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Living in a Companioned World

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REVIEW

Living in a Companioned World

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When Species Meet, by Donna Haraway, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, x+423 pp., \$24.95 paperback, \$75.00 cloth, ISBN: 978 0 8166 5046 0.

In her back-cover endorsement, Isabelle Stengers—no small intellect herself—declares of Donna Haraway's newest book: '... more than a contribution, it is an event'. It was destined to be so even prior to publication. Since publishing her books *Primate Visions* (1989) and *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (1991), she has blazed an increasingly influential trail across the landscapes of both the social sciences and the humanities. Haraway's imagination is so formidably and inspirationally fertile that anything she writes these days immediately garners the attention of many working not only in 'science and technology studies' and history of science (her home bases), but in fields as diverse as religious studies, environmental sociology and cultural anthropology. *When Species Meet* is published in Minnesota University Press's 'Posthumanities' book series (edited by the talented Cary Wolfe), and can—in some respects—be regarded as the main course arriving five years after the starter that was *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003). It is, as Stengers says, 'an event' simply because we have come to expect nothing less than dazzling innovation from its prodigiously gifted author. Its sheer existence whets the appetite of those who, like me, have been shaped intellectually by Haraway's previous, mind-bending interventions. But is it an event for other, better reasons? Is it, I mean to ask, a book that further demonstrates Donna Haraway's talents because it will, in time, have a paradigm-shifting effect in one or more intellectual fields by virtue of its originality?

Because the intellectual landscape in which she is operating is (in part because of her own success) very different indeed to what it was 20 years ago, I doubt that *When Species Meet* will have a tectonic effect on its diverse readership. In a sense, Haraway is now too well known to surprise her audience [her work is at this point deemed sufficiently influential to have been multiply translated, anthologised (Haraway, 2004) and serially evaluated (e.g. Schneider, 2005)]. This said, it depends on who, exactly, the

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readers are. Take my home turf, human geography. There is now an energetic minority of researchers and teachers in the field who have read Haraway's previous works closely and used them in conjunction with those of others (such as Bruno Latour, Stengers, John Law, Annemarie Mol, and Michel Callon) to promulgate a 'more-than-human geography'. I am thinking here of Sarah Whatmore (at Oxford University), Nigel Thrift (at Warwick) and their students and associates elsewhere in Britain. For this group, I doubt that *When Species Meet* adds anything fundamentally new—which is not to say that its members will not enjoy this book or cite it approvingly.

However, for those who know Haraway only by reputation and who may have encountered her ideas in demotic, second-hand forms ('isn't she that feminist who talks hyperbolically about cyborgs and goddesses?'), *When Species Meet* is likely to be as challenging a read as any of her previous works. Such readers would do well to digest her small 2003 *Manifesto* first though, before wading into the deep waters of this much larger work. Then again, *When Species Meet* is only as large as readers want it to be. Like her previous works of this size, it is a collection of relatively free-standing essays (all published previously in some form: see pp. 393–394). It can be sampled profitably: Haraway has not written *When Species Meet* as the sort of text in which we only understand the whole by engaging closely with all the parts in equal measure. It is a book of leitmotifs: running themes are elaborated and explored in different settings (e.g. laboratories, farms, dog shows) such that each chapter is—philosophically and ethically at least—in some sense a capsule version of all the others.

I hesitate to 'summarise' the book. Those who know Haraway's works well appreciate that most of her important messages lie in the fine details of her pungent prose and myriad stories about people and non-humans. Her writing is the sort that resists the interpreter's desire to abstract and identify the conceptual or thematic signals in the empirical noise (and this is why I think her 2004 *Manifesto* should be read prior to this book). But summarise I will, in the sure knowledge that I'm doing *When Species Meet* a great injustice in the process. The book cover offers a strong clue about Haraway's intentions. It shows the silhouette (or is it shadow?) of a dog whose paw touches a visibly human hand. The canine silhouette/shadow is, I take it, an attempt to represent the way we Westerners fail to fully appreciate how non-humans *constitute us* as what we are, rather than being things 'out there' with which we 'interact' subsequent to the achievement of our supposed 'humanity'. We routinely background, ignore, externalise or objectify non-humans. Haraway's intention is to take issue with these practices, and to both describe and actively recommend alternative modes of relating.

The concept of 'companion species' animates the book. It is a category of historical-geographical ontology which insists that we humans are formed relationally in 'lively knotting' (p. vii) that co-implicates diverse others. Subverting the supposed fixity of species categories, Haraway's mantra is that 'The partners do not precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with ...' (p. 17). She is a non- or anti-essentialist through-and-through who refuses atomistic ontologies without embracing those holistic and systemic ones ranged at the other end of the philosophical spectrum. In this sense, her continued use of the word 'species' is intended to be ironic and reflexive. Collateral concepts convey this sensibility throughout the book, such as 'naturecultures' (no hyphen, no slash), 'contact zone' (the point-of-meeting and coshaping 'where all the action is', p. 219), 'intra-action' (Karen Barad's term for relations that are never between discrete, pre-formed, finished entities), 'critters' ('a motley crew of lively beings including

microbes, fungi, humans, plants, animals, cyborgs and aliens', p. 330 n. 33) and 'things' (Latour's subversive term for the entities-in-the-making that are precisely *not* 'things' in the conventional sense of objectified, self-contained phenomena).

Haraway calmly directs her animus against two practices throughout *When Species Meet*. One is 'calculation', where we organise our interactions with other species according to general taxonomies (simians, felines, viruses etc.) which are decomposed into further supposedly stable sub-categories the referents of which then enjoy/suffer certain forms of treatment on the basis of differential valuations of their moral worth. The second is a much broader form of practice of which calculation is one widespread example. This practice is the opposite of what Martin Heidegger called 'the open' (an idea that Giorgio Agamben has made much of). In a long footnote to chapter 8, Haraway explains:

Heidegger's open ... acknowledge[s] the awful, essential purposelessness of man, who is defined by no fixed world, no nature, no given place ... Only from this 'open' can man grasp the world with passion, not as stock and resource, but in unconcealment and disclosure ... Precisely what differentiates man and animal ... is the possibility of 'profound boredom', utter disconnection from function ... My 'open' is quite other, if similarly lustful for non-teleological understanding. It emerges from the shock of 'getting it': *This* and *here* are who and where we are? What is to be done? How can respect and response flourish in *this* here and *this* we? ... (pp. 367–368).

By valorising 'the open' Haraway is indicating her disappointment that so much of what makes life interesting and fulfilling for all species is honoured only in the breach.

There are some normative categories that run throughout the book, the meanings of which are only evident in the many stories that Haraway tells. These categories include 'regard', 'response' and 'respect', all of which are subtended by the term 'curiosity'. In different ways each of these is a call to experience diverse living others not as examples of taxonomically stable types whose properties and worth are known and settled. The title of chapter 4—'Examined lives'—conveys directly Haraway's belief that we lead mostly *unexamined* lives. She puts enormous emphasis on the recognition of relationally-achieved *specificity*, and challenges readers to let go of categorical certainties, generalities and hierarchies in encountering the world—indeed, 'attending to the details' (p. 157) is a refrain that, for Haraway, has a cognitive, affective and ethical charge. As she says, '*We* are not one' (p. 50) but neither does she commend the 'Me and nature are two' sensibility about which Woody Allen once quipped: 'wholes are non-Euclidean knots of partials connections' (p. 98). In this sense, her book resonates strongly with the messages communicated in Stenger's (1996, volume 1) *Cosmopolitics* and Latour's (2004) *Politics of Nature*—two authors who Haraway cites approvingly in *When Species Meet*. There is, she seems to say, far more to ourselves and the world than we're usually prepared to recognise: we need to 'raise our game' as practical, feeling, sentient beings. We can do better by apprehending differently. As she says, 'the open is not comfortable' (p. 75) and that, no doubt, is why we prefer not to 'go there' too often, if at all.

The 'details' that Haraway explores to make her case focus mostly on 'companion animals', and especially dogs (though chickens get their own chapter). 'Calculation' may be writ-large, but Haraway shows readers that the sort of regard, response and

respect that interest her are also practised by certain of us. She devotes a lot of space to discussing the dog breeders, owners and trainers (including herself as ‘partner’ to Roland and Cayenne) who go to great lengths to ensure the sort of ‘relentlessly specific’ (p. 165) ‘flourishing’ that can occur when species meet. Haraway’s consistently interesting stories matter, because her point is that we *not* abstract from the details to derive ‘general’ principles for cognitive, moral or affective engagement with the non-human. Such abstraction is, she intimates, a virus that infects contemporary bioethics and thus illustrates the continued hold over us of an Enlightenment (or was it Greek?) desire to render orderly a world whose complexity we experience as a threat or barrier rather than a basis for a life well lived. Ironically, as an expression of serious concern and care, bioethics for Haraway is not nearly careful *enough*—it’s too hidebound to rules and formulas to do justice to species interminglings.

Rather than list the chapter contents, let me pick out some things of especial interest. ‘Value-added dogs and lively capital’ (chapter 2) I found highly suggestive. It takes seriously Marx’s arguments about the violence attending capital accumulation, but then asks how—within all the injustice constitutive of the mode of production—we can recognise much that is transspecifically *good* in the relations enabled by flows of labour-time determined ‘value’. This suggests some interesting ways to further the project of an ‘ecological Marxism’ of the sort advanced by figures such as James O’Connor, Ted Benton and Elmar Altvater. The following chapter (‘Sharing suffering’) tackles the charged issue of animal killing (for meat and other purposes) and advances a position that criticises much (industrial) killing in its current form without condemning killing *tout court*. Chapters 7 and 8 are highly personal, and explore Haraway’s own attempt to make flesh the very ideas she advances in her book—specifically through her relationships to Roland and Cayenne. ‘Able bodies and companion species’ (chapter 6) is equally personal but unusual in the context of the book in that it focuses on an intra-human relationship: that of Haraway with her sportswriter father Frank (now deceased). I should also add that the 88 pages of endnotes were as edifying as the text proper, and for me a pointer to numerous new books, papers and essays.

As I said before, quite what one takes away from this book very much depends on who one is. Haraway is one of those relatively rare people in academia whose work commands a very wide and diverse audience that includes seasoned readers and newcomers alike. Readers of this journal constitute only a minority of her actual and potential readership. Neophytes, regardless of their disciplinary background, will doubtless find this book forbidding. Haraway’s idiomatic prose-style, combined with the refusal to privilege big, ‘take-home’ concepts over numerous empirical small stories, make *When Species Meet* a challenging read for those not already in her fan-club. Then again, initiates (which included myself back in 1990) have risen to the challenge before, so there’s every chance that this book will prove to be as good a place as any to enter the Haraway universe for those willing to be tested. More seasoned readers will find some new things compared with her earlier major works. In an autobiographical-cum-confessional footnote to chapter 1 Haraway explains:

When I wrote *Primate Visions* I think I failed the obligation of curiosity . . . I was so intent on the consequences of the Western philosophical, literary and political heritage for writing about animals . . . that I all but missed the . . . relentless curiosity

about animals [of the many scientists] and their tying themselves into knots to find ways to engage *with* these diverse animals ... (p. 312, n. 29).

In other words, and to over-simplify, this book is much less about epistemology and much more about ontology than Haraway's previous works have been. She is here alive to the materiality and agency of the non-human, as well as the range of registers in which we people are entangled therein (sight but also touch, smell, sound, taste; emotion as much as reason). At one point she terms her approach 'non-humanism' to capture its critique of the 'human exceptionalism' idea (the notion that we, uniquely, rise above the world and can entirely pick-and-choose our companions as if the choices did not alter in important ways our supposedly immutable 'humanness'). This choice of term intentionally takes its distance from *post*-humanism ('once were really *were* human, but now technoscience allows us to become something more hybrid and plastic') and *anti*-humanism (the idea that people possess no special qualities in need of recognition or protection). It would be interesting to see how ecocentrist thinkers respond to Haraway's argument. She does not formally engage with the work of Arne Naess and his fellow-travellers, but she is going over common ground in rather different ways.

Inevitably, a book of such intellectual ambition raises questions rather than providing all the answers. *When Species Meet* focuses on complex organisms, which leads one to wonder about the reach of Haraway's erstwhile general argument. How should or could it play out in respect of rocks or very simple organisms—are these equally companionable for us and how ought we to attend to them? Haraway makes mention of power, but does not explore it with any of the vigour found in a book like *Primate Visions*. If power possesses systemic qualities, then does the sort of conspecific regard, respect and response that Haraway commends not also necessarily entail changing the inequitable relations in which otherwise 'good relations' might exist? The chapters on capital and killing broach this question but not in any sustained way. This links to the question of what social theorists have been wont to call 'rationalisation' since Max Weber's time: the transformation of qualitatively different and particular sites, situations and entities into governable things by way of abstract forms of measurement, evaluation and calculation. As I've said, Haraway criticises calculation but she implies that the sort of rationalisation it is an instance of (the closure of 'the open') can perhaps be done away with in favour of endlessly varied companion relationships. This obviously ducks the question of how new and better forms of rationalisation might be more politically progressive than a quasi-anarchistic plurality of inter-species flourishings existing, as it were, below the radar of those logics needed to govern large-scale, mass societies. The fact that the communities of dog breeders and trainers she is part of seem relatively unusual and hard-won does suggest that her agenda for a different way of living could not, as it were, arise spontaneously out of many micro-acts of sheer will-to-change. Finally, Haraway's chapter on her father poses the question of intra-human relations not broached elsewhere in the book. Her philosophical argument through *When Species Meet* logically applies to how we people do, and ought to, interact with each other. The focus on animal–human relationships would have been complemented, and perhaps complicated, in interesting ways if Haraway had explored how human flourishing (in her specific sense of the latter term) can occur in a highly raced, gendered, ethnicised, heterosexed and classed world. Her earlier works focussed closely on power relations and it's a shame some of this concern did not spill-over into her latest offering.

When Species Meet is a hopeful book, full of quiet passion and desire. Never shrill, it refuses to offer readers any concrete programme for a more-than-human life better lived. It's a book about, and celebratory of, the process of becoming. It abhors the apparent solidities of being. It's not especially novel in its themes and recommendations in light of the already published works of figures like Latour and Stengers. But it is a rich, enjoyable read for those who have followed Haraway's writings. The book is also, on balance, as good a place to begin for readers new to Haraway as any of her previous, now-celebrated books. Will those who consider themselves STS scholars get much from this book? Again it depends. *When Species Meet* does not seek to advance debates in STS sense in any formal sense—Haraway dispenses with the conventional practice of specifying how her ideas develop those of previous luminaries and their acolytes. But her book may well finesse some existing perspectives in the field as part of the search for a regime of technoscience fit for truly democratic societies where, pace Latour, the constituents are not only us humans.

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