

Tracking Love in the Wild: from San Diego to Athens, Greece and Beyond

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Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging
Beyond Settler Sex & Nature
L'autochtone et queer au-delà de la nature et du sexe coloniaux

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Article abstract

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TRACKING LOVE IN THE WILD: FROM SAN DIEGO TO ATHENS, GREECE AND BEYOND¹

ALEXANDRA HALKIAS

Abstract: *The animal is a border guard; produced socially and historically in ways that work for an array of (neo)colonizing state-building projects. Here I attempt to destabilize 'the animal' while tracking pathways for a form of relationality which reveals it as a political instrument that is powerful and deadly. Of interest is a state of being wherein relationality between human and non-human animals becomes a force that is transformational. A state of being wherein the human is the feline; wherein humor is not exclusively human. A new politics of vision is at stake. This paper-collage seeks to open up this ground.*

Résumé: *L'animal est un garde-frontière dont la production sociale et historique contribue à un éventail de projets de construction d'état (néo)colonial. Je tente ici de déstabiliser 'l'animal' tout en traçant des voies vers une forme de relationalité qui le révèle comme un instrument politique puissant et mortel. On notera l'intérêt d'un état dans lequel la relationalité entre animaux humains et non-humains devient une force de nature transformative. Un état dans lequel l'humain est le félin, et l'humour n'est pas exclusivement humain. Une nouvelle politique de la vision est en jeu. Cet essai-collage tente d'ouvrir cette voie.*

"The ancient rocks have faces that sneer at me."

- Arthur Koestler, *The Call Girls* (1972)

Huge vistas of human inexperience are governed by norms that pulsate underneath a thin discursive layer of spontaneity. These norms—little clusters of narratives or other signifi-
catory praxis—are the product and the tool of power relations in specific historical and cultural contexts. They extend out to all surfaces, potentially colonizing and re-colonizing relationality. *What is natural* is one of their aces. The call to obey is very often issued in these terms.

This seemingly subtle governance of relationality is in many ways an imperialist project, with the call to comply being issued in terms of what is deemed natural even in the farthest reaches of what is commonly recognized as power. Intimate crevices of sociality are saturated with an intricate mix of regulatory ideals, capitalist appetite, and biopolitical manure. Sexism and racism reign supreme here. Queer theory and practice have developed over the decades as a potent tool of resistance—all their human and capitalist shortcomings, the growing lure of homonormativity, sentimentalism, and other nationalist dynamics notwithstanding.³ So too has Indigenous praxis in assorted sites around the globe. The victory of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe protest against the Dakota Access Oil Pipeline (NoDAPL) is but one example, if tenuous under the Trump presidency, of how assorted disruptions of the dominant version of what is natural can work to empower minoritarian articulations that are increasingly dispossessed. However, even at these sites of knowledge and resistance, the human vs. non-human binary typically escapes unscathed.

On another level, in a much smaller space, the relationship I developed with a cat I called Myrra helped sharpen my vision and critique of power further. Certainly, I was a vegan for several years before I met her. Also, I followed animal-rights struggles and movement to protect ancient trees way before she was a glimmer in my eye. But my 19-year-long relationship with her is well beyond participation in said practices in terms of educational wealth. This paper-photo essay draws from there and also takes material from other interspecies relationships in an attempt to work with and render visible relationalities that are different, firmly critical of human supremacism and adversarial to the

“civilizing” pretexts of assorted violences. The aim is to contribute to an intellectual destabilization of the human vs. non-human binary underlying all this.³ “Subjects, objects, kinds, races, species, genres, and genders are the products of their relating,” says Haraway (7). Indeed. Key to my project is a rethinking of the figure of the animal in tandem with what Dave pithily refers to as a “breaking [of] the fiction of sovereign subjectivity” (qtd. in Allison *Precarity*).

The terrain thus consists of instances wherein relationality between non-human and human animals is such that the very distinction, as well as its hierarchical quality, is occluded or even eradicated. Glimmers of that possibility can be seen too in instances of relationality between animals-in-general and plants, or also, in some cases, living forms and geological matter such as rocks. Moments of such relationalities are like cracks in time wherein much held as commonsense is reversed and binaries that are cornerstones of multiple contemporary projects of domination are faced with a powerful agent of dissolution.⁴ The photos used here relate to this in their depictions of a certain fluidity of form. Rocks transmogrify into human or non-human faces, shadows form figures on another plane, positioned in the same scene. Perhaps more concretely, moments such as those articulated here can do the work of expanding notions of both what is non-human and what is human. Familiar mappings of the social are called into question.



1. Stoic Gorilla with Talkative
Woman



2. Faces, Black Cat Watching

Also, on a more practical level, a clear sighting of such moments might block or at least frustrate the circulation of powers that are interested in domination in late modernity. For example, if we agree that the incarceration rate of the United States, and its specific manifestation in terms of prisoner demographics, hinges at least in part on a specific understanding of “the animal,” which is systemically, if quietly, ascribed to particular versions of human animals, then what would happen to that rate if dominant understandings of the animal lost their grip?⁵ Also, how would the annual rate of police shootings of non-white Americans change if, when confronted with non-white agency, police officers no longer had recourse to negative concepts of animality or cultural designations of the animal as inferior, less sentient or intelligent, and inherently more dangerous? More specifically, would it be possible to transfer people who have been arrested with limbs tied in handcuffs and wearing no seatbelt in the back of a metal van over circuitous bumpy road routes?⁶ More generally, what would happen to racism if common designations of the animal were deconstructed in this way?



3. Head on Serpent's Platter (black-and-white)

Setting these questions forward as another point of departure for an inquiry into critical relationalities might seem arbitrary or even incomprehensible. After all, war, slavery, and human trafficking are also all practices contingent on seeing some human animals as less human than animal. Certainly, the issue of human violence against non-humans, and the planet more generally, should in itself be enough reason to set forth. However, I take as significant the co-incidence of the highest incarceration rate in a country considered one of the most advanced in terms of the protection of human rights, in tandem with the demographics of that rate. I take as also significant sociological data the fact, related, that in the United States, for example, in 2015 “police officers fatally shot nearly 1,000 people (...) according to *The Washington Post*’s ongoing count. Further that, halfway through 2016, police have shot and killed 506 more” (LaFrance). Two years later, under Trump’s presidency, in 2018, that figure was 1165 for the year (Harriot). Also important is the fact that both police shootings and the incarceration rate more generally seem to target specific categories of subjects.⁷ To be meaningful and have political purpose along with the scholarly, any inquiry into critical relationalities, whether same-species or interspecies, must reckon with the social field within which it is embedded. The hypothesis is that this social phenomenon is in fact viscerally connected to how “the animal” is constructed socially and historically in ways that work for an array of colonizing or neo-colonizing state-building projects. The animal is a border-guard.⁸ As it is popularly configured, “the animal” patrols a rich field of privilege as properly and exclusively human, precisely as it is not universally so. The objective is to contribute to a destabilization of this construction while tracking pathways for forms of relationality that reveal it to be a political instrument that is variously powerful and deadly for both non-human and human animals.⁹



4. The Ferocious

The popular relegation of “the animal” to a subordinate position, even as it is used to signal maximum “nature” if not also wildness, works to demarcate a very specific sphere of sociality as properly human. In this sphere, the violence exhibited by police officers in the United States, renewed in recent years with the shootings that Lafrance refers to in *The Atlantic* as above, by the sheer incarceration rate¹⁰ of a country otherwise considered an example of civility and respect for human rights, and by the prevalence of what amounts to forced labor within the prison system, are all somehow cleansed of their brutality. That is, the consensual understanding of non-human animals as always *uniquely* and inherently wild beings, situated just beyond the ground of human relationalities, is what allows state-sanctioned human violence to be justified as civilized in some way.

Of course, calling on this divide also constitutes a strategy for humans targeted by state violence. The call issued by prisoners engaged in forced labor within the U.S. prison system is, for example, “we are humans, not animals.”¹¹ But this project contributes to a trajectory of cul-

tural and political work aimed at breaking the connection between “animals” and “normalized violence.” That is, I am interested in destabilizing the cultural frame wherein violence against “animals” is not registered as counting on the same scale as does violence performed against subjects recognized as humans.¹² This might result in the loss of a powerful discursive weapon in struggles involving the violation of assorted “human rights.” The hope is that it would also erode the very ground that feeds these violations however.

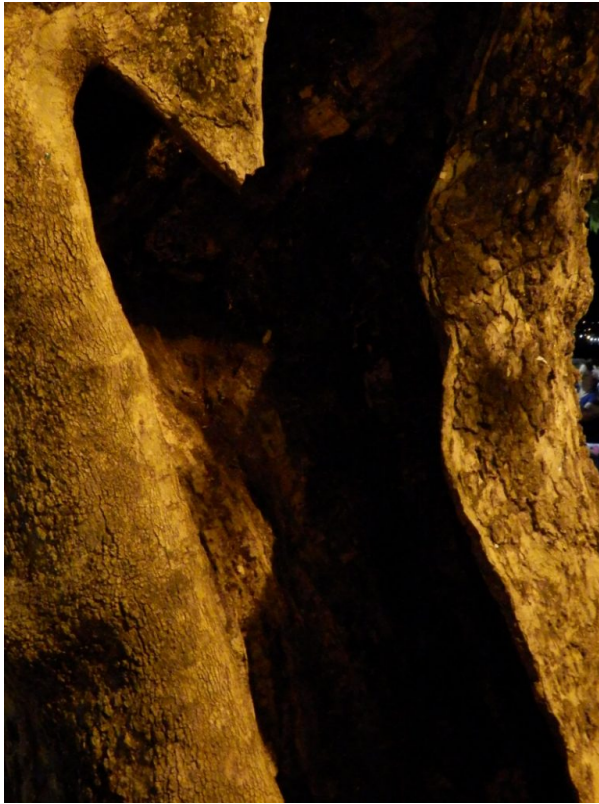


5. Serpent with Bird (black-and-white)

In fact, it isn't at all certain that further illumination of human to non-human critical relationalities would suffice for much at all to happen

to any of the above “social problems” at the end of the day. Racism and other entrenched patterns of power are remarkably innovative. But even the slight trouble that might be caused to these is an important additional incentive for such projects. Also, explorations of affective circuits of love, friendship, and desire between subjects of different species or lifeforms are important in order to transform current understandings of the self and the other and of the social and the natural, be they scientific or lay. Making our sightings of such unorthodox forms of relationality more acute, bringing them out of the shadows and into the light of public and scientific discourse, produces new forms of subjects, human and non-human alike. This vision has the potential to generate politics that are new.

What is of interest here, more specifically, is a state of being wherein the human is equal to the feline; a state of being wherein relationality becomes a productive energy that transforms the social world, at times transforming even the material one—a state of being wherein even killing can at some time emerge as an imperative in order to live and to love adequately. This is a state of being wherein humour is not a trait that is exclusively human, in fact. Life, as death, is different here. Violence, too. Gender is fluid, when it is at all. This is a state of being wherein the distinction *non-human* could potentially refer to a state of superiority. Or even cease to make sense at all. This paper-collage is an attempt to assist in the opening up of this ground. The method is of necessity piecemeal. The tool I prefer is an intermingling of forms of analysis; related scholarly work along with verbal and non-verbal images, dare I say studies, of such relationalities. So far I have sketched a picture of how stereotypical figurations of “the animal” serve as a trope facilitating forms of violence that are state-sanctioned, if not always sponsored, against specific types of human animals in the context of one nation, even as the same figurations are mobilized in struggles of resistance. The focus then turns to the zone of contact between human and non-human animals. The specific interest here is in forms of relationality that are critical of those supporting aforementioned violences. “The animal” figures differently here.



6. Cat Tree, Woman, in Gold

Moirā (pronounced *Meerah*) is the word for fate in Greek. Myrra, later Myrrella and occasionally Myrrabella, was a kitten I adopted from a woman living in a mansion in San Diego who had turned one of the towers of her home into a cattery for strays that she collected and cared for until they were adopted. Myrra's origin story was that she was found in a plastic bag on the shoulder of the highway connecting Tijuana to San Diego, on the U.S. side. There were two other kittens in there, both dead. The woman with the cattery, whose name I don't remember, turned her over to me, once I chose her, complete with shots, an early sterilization operation that was then pioneering at

the Yale Veterinary School, and, of course, “papers.” *Her* papers. She was 4 months old then. I was introduced to forms of relating and loving I could never have imagined in the 19 some years that followed. During our time together we lived in San Diego, New York, Boston, and Athens, Greece. During the last part of her life she had kidney failure. Later she had paralysis of one hind leg, and blindness later yet. We lived there too. I dare not say “together” for there.

Facets of what it means to see life from the perspective of a form of relationality that is not sanctioned by the state, nor condoned by many fellow human animals, are not easy to convey. These range from the soft and gleaming to the mundane and gritty. An example of the first are the millions of moments of sheer love being communicated between two sets of eyes belonging to beings that cannot talk to each other. An example of the latter, when on a trans-Atlantic flight I took her carrier to the bathroom with me in order to let her out and stretch her limbs, only to find her jumping and perching on the top of my head, hissing and grabbing my hair with her nails as the plane hit turbulence and the engines roared in the metal cage of the airplane’s small bathroom. Or, also, when based on research I did, I had decided not to put her through the routine series of shots required by the state of Massachusetts and I realized, in effect, that she (-I) was illegal there. The subsequent thought that I could somehow be forced to inoculate her resulted in a plan for us to escape such circumstances without any consideration at all.

While I assumed full responsibility for Myrra’s care, from the onset there were many domains of our relationship within which she was clearly the superior. I don’t mean this in the sense that is popular within various Western micro-worlds of “pets” and their “owners.” Rather, even with regard to her care, there were assorted ways that she showed me what she needed or was good for her. The problem was that I wasn’t always an astute enough listener. One of the most remarkable instances of this occurred near the end of her life, when I had found that she would at least put up with eating yoghurt. Yet she would not eat all the yoghurts I would pick up from the supermarket. I thought she was being finicky. After her death, a couple of years later, a doctor told me to only eat dairy products based on sheep or goat milk as cow’s milk can be damaging. As I shopped for yoghurt that evening, I realized, look-

ing at the yoghurts, that the ones Myrra wouldn't eat were those based on cow's milk.



7. Forest Totem, Seeing

There were moments when I saw things about reality that others did not purely as a result of my love for her. For example, when she first started drinking a lot of water and I had an allopathic vet in Athens see her, he claimed I was mistaken when he asked her age and I told him she was, then, 14 years old. He said that was impossible as cats do not live over 8 years of age. After he physically examined her he said, quite loudly as he stood next to her, that she had kidney failure and would likely die within three months. He also wanted to do bloodwork. I was

reticent. If you think you have a diagnosis, I said, what do we need the blood for? Is there some treatment we can then do? He said no, the only thing is kidney transplant, which is very expensive and difficult. Therefore, I said, why do the blood exam? He was insistent that it would give us necessary information.

I finally decided to go forward and held Myrra, who did not like the entire process at all, as he drew some of her blood. The next day the vet called me to tell me something incredible had happened, that it had never happened before, and he apologized. Apparently, as he was taking her vial to his lab, the vial fell and broke. He was clearly upset and said he would take the blood again, he offered to come to the house to do so, for no additional charge. I decided on the spot that no, we will just have to do what we can without this information.

After that I found a homeopathic vet, remembering how her first one, Dr.Tapp, had saved her from cardiomyopathy when she was young and we were living in Boston. Something we were able to do partly because that vet had listened to me when I said I had seen an image of a heart as a balloon when I sat with the then ailing 3 yr. old Myrra one afternoon trying to figure out what to do to help her get better. With phone appointments to the new vet, Dr.B., now here in Athens, along with a natural diet and a phosphorus-binding agent added to the meat cats need in order to survive, Myrra lived another 5 years to the age of 19. We never did another testing of blood. Only in the last few months of her life was there any visible impairment of her health.

Another example of seeing new aspects of reality thanks to my relationship with her has to do with sound. From when she was still a kitten, I became very attuned to sounds in the houses that we lived in because abrupt noises, even if they weren't loud, were disturbing to her and would result in hours of her hiding under a bed. I also acquired an acute sense of how careless many of us humans are with our bodies, quite clumsily carrying ourselves through space and unthinkingly moving too close or too jaggedly to other beings, human or not. More generally, seeing us through her eyes, I grew to understand how humans have lost touch with their bodies in a very fundamental sense. Physicality seems to be a zone of life not explicitly nurtured or developed beyond very specific coupling or friendship repertoires.

There were also moments when Myrra saw things about reality that others did not, and she showed them to me. An example of this is the ability of cats to adjust to blindness which the homeopathic vet had told me of. But the actual witnessing of her learning how to navigate our apartment in Athens just three days after she lost sight was an experience that was remarkable. She would go up to the doorway of the room she slept in, push her shoulder around the frame and then turn down the hallway, repeating the same thing with any doorway of a room she wanted to go into. When the blindness first occurred, both I and various other people I talked to all considered that euthanasia would be inevitable. How can a blind cat find her food and litter box, or move around in general? Her first attempts had been painful to watch, as she bumped into chairs and lost her bearings. Yet here she was practically breezing through most of the apartment in less than three days later. A few days after that she also walked slowly to the balcony door, basically asking for her usual afternoon sunbathing in the breeze. We went out together and as she settled on the balcony, her newly blind self, she slowly adjusted her position and moved her head towards the trees she would always like to gaze at. In short, being with her helped show me further vistas of how sanctioned norms colonize the real and of how tiny what we call human today can be.

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8. Lumbering Ashore, Girl Watching

My partner sits with a friend of his in front of the latter's computer. He lives in Psirri, a downtown area of Athens that used to be workers' homes and now is increasingly home to bars, cafés, and restaurants. Our friend's house is spacious and bright, if without heat. The two of them are ordering parts to construct a new computer for us, now that our old one simply ceased to work one day. Next to the table with the computer is a bed covered with cushions resembling a couch. As the two men sit in front of the computer, our friend's feline companion, Fiogos (bowtie in Greek) lumbers over towards them and sits on the bed next to them. Fiogos is 17 yrs old, somewhat plump, and black.

The two of them talk as our friend types and moves from site to site looking for the right pieces from which he is going to build a new computer for us. Fiogos lifts his paw, ever so gently, bringing it down on the arm of our friend. As our friend types, and the two of them continue to talk, Fiogos' paw moves up and down, firmly planted on his arm. Every so often, Fiogos' paw is equally gently lifted off this human arm and put back down in front of Fiogos. Every time, a couple of minutes later, the feline paw returns to the human arm. After a few times of this, our friend lifts him up and puts him in his lap. Fiogos contentedly seats himself so he can watch the screen along with the two of them.

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In the fall of 2016, after having lost touch for a couple of years, I met with a good friend who gave birth to a baby boy a few months ago, via a sperm donor in Denmark. Eleni is of Greek-American background, like myself. Her partner, let's call her Athena, a "Greek in full," also had a baby, this time a girl, a little before that, using similar methods, also in Denmark. Denmark was important because they found it to be the only place in Europe where the child later has the right to learn the identity of the sperm donor. Artificial insemination and sperm donation became necessary, Eleni told me, because after trying with sperm of several friends and relatives, which tests proved to be inadequate, they came to the realization that good quality sperm is hard to find. I thought this was funny and told her so. Even today, Greek lay attitudes towards heterosexual couples having difficulties getting pregnant tend towards the belief that it is the women's bodies that have some problem that prevents conception.

As we sipped our coffee in the gentrifying area of Athens called Koukaki, where they rent their home, Eleni filled me in on other major events I had missed. She had stopped working as a "creative play" babysitter a few months in to her pregnancy. So too had Athena, who worked in a co-op café that she partly owns. They now lived on the rent each collected on an apartment each one owned thanks to their families of origin. Eleni told me, her dog, Bonnie, who had been a member of their household since she and Athena started living together, had died. She developed cancer, Eleni told me, and they took care of her for a long time, with remissions and other ups and downs. Then, finally, it was

clear, she was going to die and they brought the vet to the house to do euthanasia.



9. Question Mark in Reverse

Having gone through a similar process with Myrra a few years ago, I listened carefully and empathized with the difficulty of what she was sharing. For me, this decision was one of the most difficult in my life. For Eleni, however, the euthanasia decision was not the focus. As she continued the story, she emphasized that the euthanasia took place less than a week before Athena gave birth. So much impending happiness and so much sadness at once was basically the gist of the story. I sympathized fully. Though I never really wanted to have a child of my own, I could understand the confusion and the intensity she alluded to. Also, there was something about the timing that I sensed, though we didn't discuss it. I had finally made the decision for euthanasia for Myrra and scheduled it (yes) for the day before my niece's 6th birthday. It is other aspects of Eleni's story, however, that work to shed an almost glaring light on zones of critical relationalities between human and non-human animals. She went on to tell me how what happened was that even after the first few weeks of their baby's life, their predominant feeling was that they had lost a child. Her way of describing this

was very vivid. I later mentioned this project and asked her if she might be willing to briefly write me the experience, as she had told it to me.¹³ This is her response:

Hmmm well I don't know exactly what you are thinking about bc I think I said a lot about my sweet Bonnie ... so here it goes a brief repeat.

When Bonnie was ill (or rather when we realized she was ill) it was such an emotional time. On one hand, we were preparing and looking forward to our much anticipated birth of our baby and on the other hand we were desperately trying to keep our other one alive. We finally let her go a week before Athena gave birth and it was a really beautiful last day we all spent together ... friends came and said goodbye and even though she was so sick and weak she stood up when each visitor arrived. The next day we wandered Athens crying and grieving and shell-shocked. 5 days later Athena gave birth in our home while 5 days earlier we said goodbye to our other baby in our home. 2 months later I gave birth. We admitted to each other a couple months after H. [the baby Eleni gave birth to] was born that we almost loved them as much as we loved Bonnie and then some months after that we agreed that we loved them as much as we loved Bonnie.

How could we love them immediately the same as Bonnie? We already had a long relationship with her...they were new in our lives. She was an equal member of our family ... we were a threesome. Even though we have a crazy household now full of love and noise and laughter from babies, the house still feels like there is a void ... something is missing ... our Bonnie. The other day Athena was really sad because she was thinking about how much she loves F. and H. and how she honestly loved Bonnie just as much and how much she misses her. So F. is turning 1 on Dec 27th and as amazing this is and how we can't believe it and what a celebration we will have, I have just as a strong feeling of still shock and sadness that our Bonnie has been gone for almost a year. She was definitely our first

child. I don't think the pain ever gets any less, I just don't think about it as often ...

Part of what is very important in Eleni's map of critical relationalities is the way in which the distinction between human and non-human is firmly rendered mute. This narrative highlights the disparate incredibly rich forms of relationality that can develop between human and non-human animals as well as tracks the process-based aspect of their development. Powerfully destabilizing popular stereotypical images, the newborn human babies are inscribed as liminal subjects in terms of the family, if very welcome and loved ones. Their full ascription on what emerges as a hierarchy of "our child" takes a couple of months. The status of "our child" who is loved, moreover, "as much" as Bonnie, took yet another few months to be attained. The aged and ill dog is an unequivocal kin subject rated, in fact, at the highest level of "our baby." Moreover, her departure from life is clearly mourned.¹⁴

In this way, Bonnie emerges as a subject that at once overcomes essentialist designations of both species and age. Similarly, strong kinship relationality and ties of family are interwoven here between an interesting assemblage of subjects: human and non-human subjects with no genetic tie; human subjects who have no genetic tie to one another, as are the two adult women and the two human babies; and those who have "half" a genetic bond, as do the babies born to each of the women with that specific woman. Finally, this story also shows how the decision to end the life of Bonnie, albeit a subject so deeply loved, was accompanied by both sadness and happiness, in thus having the occasion to say a proper goodbye. Both these feelings, moreover, are represented as living on way beyond Bonnie's death.

Eleni ended her e-mail message to me thus, capitals in the original: "SO MUCH FOR BRIEF ... I HOPE YOU FIND IN THERE WHAT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR!!!" If we queer our lens just slightly, this comment can be seen as very telling. It can be seen as a comment towards conventional approaches to family. That is, it is as though Eleni's comment is calling on "Society" with its normative notions of what is real family, as in based both on species similarity and specifically genetic ties, here is what you need to measure up against. Can the common essence of blood bonds that you favor create what we have here?

Moreover, no doubt, can I or Eleni find in this mess of charged and nuanced affective life bonds between the various subjects described, the sense of family we are looking for? The story itself stands as the pithy response: *You bet*. Thus, in one fell swoop, essentialist designations of familial kin are decentered, even as they are partially reinscribed, and effectively rendered moot. This all brings to mind Haraway's comment about method in trying to further feminist theory in the context of the coevolution of natureculture in late modernity. Of her choice to focus on dogs and relationalities with them, she says, "I risk alienating my old doppelganger, the cyborg, in order to try to convince readers that dogs might be better guides through the thickets of technobiopolitics in the Third Millenium of the Current Era." (9-10).



10. Nun, with Boxing Gloves

Preferring monkeys and violence for his angle on the larger project I too am trying to contribute to here, Adorno firmly states that "[t]he constantly encountered assertion that savages, blacks, Japanese are like animals, monkeys for example, is the key to the pogrom"; he continues

with the explanation that the (human) thought which he names “after all, it is only an animal,” in fact “reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings, the perpetrators having again and again to reassure themselves that it is ‘only an animal’ because they could never fully believe this *even of animals*” ([1951] 2005:105, my emphasis). In full alignment with this reasoning, the basic idea I am pursuing here is the following: state-sanctioned violence, such as the mass incarceration system of the United States or the more individualized shootings of non-white, racialized people by police, becomes possible at least in part thanks to one simple cultural and supremely political move. That is, an equation of some human animals, some sub-category of these, with non-human animals. Given that non-human animals are not considered equal beings in many social surfaces of the globe, whether or not they are deemed equally sentient or equally intelligent, activating this equation works to suck more animals, of all sorts, into the targets of assorted human violence.¹⁵ If we can document forms of relationality through which non-human animals emerge as equals, if not superior, then this might work as a roadblock of sorts to the barbarity aimed at all sorts of animals. But any such documentation will only be as strong as is common the premise that it makes sense to talk about any human and non-human quality as being on a par at all.

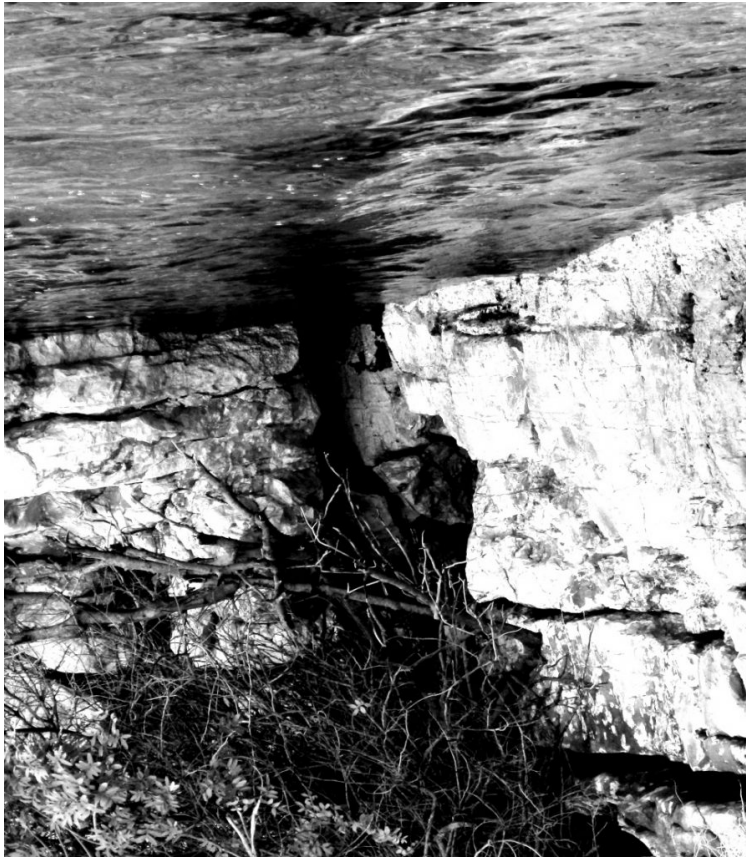
Another tactic is to show how disparate forms of genocide, aimed at human or non-human animals, are self-destructive because such violence narrows the range of bio and social diversity and thus impoverishes the planet, making the long-term survival of any lifeform more difficult. But this tack rests on the assumption that humans care about what happens after their own lives are over. This assumption is also not always safe. Even though such care is typically indexed as one of the characteristics proving human superiority over non-human animals, it is not borne out by the evidence. Climate crisis is but one example of a development that refutes this claim directly.

A method that I think holds more promise, in terms of its political efficacy, is to explore the field of relationality generated by the intermingling of the human with the non-human. This pathway has the advantage of challenging notions currently governing the production of knowledge and policy and thus, at least, of possibly opening up ground for new ways of imagining not only the human and the non-human

but sociality itself. If the easy distinction between the two can be destabilized via the adoption of a perspective that recognizes specific forms of life-sustaining relationality between them wherein the hierarchical meanings ascribed to their presumed as natural difference lose importance, or even disappear entirely, then all social and political uses of “the animal” to shore up violent hierarchies among human animals might lose their grip and become more easily available to critique as political moves rather than designations of natural truths.

Key to the established understandings of human social life is a certain relegation of the material, and materiality itself, to a fixed and relatively inert quality. The rich vein of work done on new materialisms aside, this remains a relatively pervasive cultural belief across the globe. One more step it is thus important to make involves understanding nature that is itself something that is *done*. Nature acquires its significances and uses, indeed its form in many cases, via actions taken by human and non-human life forms alike. I wish to include plants and stones here as well. There is now ample evidence that the common belief that humans act upon nature, as though it is somehow passive or inert, needs to be corrected. A vivid example of how this works can be seen in the interdisciplinary study of how earthworms exist in various contexts (Bertoni). The implications of this way of seeing nature are profound. As Filippo Bertoni puts it:

We began this article wondering how many natures there were, but, as soon as we started looking for an answer, natures began to multiply like a Lernaean Hydra, and we lost count. Such a question, we discovered, has no answer. Hacking was right: counting natures is really an impossible task. But a relevant one, nevertheless: it reminds us that having one, unitary Nature is an achievement and not a natural fact. (Bertoni *Charming Worms* 77)



11. Secret Meeting, Boy with Smashed Jaw (black and white)

Seeing nature as an achievement in this way—much as gender and sexuality are seen in the light of thousands of Foucauldean cross-cultural and comparative historical analyses--does not place the human in a firmer position of control. It is not that we humans “write” nature on a blank slate. Nor, certainly, is it that in “discovering” its constructedness, it simply goes away. The oxygen we breathe in order to stay alive, the water we drink, and the plants and animals many of us eat are evidence enough of a layer of materiality that is persistent and stubborn in some way. Rather, what emerges is a view of nature wherein we are

able to recognize that nature is indeed achieved and that this is done as the product of the interplay of assorted agents: human, non-human, and other typically considered inert materials. Whether tracing earthworms through the different sites in which they occur, stones through their specific locations and historical uses (Reinert) or the forest as a being that thinks with and within human thought (Kohn),¹⁶ the knowledge gained reveals the limitations of dominant epistemological paradigms and encourages us to broaden our lenses in studying and trying to understand the human differently.

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I chose Myrra because she was a black cat and because she was the only cat who did not come up to me in some version of a greeting. I remember my first sight of her clearly. She kept away from the meowing fuss that greeted me as I kneeled down in the La Jolla cattery. Peering through the various swerving tails, I saw her in the distance. She stood back, quite far back, simply looking at me through the forest of swinging tails of other kittens and cats who had enthusiastically run up to greet me.

Mira is also the Spanish word for look. A friend told me this as I was looking for a name. Hitting upon Myrra, for the sound as well as the Greek meaning of the word, I was worried because I didn't like the "nationalist" connotations of calling a black cat owned by a Greek-American woman the word for fate. I did like the double whammy cosmic dare involved, however. As too the insubordination indexed by a 26-year-old woman having a black cat called fate. But the normative "Greekness" was a minus, even if it indexed a "bad" thing. The Spanish worked perfectly. She herself was of the Mexican borderland after all. For the next 19 years, when I introduced her to a human of Greek origin, with just a bit of glee I would add that "it means 'look' in Spanish."



12. Woman's Torso

Joy was easy to read. Always. Even though Myrra was not a madly purring kind of cat. Indeed, I think it was a year or two into our relationship when she decided she might enjoy sitting in a human's lap. Her favorite position when she was young was perched on a shoulder.

When we lived in Boston, I am pretty sure that her favorite thing was when I would open the one room studio apartment door after midnight and let her out into the long-carpeted corridor of the “pets not welcome” building we lived in. She would furiously race up and down that long corridor as I made congratulatory sounds in a loud whisper and our neighbors slept. That was happiness. So too was her batting a crumpled-up piece of orange paper all over the floor, whatever city we lived in. Her friend Jonathan, another human, had first shown her this game. Most of all, perhaps, so too was her curling up in the sunshine of a window to sleep.

Pain and unhappiness I cannot be sure of. I never was. That was my fear during the end of her life and that was what finally helped me to let her go. I came to the belief that part of my responsibility to her was to do whatever I could so that she would not experience serious pain. In a state of kidney collapse and assorted other problems, the odds were tremendous that this would happen if she did not die in time. It was against this prospect that I weighed the days or possibly weeks she, and us together, might have left. I stalled, asked her for signs and felt she gave none. Scared of the prospect of her suffering serious pain, I suddenly decided I needed to let go of the possibility of days or even weeks remaining and arrange for euthanasia, if I really meant the love.



13. The Feline, Relief in Gold

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Also foregrounded in the light of the disparate ways that nature is *done* is at once both the resilience and vulnerability, or precarity, of disparate forms of life. This terrain can yield an “emergent sociality” made up of new ways of belonging and being (Allison *Greeting the Dead* 20). Focusing our lens in this way, closing in on the zones of tenacity and of destruction that make up both the human and the non-human,¹⁷ brings previously unknown interactions and convergences to the fore. As Anne Allison puts it, though with regards to the human specifically, “One can sense, if one senses optimistically, an emergent potential in attempts to humanly and collectively survive precarity: a new form of commonwealth (commonly remaking the wealth of sociality), a biopolitics from below” (*Precarious* 18). If this view is broadened to include non-human agents as well, relationality can be transformed acquiring more depth and a political value that is tremendous, potentially.

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IMAGE NOTES

Halkias, Alexandra.

1. Stoic Gorilla with Talkative Woman
2. Faces, Black Cat Watching
3. Head on Serpent's Platter (black-and-white)
4. The Ferocious
5. Serpent with Bird (black-and-white)
6. Cat Tree, Woman, in Gold
7. Forest Totem, Seeing
8. Lumbering Ashore, Girl Watching
9. Question Mark in Reverse
10. Nun, with Boxing Gloves
11. Secret Meeting, Boy with Smashed Jaw (black and white)
12. Woman's Torso
13. The Feline, Relief in Gold

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the editors of this issue, Kim TallBear and Angela Willey, for the inspiration offered in their call for this special issue and for helpful comments in developing this photo-essay. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers for their close readings and incisive comments. I thank Gianni Gkolfinopoulos for the careful reading and critical discussion of the ideas presented here. I thank Jonathan Markovitz for his helpful suggestions. Much gratitude too to "Eleni," for permission to use a conversation that took place in the context of our friendship and for unwittingly giving me important validation for the hypothesis of the broader research this piece is a part of. Thanks too to Adrienne Kalfopoulou for invaluable support in persisting with carving out space to write "for ourselves." Finally, many thanks to Hillevi Ganetz and the Gender Studies Program at the University of Stockholm for invaluable scholarly research resources.↵
2. For a concise overview of the current twist in this edge-blunting dynamic, and an incisive argument against it, see Jack Halberstam.↵
3. The method is, in a sense, to trouble habitual forms of perceiving the natural world, along some version of the lines of what David Abram delineates as the more-than-human (*The Spell*).↵
4. In this regard, my project has direct connections to that of Jane Bennett

(*Vibrant Matter*), outlined collectively by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and sharpened with Elizabeth Povinelli's critique of power as geontopower (*Geontologies*). That is, the analysis this photo-essay advances, including the experiment unfolding with the images presented here, stand in firm opposition to "[t]his habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant lives (us, beings) [which] is a 'partition of the sensible'..." and to "[t]he quarantines of matter and life [which] encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations..." (Bennett 1). The emphasis of my contribution is specifically on an intensification of critical relationalities via change in the politics of vision, in both literal and metaphoric senses of the latter. In another register, my objective is to fuel disruption of the "optics of thoughtlessness" which Hartouni (*Visualizing Atrocity*) incisively identifies, following Arendt, as an ongoing cultural force and visual practice enabling life-effacing political projects.←

5. For a nuanced map of how discourse "animalizes black bodies" in the context of lynching, circa 1840-1930, as well as for analysis of the trap anti-lynching rhetoric fell into by drawing from "traditional" animal welfare discourse, see Lindgren Johnson (*Race Matters*). For the historical figuration of black men specifically as "beasts," see also Markovitz (*Legacies*). For incisive tracking of similar cultural politics in three more recent cases, and demonstration of the complex racist consequences of culturally specific articulations of the human vs. non-human binary, see Kim (*Dangerous Crossings*). Public responses of "horror" towards the live animal markets of San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1990s, the conviction of NFL Michael Vick for charges of dogfighting, and the decision of the Makah tribe to resume whale hunting in the Pacific Northwest are the focus of this study. Analysis shows how race and species become tightly intertwined in the U.S., thus connecting "the animal" and "the black man," along with "the Chinese immigrant" and "the Indian," in racist thought. Kim suggests the need to "see beyond" a particular "optics of cruelty and disposability" in order to identify the cultural politics that link non-white populations with cruelty and animality. For a single close reading of the connections between a demonized view of animals in the human vs. non-human binary and the constitution of racist understandings specifically of black men, see Kim's "Murder and mattering in Harambe's house." Here, analysis of "the zoologo-racial order" shaping the events resulting in the murder of the gorilla Harambe within the Cincinnati Zoo (May 28, 2016) contributes to the project of "exposing the circuits of unremitting violence that go into making the black, the an-

imal, and their nearness to one another” (11). Kim’s investigation of how the decision to kill the gorilla was arrived at foregrounds the cultural grid involved in state violence against black humans, including the demographics of the incarceration rate.[←]

6. See Broadwater “Records show city police had long urged seat belt use in vans: Before Freddie Gray’s death, police waged campaign urging seat belt use in vans.” Also see Stolberg and Bidgood, “Freddie Gray died from ‘Rough Ride,’ Prosecutors Assert.”[←]
7. According to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, “African American people are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites.” Also, Harriot notes that in 2018, “black people were three times more likely to be killed by police than were whites.”[←]
8. What many think of as ‘the animal’ is a border-guard enlisted on the side of assorted violent human endeavors. Thinking on this matter, with the work of Kristeva, Foucault and Butler, Stanescu writes:

the philosophical and scientific questions we use all involve some formulation of “what makes us human?” rather than “what makes us another animal?” ... we invest a vast amount of intellectual work in trying to figure out what separates and individuates the human species, rather than in what makes us part of a commonality with other lives. This separation produces a valorization of those traits that we believe are uniquely human—rationality, production, what have you—rather than valorizing those traits we obviously share with other lives—we are finite, interdependent, embodied, capable of pleasure and pain, vulnerable, born to, and one day will, die. The intellectual work to make the human unique results in a devaluing of traits we share with animals. (569-570)

That is, I suggest, to make the animal to serve as a border guard of (particular) human privileges. The animal is figured in such ways as to both police the porous boundary where human and non-human animals meet and to prevent leakage of privilege towards those figured as lesser humans. Put pithily, if somewhat inaccurately, Foucault notes, as Stanescu also emphasizes in his piece, “From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century... the monster is essentially a mixture. It is the mixture of two realms, the animal and the human” (Foucault 63 qutd. in Stanescu 581).[←]

9. Though not going so far as to address the role of the animal per se, focused on the division between West and Islam, Butler points out that “The term and the practice of “civilization” work to produce the human differentially by offering a culturally limited norm for what the human is supposed to

be. It is not just that some humans are treated as humans, and others are dehumanized; it is rather that dehumanization becomes the condition for the production of the human to the extent that a “Western” civilization defines itself over and against a population understood as, by definition, illegitimate, if not *dubiously human*.” (my emphasis) In short, “The question of who will be treated humanely presupposes that we have first settled the question of who does and does not count as a human” (91).[←]

10. The United States has the largest prison population worldwide. At the end of 2016, this amounted to 2,121,600 people. According to the US Bureau of Justice data, in 2010, 500 of 100,000 are in prison. At the end of 2016, 655. In addition, the conditions of incarceration for prisoners in the U.S. are inadequate and often brutal. Protest planned for September 9, 2016, on the 45th anniversary of the Attica prison uprising, aimed to bring this to the center of public debate in the nation. As noted by John Washington in *The Nation* (September 7 2016), “the actions of September 9 (2016) will shed light on the often decrepit conditions suffered by the 2.4 million people in what is the largest carceral system in the world. They will also mark a new point in the fight against mass incarceration, and likely stand as a harbinger for further actions and strikes to come. Malik Washington, an inmate in the H. H. Coffield Unit in Texas and the chief spokesperson for the End Prison Slavery in Texas movement, wrote to me in a letter: ‘Prisoners in Amerikan prisons are sick and tired of being degraded, dehumanized, and exploited.’”[←]
11. For one example, note the rhetoric cited in response to media query concerning one of the largest U.S. prisoners’ strikes by Jeff Spross: “Almost two-thirds of the prisoners who work under these conditions are not white, versus just 30 percent of the American population as a whole that’s non-white. The IWOC has clearly connected the dots between modern prison labor and America’s shameful past use of slavery: ‘Overseers watch over our every move, and if we do not perform our appointed tasks to their liking, we are punished,’ the union’s announcement read. ‘They may have replaced the whip with pepper spray, but many of the other torments remain: isolation, restraint positions, stripping off our clothes, and investigating our bodies *as though we are animals*.’” (my emphasis).[←]
12. For this reason too, I find unsatisfactory exceptionalist moves to include specific species of non-humans in the category of persons and accord them protection, rights, and sovereignty. One such example is India’s Central Zoo Authority’s 2013 recognition of cetacean species as “non-human per-

sons.” For a brief analysis of how the politics of “care” for a specific species can translate into license for further onslaught of the environment it depends upon in the case of the Kemp’s Ridley turtle which lives only in the Gulf of Mexico, see Halkias. For an exposition of a strong argument problematizing such decisions, see Bertoni and Uli Biesel.↵

13. The text that follows is a direct copy of the response sent to me via e-mail by “Eleni” on Monday, 21 November 2016. Our face-to-face conversation had taken place in a café in Athens a few days earlier.↵
14. Eleni’s narrative is a vibrant illustration of how “Mourning both celebrates and grieves our precarious lives. It seeks connections, discovers secret kinships, and recognizes intersubjective relations” (Stanescu 580). The challenge for a feminist and queer animal studies, Stanescu continues, is to “open up our practices, paths, and protocols of mourning in ways that can escape the narrow confines of anthropocentrism” (580). In effect, “... we might have to risk our own coherency so that we can demand that certain lives be socially intelligible”(580).↵
15. Studying the connections between different types of violence, Scheper-Hughes refers to her concept of a “continuum of violence” as “one capable of linking the ‘sensible’ violence and right of the state to wage war (even a dirty war) against its’ enemies with the ‘senseless’ violence of ‘irrational’ youth protecting their turf and/or their dignity” (79-80). More specifically, she notes, “Peace-time crimes such as prison construction sold as economic development to impoverished communities in the mountains and deserts of California (Gilmore 2007) or the evolution of the prison industrial complex (Davis 2003) into the latest ‘peculiar institution’ for managing race relations in the United States (Wacquant 2006) are the ‘small wars and invisible genocides’ to which I am referring here.” Though she does not make reference to non human animals per se, she continues “Identifying misrecognition [of deaths] is crucial as is paying close attention to violence hidden in the minutia of ‘normal’ social practices. These force us to consider the links between the violence of everyday life and political terror authorized by the state” (86).↵
16. Kohn specifically distinguishes lifeforms from stones, noting, “To recognize living thoughts, and the ecology of selves to which they give rise, underscores that there is something unique to life: life thinks, stones don’t” (100). Yet the objective, as he goes on to explain, remains similar in that “The goal here is not to name some essential vital force, or to create a new dualism to replace those old ones that severed humans from the rest of life

and the world. The goal, rather, is to understand some of the special properties of lives and thoughts, which are obscured when we theorize humans and nonhumans, and their interactions, in terms of materiality or in terms of our assumptions (often hidden) about symbolically based linguistic relationality” (100).[↵]

17. Important to note here, “The Anthropocene thesis claims that humans have become a geophysical force operating on the planet, as if humans were an undifferentiated whole. But which humans, to be more precise? Among the epistemological fallacies—and dangers—of the concept of the Anthropocene is that it renders the human abstract in the process of geologizing human agency, what Donna Haraway might call an example of the “god trick” (Ahmed 40).[↵]