beings that could no longer be considered any *one* thing; she emphasized particularly that the long-held foundational distinctions between machines and humans, and animals and humans, were obsolete ideological fictions of patriarchal domination. But there was actually rather little about the animal/human connection in that extraordinary document. To some extent, Haraway's cyborg/network trope gained its in-your-face energy precisely because it no longer privileged life. Animal/human relationships came into the foreground in *Primate Visions*, but not in the radical form of the cyber-tropes of the Manifesto. In *Modest Witness*, the complexities of the Oncomouse, the actually existing figure that knots laboratory technoscience and living beings, still seemed to be a special case among animal/human interfaces: an animal generated not only within, but *by* and *for* the web of technoscience.

**Mixotrichia universalis.** The promise of WSM, and the claim made for the companion species paradigm, is that now the human-/non-human animal interfaces will not only occupy the space previously occupied by the machine/human, but will embrace and subsume it. Life and living beings will finally inhabit center stage. The cyborg, which had been embraced as the figure of the posthuman par excellence, has itself been dissolved, beginning with the concept of the posthuman. Ironically for a book appearing in a series called Posthumanities, Haraway opens with the overarching claim (troping Latour): "we have never been human." So we cannot then be *posthuman*. In this disavowal of all the posthumanist uses to which her ideas have been put, Haraway signals at the outset that WSM will also disavow every fashionable discursive niche that keeps the notion of human exceptionalism alive by negation — every post-, anti-, in-, non- and ahumanism still fighting with Big Daddy God, in whose image The Human is made, and against which the (choose your privative prefix) ~human postures.

Instead, the erstwhile Human becomes in WSM a dynamic, tumbling network of living relationships: symbiotic microbes, parasitehosts, composite organism, hybrids, prosthetic compounds, animal-human partnerships, and a near-utopian web of scholars and fellow-teachers constantly supplying new energies to each other. In WSM, Haraway's global model (discreetly hidden at the end of the book) is the composite protozoan named *Mixotricha paradoxa*. Actually existing, yet endowed with a name that could serve a comic biopunk-science fiction novel as an Ur-agent, the *Mixotricha* embodies the material-semiotic in exuberantly utopian form.

Made up of a nucleated cell and four sorts of bacterial microbes (whose different kinds number from about 200 to 250,000 cells), with its five entangled genomes, *Mixotricha paradoxa* is an extreme example of how all plants and animals — including ourselves — have evolved to contain multitudes. (286)

The proper object of attention and reflection then is the space, simultaneously real/material and imaginative ("material-semiotic"), where diverse vectors meet: contact zones. The model of the contact zone allows fractal analogies from Mary Louise Pratt's model of human civilizational/cultural confluences, to crittercams (cameras attached to marine animals to record their POV), to that embodied contact zone the *Mixotricha* — and, centrally, the human/dog partnership exemplified by Haraway's own relationship with her Australian shepherd partner, Ms. Cayenne Pepper.

In a dynamic, discentered world like this no one discursive mode can occupy a central position. Haraway's typical technique — aesthetic and cognitive — is to move from one kind of message to another without privilege. E-mail correspondence with fellow agility-training enthusiasts, reflective memoirs of her disabled feisty sportswriter father, citations of fellow scholars' research, meditations on Whitehead, Stengers, and Gregory Bateson, are all equal nodes in the net. Nonetheless, most readers will be left with the impression, as they were with CSM, that Haraway's own experience training with Cayenne is the center, the *raison d'être* of this book. And for good reason. Although in principle any of Haraway's many material-semiotic figures can be used to organize all the material in the book, the chapters describing Haraway's personal experiences of training and being trained for canine agility trials lend themselves to be read as the central analogy for the book as whole.

The tenor of Haraway's use of her agility-work with Cayenne is different from CSM's, even though it reprises many of the earlier book's anecdotes. Indeed, it is easier to read the agility sport as a poetic-polemical argument, and consequently WSM as a genuine manifesto, because, I believe, Haraway has found and engaged a worthy adversary, which she lacked in CSM. That adversary is Derrida.

**Derrida's cat, Haraway's dogs.** In an unusual (for Haraway) family reminiscence about her sportswriter father, who, disabled at a young age, nonetheless thrived by treating it as a joyful sport in competition with his infirmity, Haraway makes clear that she is her father's daughter. Although she describes in detail the material training and trials of canine agility sports with Cayenne, the figurative message is that co-operation mixotricked with competition is good for thinking too. Like a highly competitive athlete, Haraway raises her game by treating Derrida's now well known lecture "And You Say The Animal Responded" as a challenge.

In Derrida's oft-discussed piece, the philosopher traces the genealogy of the chasm between the Human and the Animal as hypostatic beings, a chasm that Derrida argues is the source of the very notion of the Human Being. Derrida finds the epitome of this boundary drawing in Descartes's view that animals are incapable of the supposedly distinctively human capacity to *respond*, being able only to *react*. This boundary, more than any of the other culture-constituting exclusions of history (not merely Western, it should be noted), Derrida considers the origin of every value and ideology that relies on the concept of the human as an ethically and ontologically privileged subject. The boundary simultaneously disavows human beings' manifest continuity with other animals, while concealing the enormous diversity of beings that are swept into the category of The Animal. It is in the name of this trick that most human atrocities have been committed, to the lasting shame of philosophy. To make this shame concrete, Derrida tells a shaggy-dog anecdote of encountering his "little cat" one morning in the bathroom of his Paris apartment. Standing stark naked before the wee beast, Derrida confesses to feeling that he (and specifically his "sex") is being watched, and judged.

The story is an aesthetic moment in Derrida's argument, an attempt to concretize the shame of philosophy in a lived experience turned parable. In an essay specifically studying Derrida's lecture, Erica Fudge has traced the genealogy of Western philosophers' use of cats and dogs as emblematic animals. The dog has traditionally accompanied the philosopher, in part to symbolize the hunt for the truth, and in part to embody the essential difference between Animal and Man. The cat, by contrast, has stood in for the wild, self-willed, and feminine resistance to philosophical discipline. A

cat may look at a king. Fudge implies that whatever Derrida's relationship with his actual pet was, the cat's role echoes the tradition of a natural animal challenging philosophical rationalization: the philosopher caught being unaware of his animal companion in the very act of recognizing its existence, its claim to a response. Whether Haraway is consciously drawing on this literary typology or not, her central chapters, "Training in the Contact Zone," are a rich addition to the heritage, now with a special self-reflexiveness, since the emblematic animals are no longer primarily "semiotic," but emphatically and necessarily tangible, historical, and companions in the world.

In most propositional respects, Haraway and Derrida are in full agreement. For both, the point of acknowledging animals is to demolish anthropocentrism by first establishing that the ontological category distinction between Human and Animal is bogus, in the interest of an ethic of respectful and responsive relationship that would make the civilization-constituting atrocities against both human and non-human animals impossible. They both keep animal rights discourse at arms' length, since neither can accede to the liberal individualism underlying most Western legal discourse. The difference between them lies less in reflection, than in how they imagine agency.

In his lecture, Derrida accepts the generative premise of animal rights discourse that animals suffer, and thus make implicit claims on human beings guided by an ethics of care. This does not require that the abyss between language-trapped human beings and inscrutably languaged non-human animals be bridged. The shared mortality of living, sentient beings makes its own demands. For Haraway, the emphasis on suffering leads, in reality as in etymology, to imagining the question of the animal in passive terms. Derrida in the Paris bathroom, writes Haraway,

did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning. (20)

Thus, even though Derrida has challenged the very category of the Animal, for Haraway his encounter with his cat did not draw him out of his reflection, or spur him to ask the questions that Haraway believes must be added to the one asked about animals' suffering:

Can animals play? Or work? Or even, can I learn to play with *this* cat? Can I, the philosopher, respond to an invitation or recognize one when it is offered? What if work and play, and not just pity, open up when the possibility of response, without names, is taken seriously as an everyday practice available to philosophy and to science? What if a usable word for this is *joy*? (22)

Over against Derrida's discreet and urbane animal parable, Haraway asserts one that condenses an active, rambunctious relation, based ultimately on play and joy, that is consciously shared and in evolving companionship, in a sporting partnership with actual dogs. I will confess that Haraway's detailed accounts of training with Cayenne for agility competitions and the trials themselves, and the exchanges with human companions who share the love of the sport, do not do much for me. I love dogs (as I love cats, and raccoons, and skunks, and octopi), but the extended reports on agility competitions strike me somewhat like the Christmas letters of the parents of a Little Leaguer to family and friends about their special child. And yet... the uninhibited enthusiasm of a world-class philosopher takes on parabolic dimensions. For Haraway's dynamic dog-anecdotes are in fact indirect critiques of Derrida's embarrassed emphasis on animal passivity — and his own.

Extended to the book as a whole, WSM's reveling in activity indicates a rich counter-philosophy, if not outright resistance, to the "philosophy of the animal" presented by continental European theory. In company with thinkers like Karen Barad, Isabelle Stengers, and Marc Bekoff, Haraway approaches human/non-human interfaces in ways directly contrary to the post-heideggerian philosophical obsession with shame. Where shame represents the ground of conscious human existence in much contemporary continental theory, from what Agamben quoting Primo Levi calls "the silent shame of being human" (131) echoed in writers as various as Levinas and Deleuze, to Derrida's shame of philosophy, Haraway's approach stresses the opposite. Throughout WSM, figures of joyful, participatory, and indeed *physical* interactions abound — with nonhuman animals, with their lovers, with constantly emerging new ideas and collaborations, and above all, with the *outside*. Against Heidegger's notorious notion that animals are "poor in the world," Haraway seems intent on demonstrating they are as rich as humans are. Where Derrida confesses to a mortal sexual embarrassment at being seen by his cat, Haraway treats the reader to randy puppy porn:

Willem lies down with a bright look in his eye. Cayenne looks positively crazed as she straddles her genital area on top of his head, her nose

pointed towards his tail, presses down and wags her backside vigorously. I mean hard and fast. He is trying for all he's worth to get his tongue on her genitals, which inevitably dislodges her from the top of his head. Looks a bit like the rodeo, with her riding a bronco and staying on as long as possible. They have slightly different goals in this game, but both are committed to the activity. Sure looks like eros to me. Definitely not agape (193).

This move serves not only to illustrate the unfettered agency of dogs to create their own queered terms of joy; it shows the human witness liberated by the erotic discourse of nonhuman animals. "The open" is articulated by concrete, renewable, events shared by dogs and humans, recreated again and again through sport, play, and work, and ultimately co-evolutionary companionship. To counter the numbing challenge of "bare life" to which millions of animals are condemned, Haraway offers the biopolitics of "flourishing."

Chris Cuomo suggests that the core ecological feminist ethical starting point is a "commitment to the *flourishing* or well-being, of individuals, species, and communities." Flourishing, not merely the relief of suffering, is the core value, one I would like to extend to emergent entities, human and animal, in technocultural dog worlds. (134)

One can, however, question whether this powerful affirmation of the positive in Haraway's thought is sustainable for very long. Christine Cuomo's feminist-ecological notion of "flourishing" (not to be confused with the "positive psychology" of flourishing associated with Martin Seligman and Mihály Csíkszentmihályi) serves Haraway as the ultimate ethical collection-point for this responsible/responsive and joyful distribution of agency. But this version of flourishing, extending the ethic of care to the entire biosphere and perhaps beyond, is so profoundly abstract and under-theorized that it blocks from sight the difficulty of imagining how human beings can reconcile their own inexorably intrusive actions on the infinitely complex animal world with the utopian wish to assist — if not indeed to manage — its universal well being. Haraway discusses at length the need for eco- and animal activists to accept the necessity of killing in mortal, animal life (human and non-human), and the imperative of "killing well." Until "flourishing" is brought face to face with this moral necessity, it has little practical value. From this perspective, *When Species Meet* is something of a pastoral in the literature of contemporary animal/human interface theory. Haraway

fully acknowledges the mass destruction of nonhuman animal lives at the heart of our world, but her response here is to figure out a world of corrective affinity networks and good will in the human/animal web. She mentions that she might have written *Biocapital Vol. 1* or the *Birth of the Kennel*. WSM is neither of those books; it resembles *Mutual Aid* far more.

Three questions appear to me to be most pressing behind this screen:

**What about the octopus?** Haraway entertains many kinds of animals in WSM: sheep, whales, donkeys, mosquitoes, microscopic organisms, feral pigs, wolves, and baboons, but the canine-human relationship dominates the imaginary of the book. It is captured in the clever cover image: the silhouette of a dog shaking hands/paws with a shadowy, 3-dimensional human hand. I confess that I would have been more comfortable had the hand been grasping an octopus tentacle. While I am sure too much can be made of Haraway's choice of dogs to be what Harriet Ritvo calls her "touchstone species" (443), it is fair to ask whether Haraway's example of species companionship based on the dog can be fruitfully carried to other kinds of animals. Dogs, more perhaps than any other nonhuman species, are cyborgs before the letter, being shaped by their mutual evolution with human beings in the civilizing process. They are, as Haraway controversially argues, creatures that enjoy discipline, purposive action, problem solving, innovation, polymorphous perversity (with humans as well as other species), and collaboration. They can be demonstrably smarter than human beings in the very tasks that human beings set for them, especially the working breeds that Haraway favors.<sup>1</sup> Also, since Europeans and diasporic Anglos don't eat dogs, they are protected by the culture from the fatal commodification suffered by most other literal companion species. While dogs may eat with us, most other animals at our tables are eaten by us, often through the help of our canine kapos. In the naturecultural economy that determines who shall kill and who shall eat, dogs tend to be privy to power.

One must, of course, start somewhere. The vast majority of texts addressing human/non-human animal interfaces have emphasized the overlaps of higher mammalian consciousness in those beasts who might in some alternative zoötaxonomy be classed together as "mind beasts," on the basis of their supposedly shared "intelligence" (defined, of course, in terms of problem-solving that humans appreciate). It is more difficult to imagine granting personality and playful co-operative impulses to mosquitoes and molluscs, and so it may be inevitable that even critical animal studies will separate animals into different categories of affinity, with different powers of attraction for scientific research projects, funding, and public affection — now perhaps

with more sophisticated ontological justification. Indeed, the notion of joy in play may mark just such a dividing line.<sup>2</sup>

Human relationships with dogs, like other working animals and pets, require minimal accommodation from humans. This goes doubly for “sporting” relationships, like agility training or other suburban skill sports that serve no utilitarian goals. Even wild mind beasts are curious about, and participate in, rapport with human interlocutors. But what are we to do with the beasts that have no desire to accommodate us? What are the models of civilizational transformation that will accommodate the nonhuman animal world that we have no chance to “uplift” into our own techno-evolutionary projects?

**What about the cyborg?** In WSM Haraway intimates that each new relationship of becoming between human and nonhuman animals should essentially evolve freely, without predetermination. Though WSM notes several kinds of machine-animal assemblages — canine genetic databases, e-mail support networks, crittercams, cloning regimes, laboratories — Haraway’s emphasis has noticeably shifted away from the material command-control-communications networks, if not specifically to organic creatures, then to a more encompassing metaphysics of becoming. In a now famous phrase, Haraway has said that she has moved on from the cyborg, which is a “junior sibling” of the more comprehensive concept of companion species (CSM 11).

In a critique of this shift, N. Katherine Hayles has argued that, while the cyborg as a network node may indeed be too narrow a focus compared to human/animal co-becomings, the underlying cybernetic matrix of posthumanist technoscientific society has expanded far beyond the grid that generated the notion of the cyborg in the first place. The web of interlinked “cognizing machines” expands at an accelerating pace, so that conscious human decisions about our own environment and political possibilities — our biopolitics — will soon be just the tip of the iceberg over a massive unconscious domain of proliferating mechanical operations occurring more rapidly and complexly than human agents can follow. This process is being aided from both ends of the cultural spectrum, by both techno-capitalism and the posthumanist dismantling of the liberal subject, a decentering that bestows greater and greater decision-making power onto interlocking bio-mechanical systems. Many of the most important decisions about our relationships with animals will be made by machines having far less in common with animals than human beings do.

As Haraway has tirelessly emphasized, non-human animals are historical beings. They are historical not only like human animals, but with them. From extinctions to sanctuaries, non-human animal histories are now inextricably bound up with human activity. Given human technoscientific capacities to demolish habitats (and indeed the entire biosphere), wilderness exists on human sufferance. Can the responsibility grounded in responsiveness that Haraway calls for be assumed without recognizing the power that the “Regime of Computation,” as Hayles calls it, has acquired in all human relationships? The specific powers that human beings have already manifested in natural and social history — through their language, hands, or the folds of the anterior MPFC and ACC regions of the human cortex — cannot be wished away by decrying anthropocentrism. As technocultural posthumanists tirelessly emphasize in their turn, these powers are being ramped up to a new level with the creation of a “cognisphere.” The conditions of existence of every living thing on earth are now subject to human political decisions that increasingly place power over life in nonliving systems.

**What about life?** Haraway’s cyborg was particularly memorable because it was the first major Left-critical theory to use a cybernetic model for mapping possibilities of praxis. The model was often resisted, in part because of cybernetics’ foundational refusal to treat organic life as an inherently superior system of organization. The cyborg and its cognospheric evolutes not only break down the animal/human/ machine distinctions, they do so (in theory) by not privileging one over the other. There is no requirement to privilege life over any other kind of organization of information. The cognisphere no longer recognizes a compelling distinction between organic life as given and other kinds of self-organizing self-enhancement — the many potential forms of artificial life and even artificial culture. Implicit is the victory over “biocentrism.”

It is reasonable to expect, given hundreds of generations of human beings’ sense of the sacredness of life, that there will be serious and principled reactions against this anti-vitalism. The centrality of the ethic of flourishing in WSM, and Haraway’s affirmation of erotic and cognitive joy in partnering living beings, seem to come down on the side of organic life. I believe it remains to be defended explicitly within the supposedly cybernetic-materialist framework in which she is working, or we may have to somehow accommodate the meaning of sacredness once again, and readmit the expelled shadow of spiritual awareness into our critical discourse about animals and life.

Do people owe allegiance to “life?” Can one be committed to animal being without also identifying with non-human animals, sharing their ultimate interests? Is the view that organic life on earth is merely a contingent vehicle, rather than a source and mode of

being that has inherent worth, and to which we owe much, compatible with love of the biosphere? In the collapse of the machine/animal wall, it is not hard to imagine that many in the animal party will resist, including, and perhaps mainly, nonhuman animals.

Technoscience cannot provide answers for these things. The metaphysical turn by many posthumanists shows that the subject is beginning to come to the surface even in materialist discourse. Practices that put this allegiance to life – from individual animals and plants to the living planet – to work will probably have to resemble respect for sacredness, if not actually affirming it. Joy and love, Haraway's two most powerful sources of knowledge, are not only emotions; they are for most religions spiritual forces. Despite her frequently stated disdain for religion, Haraway's work increasingly engages spiritual thought and we should not be surprised if the repressed sacred makes a comeback after species meet.

## Notes

1. Cf. the remarkable, original problem solving by a sheepdog in Cox and Ashford, 430.
2. A leading scholar of animal play, Gordon M. Burghardt, hypothesizes that play behavior develops only in animals that are nurtured under certain favorable physiological conditions, such as a “high-energy lifestyle,” extended parental protection, surplus energy following satiation. This conception favors mammals and some birds, and excludes most reptiles. Cf. Burghardt, *The Genesis of Animal Play. Testing the Limits*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2005.

## Works Cited

Cox, Graham, and Tony Ashford. “Riddle Me This: The Craft and Concept of Animal Mind.” *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 23:4 (Autumn, 1998). 425-438.

Cuomo, Christine J., *Feminism and Ecological Communities: An Ethisch of Flourishing*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Derrida, Jacques. "And Say the Animal Responded?" (Trans. David Wills). *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. Ed. Cary Wolfe (ed.). Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2003. 121–146.

Fudge, Erica. "The Dog, the Home and Human, and the Ancestry of Derrida's Cat." *Oxford Literary Review*. 29 (2008). 37-54.

Hayles, N. Katherine. "Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere." *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23:7-8 (2006). 159-166

Ritvo, Harriet. "Making Animals Real." *Biosocieties* 3 (2008). 443-446.