

an other



a black feminist
consideration of
animal life

Sharon Patricia Holland

an other

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Black Outdoors Innovations in the Poetics of Study

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animal life

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for amani & zadie
because they asked me to

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an-oth-er

(determiner and noun)

- 1 Middle English. *an oth-er* until the sixteenth century.
- 2 Used to refer to an additional person or thing of the same type as one already mentioned or known about; one more; a further.
- 3 Used to refer to a different person or thing from one already mentioned or known about.
- 4 A hum:animal world.
- 5 An insurgence.
- 6 Something out of vision.
- 7 Your mama.
- 8 Your daddy too.
- 9 A kind of living.

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Me, I have two rituals. I chant, and then, before I mount the horse, I breathe him in. I know it sounds a little Horse-Whisperer-ish, but when I breathe in a horse, it's as if we are kindred souls. We are one.

SYLVIA HARRIS, *Long Shot* (2011)

The distinction between the human and the non-human no longer marks the outer limits of the social world, as against that of nature, but rather maps a domain within it whose boundary is both permeable and easily crossed.

TIM INGOLD, *The Perception of the Environment* (2000)

For the heart to truly share another's being, it must be an embodied heart, prepared to encounter directly the embodied heart of another. I have met the "other" in this way, not once or a few times, but over and over during years spent in the company of "persons" like you and me, who happen to be nonhuman.

BARBARA SMUTS, reflecting in Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1999)

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

AUDRE LORDE, "Power" (1978)

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x — CONTENTS

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how to read this book

The animal looks at us, and we are naked
before it. Thinking perhaps begins there.

JACQUES DERRIDA, *The Animal That
Therefore I Am* (2008)

Lone black filly. Finished . . .

JOY PRIEST, “Elegy for Kentucky,”
Horsepower (2020)

What happens when Black people *do* things with animals? To write this book, I returned to the birthplace of my maternal line, spent over a decade working with horses, and sometimes failed miserably at becoming with, being with, and loving with them. In short, I did a lot of field work for this project.

This book is therefore riddled with what the animal said, at the same time as it collapses the meaning-making of the term *animal* altogether. This is a feminist text, as it follows a line of argument that concerns itself with females, and all of their hot mess.

Andrea Long Chu sets our teeth on edge in *Females* by coming after a few sacred points about gender (a politics of sex): “Everyone is female. . . . The entire incarcerated population is female. All rape survivors are females. All rapists are females. Females masterminded the Atlantic slave trade. All the dead are female. All the dying too. . . . I am female. And you, dear reader, you are female, even—especially—if you are not a woman. Welcome. Sorry.”¹ In thinking with Valerie Solanas’s work, from her play *Up Your Ass* to the oft-referred to but little quoted *SCUM Manifesto*, Chu writes that Solanas was “brushing off a decade of feminist organizing like a fat, drunk tick” (9). There goes Heidegger’s tick again, but at least in this world, the tick is satiated, feels release.

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For Chu, not only are we females, but we are especially so if we are not women, a nod to Judith Butler and also perhaps TERF wars in feminist encampments. I want to take note here especially that in this catalogue of possibilities for female, being *female* means you can send up the whole history of a people's embodied living as enslaved peoples in and as the master's mind, which reveals itself just so (female). Certainly not the "female" that Hortense J. Spillers refers to in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," as Chu has no time for a biology that engenders. If we take this word—*engenders*—at its root, then the repudiation here is of the *male* parts, and their situatedness at the top of orders of being, doing, and becoming. I bring Chu's text into this brief praxis for reading because it posits several categories of being we think we know: blackness, hum/animal distinction, and, yes, females. This book in many ways works against *knowing* as a rule of thumb.

In the beginning, I was writing a book called *Vocabularies of Vulnerability*—I wanted to cite all of the ways in which blackness, and perhaps Black life, could be taken in this world(ing) that we find ourselves in. Then I "fell"—a rider's euphemism for being bucked off of or politely deposited on the ground by a horse—and shattered my left collarbone. In that moment, I discovered things about my body that I didn't know, I considered my own vulnerability to *an* other, and, perhaps most importantly for this work, I moved past my indebtedness to ontological modes of being and understanding and began to see things through the prism of ethical relation, always already a dog's eye.

My inquiry therefore is about relation, rather than difference, or its resolution. The book's organizing structure is *peripatetic*—I sniff the ground, following the scent of ordinary objects and the theoretical scaffolding they might/must build, then I move on, get bored, find another patch of awful/offal to enjoy. Animal life is, after all, mostly unreasonable and hard to manage. I move at a curiosity, but not always an argument, culled from the thin edge of a knife; I allow some of my finer points to fall away, I get comfortable with my failure to master.

The Black feminist thought that *tracks* best here is from that dirty south, the one we live every day. The one bell hooks refers to that engenders "dissident thinking and living."² hooks contends that to even speak of this place, to claim it, is "an act of

counterhegemonic resistance” (5). If you don’t know this place, if you don’t do your working and living and dying in its arms, this book is not for you. I’m sorry too . . .

I use several terms throughout this book to make my most salient points. When I use the term *hum/animal*, I refer to the philosophical distinction between human being and nonhuman animal being. My use of the term *hum:animal* is to have us reflect upon how the animal opens to the human and the human opens to the animal; this configuration sees *relation*.³ When I say “animal life,” I am intentionally blurring the distinction, *hum/animal*, encouraging us to rethink what we mean by “animal life,” and incline our heads elsewhere.

Along the way there are some impolite questions and outrageous assertions. Some nudity and nakedness. Several moments of ill humor and misbehaving. And among them, yes, love.

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primer : what the animal said

Hast thou given the horse strength?
Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?

JOB 39:19

A mess is an accident.

IAN BOGOST, *Alien Phenomenology* (2012)

accident

How dare I write to you about accident before love. The autocorrect for oxycodone is oxymoron. I will have to tell friends that my trouble is not a literary one. The ground comes up quickly below me and I am not stunned, but indignant. Fuckityfuckfuck am I really going down? Where is he? How far to my right? Will my outstretched leg catch his panicked hindquarter? This could end very badly, I think, but before I hit the ground I take a calculated risk, triangulate the vectors and decide to twist my body toward the horse. Avoiding the face plant and head injury, I choose my left shoulder—am lucky to choose.

Blackhawkdown

Blackhawkdown

I spring up and in the corner of my eye I see the foamy backend of Petey, all sixteen hands moving away from me at a long-stride canter with a few bucks thrown in for good measure or for scorn—I cannot say because he is not mine and at this point never will be. Nonetheless, I notice the sheen of his coat and mourn for our fleeting partnership.

What happened?

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An oxymoron

Updown

Slowlyfaster

Unseatedrider

I get up so fast that my trainer cheers—I turn to her after seeing Petey galloping down the far fence line and I raise my right arm for the thumbs-up. When I go to lift my left arm, something between brain and shoulder breaks down. I point to the general region of my collarbone and shake my head, her voice begins to come from far away; I am broken; getting high on my personal stash of endogenous morphine.

*Help. To Morristown regional hospital for the verdict: I am indeed broken—a wing that cannot be fixed without incident . . . my x-ray is a vision of small bones shattered like glass. I need to see a specialist. I hear the soundtrack to *The Bionic Woman* playing in my head; I will finally get to meet Lindsay Wagner. I smile.*

The Demerol begins to make me drool; I tell my trainer that I love her . . . really and the nurse too and the little boy by the front desk who stares at me in wide-eyed panic, clutching his mother for dear life against the woman with the shredded shirt and paper bag of hydrocodone and the mud stains down the left side of her riding pants.

I will have surgery in five days; in the interim, I teach my summer class in a sling, cook dinner for a friend reminding myself not to move my left wing that little half-inch to the right. I forego all attempts to read as I have the attention span of a twelve-year-old. I am pleased that my masturbating hand is still good.

My left eye now possesses a horse's vision. I see my enemies from two separate flanks and rapid movement makes me rear. Recipe for repair of a shattered wing: do I want a long pin or screws and a plate? The latter. Do I have people who can be with me before, during, and after surgery? Absolutely. Am I allergic to any medications? What? Do I intend to ride again? Yes! Am I insane? Probably. My surgeon comes in and with military precision he marks the spot where the incision will go, noting the fall of my undershirt. He wants to make his mark but not leave it.

My sister flies down from Boston with my nieces in tow. The Facebook post from the oldest reads: "My crazy auntie got bucked from a horse and we have to go take care of her." None of us are actually related by blood—we are blood-strangers. Twenty-four hours after surgery, they walk into my bedroom with the quiet hum of the ice machine circulating, pumping what is now lukewarm water to the wrap under my arm and around my bandaged incision.

"Use of this device cuts down by 50% both pain and swelling after surgery"

I am a mess of sheets and blankets in the apathy of anesthesia ringed by a halo of oxycodone. They are worried. How many did you take . . . no, really? Shite, I am a purist and unused to narcotics. The youngest climbs onto the bed, dragging along her father's iPad. She knows what to do and the rest follow until we become a collection of Mac products fanned out among the bed linens along with the limbs of the dogs, enjoying our togetherness in a haze of cyberlove.

During my months-long rehab, I read the online results from my rib x-rays and find that they do not describe anyone I know.

Impression:

- 1. The cardiac silhouette is unremarkable for the patient's age.*
- 2. No acute abnormalities in the lungs.*
- 3. Mild scoliosis.¹*

love

My oxycodone dreams are vivid and reek of horseflesh. I no longer recognize my silhouette. Something has happened to me of my own accord; I am now metal, severed nerve, and organic matter.

A year later, I circle, urge Annie on, kicking just before the jump cycle to get her up and over. We leave the ground together. This might be what love is. Sherah with Joy.

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notes

how to read this book

- 1 Chu, *Females*, 2. I want to thank my research assistant, Katelyn Campbell, for bringing this text to my attention.
- 2 hooks, *Appalachian Elegy*, 4. I want to thank Danielle Dulken, scholar extraordinaire, for bringing this text and its love for *animal* life and living to my attention.
- 3 Jodi A. Byrd speaks to *relation* when examining the work of Daniel Heath Justice. She notes, “It is the relations between them that matter the most . . . there are moments when the boundaries break down altogether to allow crossings, transformations, and stealings away.” Lisa Lowe and Jennifer Nash, have both spoken to thinking through *relation* or relationality. Since their work doesn’t necessarily focus exclusively on a non-species-centered approach to relation, I don’t engage them more fully in this project. See Byrd, “What’s Normative Got to Do with It?,” 119; Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*; and Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.

primer : what the animal said

- 1 I am grateful for remarks made by friend and colleague David Mitchell, whose response to this portion of my keynote for a conference at the University of Maryland was, in a word, brilliant.

1. vocabularies : possibility

- 1 Jean-Luc Nancy has described “world” in the following manner: “The becoming-world of the world means that ‘world’ is no longer an object, nor an idea, but the place existence is given to and exposed.” Cadava, Connor, and Nancy, *Who Comes After the Subject?*, 1.
- 2 See Pickens, *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness*. She explains her use of the double colon in the introduction.

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