Review

Cat’s cradle with Donna Haraway

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Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), x + 360 pp., £15.50/$24.95/€18.22 (pbk), £46.50/$75.00/€54.68 (hbk). ISBN-13: 978-0-8166-5046-0 (pbk), 978-0-8166-5045-3 (hbk).

The explorations in When Species Meet converge in advocating an ‘alternative globalization’ (p. 3): creating a future world that resembles a global ecology rather than a monoculture. To this end, Donna Haraway endeavors to navigate between the polarities of, on the one hand, love of organic nature (often coupled with suspicion of technologies) and, on the other, love of cyborgs (often taken to make one an enemy of pristine nature). She stays loyal to the cyborg (as ‘hopeful monster’), theoretically enlarging it into the neologism of ‘natureculture’ that permeates her text. In the world of natureculture, she tells us, there is ample room, figuratively and literally, for both lapdog and laptop on the same lap (p. 10). The text argues that good theorizing and ethical practice are worked out in the messiness of ‘mortal entanglements’, and not through the imposition of ideologies or agendas that tend to float above the complexities of the lifeworld. The author agitates for a ‘chance of getting on together with some grace’ (p. 15), expressed elsewhere as the desire for the ‘co-flourishing of companion species’ (passim). The means are unassuming but profound: co-flourishing does not arise primarily through implementing regulations, norms, or abstract principles, but by cultivating ‘respect and response’ – bundled together in Haraway’s evocation of respecere, ‘looking back [and] holding in regard’ (p. 88). The text’s ontological refrain is that we always ‘become with’ others, not only humans of course but all sorts of nonhumans as well. Nothing is barred from this co-becoming, including technologies, creatures, landscapes, and practices. Symbiogenesis, in both biological and social worlds, is the rule not the exception; to acknowledge and embrace this promises moving toward an alternative globalization. Such meditations run through a collage of chapters (topics), keeping otherwise dissimilar explorations fairly well integrated.

Haraway’s commitments are incompatible with ‘human exceptionalism’ – the imperial exaltation of the human above the dance of Earthly life. With polemical relish throughout
the book, Haraway denounces exceptionalism (in its theorized and lived modalities) as the fatally flawed dream of human insularity; the deluded ambition to become through one’s own autonomy and privileged resources; a sense of entitlement to use the world without accountability; and the divinely or secularly licensed right ‘to multiply outside of all bounds of sharing the earth’ (p. 245). ‘If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism’, she writes, ‘then we know that becoming is always becoming with’ (p. 244, emphasis in original). Inside instrumental relations, such as those that often involve pain and suffering of laboratory animals, human exceptionalism remains smug, giving itself license not to look back and not to think twice. Indeed, instrumental relations in which animals are used constitute a definite and perpetual challenge for the chance of getting on together with grace.

Instrumental relations in themselves, Haraway avers, are not the problem. They cannot be the problem because they are inevitable in ‘webbed mortal earthly being and becoming’ (p. 71). She thus steers clear of an in-principle condemnation of instrumental relations, for ‘to be in relation of use to each other is not the definition of unfreedom and violation’ (p. 74). The question comes down to this: if we have to use, how do we use responsibly and ethically? It will surprise no one that this is a complicated question that no regulative apparatus can fully resolve. (Plenty of regulations and guidelines about using animals are needed, however, some of which Haraway offers in general terms. It is also the case that ‘some instrumental relations should be ended’ [p. 77].) For Haraway the ethics of using, when using we must, is about (perhaps oversimplifying) the cultivation of heart: the willingness to stay face-to-face with and share suffering; to sustain a ‘radical ability to remember and feel what is going on’ (p. 75); always to ask for a forgiveness that cannot be granted; to know that no balance sheet of cost and benefits can absolve action that causes pain, suffering, and/or death; to remain intimate with the knowledge that killing is never innocent.

No general principles can deliver the epistemological, emotional, technical, pragmatic, and ethical requirements of exacting the labor of sentient beings within asymmetrical contexts. This kind of unequal relation cannot be made good through codification, nor abolished by means of radical political theory/action (such as that of animal rights). Instrumental relations call for something more nebulous, but perhaps also more authentic: an alternative form of life, namely, the willingness and ability to ‘stay in the open’ (passim).

How can laboratory practices be ‘less deadly, less painful, and freer’ (p. 77)? It is not simply that Haraway poses the question; more to the point, she wants laboratory practitioners to pose it. Ultimately, she is calling for a new culture (laboratory as well as wider) within which questions of this nature can be posed in real time and as a matter of course. Such a culture would not be governed by the impossible proscription ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’, but by the plausible and achievable command ‘Thou Shalt Not Make Killable’ (p. 80). The making killable (which our culture endorses in spades) undergirds, according to Haraway, the gigantic, systematized violence against animals that has reached unprecedented levels in the (post)industrial world. It is the making killable of billions of animals, and of innumerable kinds of animals, that also ensures the fact that all the killing remains below most people’s radar screens. Steering clear of the human exceptionalism that turns a blind eye to this ubiquitous and mundane violence, without buying into its alter ego that wants to transfer the western idiom of rights to animals, Haraway struggles to articulate a position of ‘staying in the open’ within unavoidable instrumental bonds; ‘we can never
do without technique, without calculation, without reasons, but these practices will never take us into that kind of open where multispecies responsibility is at stake’ (p. 81). What she advocates, if I understand correctly, is a politicized form of ethnomethodology that forsakes Big Principles, Ethical Universals, and Grand Theory in favor of messy engagements, ‘imaginative politics’, never fully resolvable quandaries, emotional risks, and ‘permanent complexity’ – coupled with unswerving reflexivity and compassion in the midst of it all. There is no time-out from being worldly, and the seeking of such time-out is perhaps the secret dream of most forms of abstraction.

To always be in response – with respect not only to laboratory animals, but also with the ones we live with and perhaps breed or train, as well as with other kinds of beings touched upon in When Species Meet – means staying alert, not avoiding, and being without excuses. It is within open presence (physical, emotional, and spiritual) that love is born and endures. Absentmindedness, complacency, excuses, and evading emotional discomfort (practiced long enough) harbor the end of love, or its impossibility. ‘To be in love means to be worldly, to be in connection with significant otherness and signifying others’ (p. 97). Haraway here happens to be talking about dogs, which, for some of us at least, is a stimulating philosophical excursion. Only people who have fallen in love with an animal, or with the animal kingdom as such, can understand the intimations brimming in the phrase that Haraway cites and reiterates – that animals enrich our ignorance.

A chapter on the genetics of dog breeding examines ‘how heterogeneous sorts of expertise and caring are required to craft and sustain scientific knowledge for the benefit of kinds of dogs, as well as individual pooches, within a particular, noninnocent, natural-cultural context’ (p. 128). It details how practitioners meld devotion, energy, courage, politics, knowledge, and technical savvy to negotiate the challenging terrain of dog breeding, where suffering (caused by the mishap of pairing recessive alleles) must be avoided and diversity (somehow) sustained, while ‘pure lines’ are reproduced: all for love of the breed and the dogs, and not for turning a profit. Haraway weaves a familiar science studies narrative of the politics and thought of lay expertise, with a less familiar ingredient of passionate advocacy for an ethics of co-flourishing. Reproducing the working breed of Australian shepherd dogs (who will suffer from epilepsy, for example, as a consequence of inbreeding or care-less breeding) thus becomes thematically continuous with the examination of laboratory animal life (in the preceding chapter) and the life of industrially grown chickens (in one that follows). Working for the co-flourishing of companion species thus has multiple meanings – from staying present with suffering, to promoting full disclosure of genetic information on dog lines, to querying how animals that end up at the dinner table ought to be grown and treated.

‘If science studies scholars have learned anything in the last decades’, Haraway maintains, ‘it is that the categorical dualism between society and science, culture and nature, is a setup to block a grasp of what is going on in technoculture, including what is to be done in order that companion animals flourish’ (p. 136). Closer to the truth, I think, is that science studies scholarship has always been more comfortable on terrain where technoculture is solidly operational – terrain that is, without end in sight, taking over more and more of the world field. That is why it is not surprising that while the title of one of the chapters (‘Cloning Mutts, Saving Tigers’) seems to promise that tigers will get 50% of the attention, they only get perfunctory representation. An other-centered ethic, however,
would demand that we do not turn a sustained theoretical and political gaze away from the plight of the tiger – who is, after all, a poster case of the other. It is a legitimate question to ask whether ‘the tiger’ (now in quotes as a stand-in for Earthly otherness, such as it is, today) wants any truck with our naturecultures or our technocultures, or has much interest in becoming with us. Questions about co-flourishing tack a different course here, as they (re)ignite themes of loving from afar, looking back from a distance, showing respect by means of discretion, and drawing principled limits on instrumentalism. Because these themes conjure and involve unhitching the ‘natural’ and the ‘cultural’, the ‘human’ and the ‘nonhuman’, they remain much un- and under-pondered in all discursive domains (including most social theory) save a fraction of the environmental. But a genuine interest in the plight of the other (and in the plight of otherness – for an immense chunk of the category itself is critically endangered) demands sufficient openness to challenge the theorized and real-worldly fusions echoed in such concepts as hybrid, cyborg, natureculture, technoculture, and even technoscience. It is a telling and, I think, unintended irony of such mergers that they adumbrate the homogenized and colonized planet that has always been the nightmare destination of human exceptionalism. While considering the (literal and discursive) de-construction of the above fusions, we might simultaneously contemplate breathing new life and theoretical energy into the maligned (by a heavy diet of constructivism) concepts of ‘intrinsic being’ and ‘intrinsic value’.

To enlarge the ethical regard across many species, including the ‘more-than-human world’, is the direction in which Haraway moves her readers. Her frontal attack on human supremacy (the ideological handmaiden of exceptionalism) is in dialogue with many other practitioners of anthropology, biology, animal behavior science, philosophy, dog cultures, and ecofeminism. This provides for a rich conversational landscape, and makes the footnote sections of the book as lively to read as the main text. ‘Human exceptionalism is what companion species cannot abide’, she writes (p. 165). Exceptionalism has always been propped by discourses of difference, in which nonhumans have variously been denied sentience, soul, mind, language, self-consciousness, technology, morality, or what-have-you. ‘The philosophic and literary conceit that all we have is representations and no access to what animals think and feel is wrong’ (p. 226). The chapter ‘Training in the Contact Zone’ is not only a personal ethnography of training with dogs in the sport of agility, but also an essay on the availability of nonhuman mind. The mind of the dog shows itself in work, play, focus, and forms of action and communication performed for their own sake. Mind reveals itself within an intersubjective field through interlocking gestures, eyes, and movements – forms of being and becoming together. This domain of mind is something philosophical and behaviorist traditions have often failed to grant significance to, as they strain to portray mind as an inner domain either unavailable to observation and representation or irrelevant to the shaping of behavior. The greater the separation superimposed between human observer and animal subject – the thicker the theories, the more rigid the methods, and the more entrenched the (humanistic) skepticism – the more animal mind disappears behind such ostensible lenses that are actually screens.

The epistemological value of the performative sport of agility that Haraway describes lies in revealing the dog’s mind, transparent and alive in ways that cannot be ignored within a ‘reciprocity of inductions’, a coordination of movements, and the shared
emotional wavelengths of joy, disappointment, excitement, listlessness, enthusiasm, and the like. This experiential, lived, and invited (by the animal) alternative approach to mind is explored earlier through Barbara Smuts’ connection with her baboon subjects (Smuts, 1999). Smuts understood that she had to let go of stiff methodological protocols and subject–object (in the name of “objectivity”) separation, if she were to gain the baboons’ trust and actually learn something intimate about their lives. Interestingly enough, this shift required her to acknowledge mind before she could study mind (meaning, animal life). Here is Smuts, quoted in When Species Meet:

I … in the process of gaining their trust, changed almost everything about me, including the way I walked and sat, the way I held my body, and the way I used my eyes and voice. I was learning a whole new way of being in the world – the way of baboon … I was responding to the cues the baboons used to indicate their emotions, motivations and intentions to one another. (p. 24)

Such words incite a broader appreciation of the diversity of nonhuman minds on Earth that enrich not only our ignorance but also our knowledge. Smuts’ words also disclose something about the beauty of science, the ways it becomes forced to flex and reinvent itself, since its commitment to knowing the world, sooner or later, trumps loyalties to historical forms of method, theory, or baggage of assumptions.

When Species Meet, Haraway tells us, is ‘about the entanglements of beings in technoculture that work through reciprocal inductions to shape companion species’ (p. 281). Regarding companion species, she writes mostly, though not exclusively, about animals we live with. At the same time, she insists on the importance of keeping the notion of “companion species” amorphous – flexible enough to contain such diverse entities as technological assemblages, college students, and humpback whales. I beg to differ in theoretical taste from this form of conceptual plasticity which, I think, can vitiate good theorizing and compromise the possibility of liberatory politics. What do we gain if categories are blurred to such an extent that we do not, or might not, know what we are talking about? How do we begin to draw important distinctions, if all sorts of things and beings are compounded in an indistinguishable heap? How can we intelligently theorize the difference between, for instance, ‘becoming with’ Disneyland and (versus) ‘becoming with’ Tennessee’s Smoky Mountains? Becoming with my lapdog and (versus) becoming with SimPet? And so on. Of course we might always draw crisper pictures through ethnographies or case studies, but categorical fusions and over-inclusiveness bar, as I will now argue, certain forms of critical theory.

This world we live in is, in vast measure, a world of natureculture; and a great deal of the problem with this world is precisely that. Let’s call today’s immense and indeterminate nature–culture–social–technical complex the melting pot. Human beings take the melting pot for granted, since it represents the preponderance of their experience of being in the world. When intellectuals, in turn, proceed to take the melting pot as a theoretical starting point, they furnish the taken-for-granted with an additional layer of concretization: this is what is known in critical theory as ‘reification’, one of the most potent forms of ideology known to (wo)man. Within the melting pot, people entirely (and I do mean almost entirely) lose sight, for example, of the plight of the chicken in the battery cage. Interestingly enough, even if that plight is revealed – as Haraway does in a chapter called ‘Chicken’ – the revelation itself is insufficient to make people change how they live (eat).
The reason being exactly because nature and culture have been soldered together within people’s experiential fields: natureculture is the hegemonic ontology. But gaining critical leverage on the world requires us to challenge that taken-for-granted ontology – not echo it. One significant dimension of composing critical theory must, therefore, involve decoupling ‘natureculture’, so as to de-reify its repressions, perversities, forms of violence, estrangements, and so forth – all those undesirable manifestations of natureculture that are too entrenched to be visible even in open view.

Natureculture is what we live with, but hope for an alternative globalization does not lie in the continued swelling of the melting pot. Hope lies instead in distinguishing where the meshing is good, where it produces cruelty, where it harbors disease, where it is unavoidable, where it colonizes the human mind, and where divorce is occasion to celebrate. The devil is in the details no doubt, but a first intellectual step is to affirm that what we (still) have, and what we desire to have, is natures, cultures, and naturecultures. Diversity, indeed.

Reference

Biographical note
Eileen Crist is Associate Professor in Science & Technology in Society at Virginia Tech. She currently teaches in the areas of humanities, science, and environment. Her research is on behavioral science and environmental issues. She is author of Images of Animals: Anthropomorphism and Animal Mind (Temple University Press, 2000) and co-editor of Gaia in Turmoil: Climate Change, Biodepletion, and Earth Ethics in an Age of Crisis (MIT Press, 2009).