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Making Love to Whale and Bear: Human-Animal Relationships in Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* and Marian Engel's *Bear*

Human-Animal Relations: Some Theoretical Approaches

Can humans and animals enter into relationships that have meaning for both? Would it be the same meaning? Is there a cognitive breach between humans and animals – one that cannot be crossed, but only imagined? Philosophical definitions of being and the very real consequences of the treatment of animals are being discussed in the field of cultural studies. Animal studies in particular, a recent branch of cultural studies, radically challenges the idea that there is an insurmountable barrier between 'cultured' humans and 'natural' non-humans. It questions the idea, deeply entrenched in Western culture, that we as humans are considered to be clearly distinct from and superior to animals because we have a soul, because we can reason, because we use and make tools, because we can be altruistic, and most importantly, because we speak languages, in short, that we are human because we are not animal. The notion of an anthropological difference is usually attributed to Descartes who differentiated between material bodies and the immaterial soul, between thinking beings as subjects (*cogito ergo sum*) and non-thinking beings as mere objects. Derrida, among others, deplored that this kind of reasoning, still prevalent today, has led to a subjection of the animal in "unprecedented proportions" in the last two centuries, and to violence and cruelty on a now global scale "that some would compare to the worst cases of genocide" (Derrida 2002, 394; original italics).

Animal studies scholars, most prominently Cary Wolfe, but also Donna Haraway, Vicky Hearne, Carol Adams, and others, have redefined key concepts such as subjectivity, agency, intelligence, and consciousness, so that the very definition of the human in opposition to the animal becomes untenable. They base their arguments about human-animal similarities on the research of cognitive ethology and primatology which has shown, as Haraway already pointed out in her seminal Cyborg essay of 1990, that "language, tool use, social behavior, mental events" (Haraway 1990, 193) are no longer the prerogative of humans. Kate Douglas, in an article published in *New Scientist* in 2008, listed culture, mind reading, tool use, morality, emotions, and personality as the "six 'uniquely' human traits now found in animals" (Douglas 2008). This does not imply that humans and non-humans are ultimately the same. No critic would deny the aspect of difference, but it is no longer considered to be absolute. Asking new questions about forms of communication, agency and consciousness, for example, has led to new perceptions of the animal as well as to ourselves as humans. For many people concerned about the welfare of animals and about biodiversity, these new perceptions would have ethical consequences of stopping the cruel treatment of animals and understanding the human as intricately interwoven with a living environment.

Not only cognitive ethology and primatology have been highly influential for animal studies. Peter Singer's notorious study *Animal Liberation* (1975) has also played a key role. As a direct analogy to racism, Singer popularized the term speciesism, which he defines as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species"
(Singer 1975, 6). To overcome speciesism, he demands that the principle of equality be extended beyond our own species. He justifies his argument by referring to the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, who upheld the principle that pain and suffering should be prevented for all who can experience them. For Bentham, the question was not, "Can they reason, nor Can they talk, but, Can they suffer?" (Bentham qtd. in Singer 1975, 7; original italics).

For Singer, just as for Bentham, the question of animal 'rights' was not an apt moral argument for the protection of animals, but "a convenient political shorthand. [...] in the argument for a radical change in our attitude to animals, it is in no way necessary" (Singer 1975, 8). Tom Regan, on the other hand, insisted on the term 'rights' in his standard work on moral philosophy, The Case for Animal Rights (1983), which strongly contributed to the debate about a more ethical treatment of animals. He argued that individuals, including animals, have inherent value which means they have value in themselves. For Regan, it is a matter of justice to give equal respect to those individuals who have equal inherent value, whether they be humans or animals (Regan 1983, 264). Nevertheless, attributing 'rights' to nonhuman animals has been criticized as a form of anthropocentrism because it allegedly places the animal on an equal, or presumably even higher, position than human beings or, as Cary Wolfe maintains, "it tacitly extends a model of human subjectivity to animals, who possess our kind of personhood in diminished form" (Wolfe 2009, 572).

In addition to Jacques Derrida, amongst the philosophers most influential for animal studies up until today are Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari introduced the concept of 'becoming-animal' to support what they call 'rhizomatic thinking,' a radically anti-hierarchical concept in which humans and animals are not separated from each other, but ontologically connected. These connections are not a consequence of evolution, but of alliances, 'multic和平ities,' which in turn constantly form new multiplicities. The relations are complex because "each multiplicity is already composed of heterogeneous terms in symbiosis, and [...] a multiplicity is continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities, according to its thresholds and doors" (Deleuze and Guattari 2007, 46; original italics). Hence, 'becoming-animal' refutes the notion of living beings as discrete entities and, implicitly, denies a strict division between humans and non-humans. It also privileges 'becoming' over 'being' and emphasizes process and change as opposed to permanence, stability and a fixed identity.

According to Cary Wolfe, Derrida's essay, "The animal that therefore I am (more to follow)," is "arguably the single most important event in the brief history of animal studies" (Wolfe 2009, 570). Derrida's philosophical thoughts about humans in relation to animals was triggered by feelings of embarrassment when his cat gazed at him naked and he asked himself: "Ashamed of what and naked before whom?" (Derrida 2002, 373). He questioned what the difference between himself and his "petit chat" was. Unlike Descartes, he does not focus on the ability to speak or to act autonomously (instead of merely reacting to stimuli) in determining the ontological status of a living being. For him, "it comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what respond means. And how to distinguish a response from a reaction" (Derrida 2002, 377). For Derrida, one similarity between animals and humans is our embodiedness and our mortality. We as humans are not as "auto" (i.e., autonomous in our decisions and in shaping our lives) as we would like to assume, but radically other in our physical condition and in our subjection to language
which is always there before us, "as a radically ahuman precondition for our subjectivity, for what makes us human" (Wolfe 2009, 571). Derrida rethinks the connection between language, ethics, and species and the role they play in our self-image. It is essential for him, for example, to create a new word for 'animal,' as the common term subsumes an immense, heterogeneous group into "a single and fundamentally homogeneous set that one has the right, the theoretical or philosophical right, to distinguish and mark as opposite" (Derrida 2002, 408), and as he emphasizes repeatedly, to treat cruelly. His neologism is "l'animal," a French plural word that is at the same time singular: "Neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals" (Derrida 2002, 409).

Derrida has been influential for animal studies because he identified not only a common materiality, but also a new concept of language which includes genetic coding and other "forms of marking" (Derrida qtd. in Wolfe 2009, 571), thus disrupting notions of an absolute separation between humans and animals while at the same time acknowledging uniqueness and difference. Already in her Cyborg essay, Donna Haraway celebrated the crossing of boundaries between humans, animals and machines. She appreciates Derrida's thoughts on the links between the Great Divide and the violence towards animals. At the same time, however, she deplores his lack of interest in the concrete animal and notes that even though it was a philosophical trigger of discourse, "[s]omehow in all this worrying and longing, the cat was never heard from again" (Haraway 2008, 20). In contrast, she writes in detail about her relationship with her dog in When Species Meet. Unlike the French theorists, she is convinced that we have materially and culturally co-evolved with non-humans, that we are all, as she argues in her earlier study The Companion Species Manifesto (2003), constituted of "layers of history, layers of biology, layers of naturecultures," which continuously intersect: "We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh" (Haraway 2003, 2; 3). Not only are living beings thus newly defined; the same is true for the concepts of nature and culture that can no longer be seen as polar opposites. With Marilyn Strathern, Haraway prefers to speak of "partial connections," or of "relations of significant otherness," in which the players are neither wholes nor parts (Haraway 2003, 8). The emphasis on "otherness" is crucial, because there is no homogeneous merging in her concept of "naturecultures." Instead, we all exist in a complex web of being and relations, affecting each other in dynamic ways: "Once again we are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down. Response and respect are possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories" (Haraway 2008, 42). Blurring the boundaries does not mean crossing over or becoming one with the other. Val Plumwood defines the relationship between humans and non-humans as one of continuity (Plumwood 2002, 194), which implies "a movement from a monological to a dialogical conception of the human self" (195). A new ethical stance requires openness to "our planetary partners" (166), an acknowledgment of our material, historical, and cultural interdependence.

All the issues outlined above invite critical questions about human-animal relations. If the strict boundary demarcating human exceptionalism is no longer tenable, what happens when humans and non-humans meet? How can animals and humans respond to each other if, on the one hand, binary dualisms are challenged while, on the other, difference must be recognized? What other faculties besides reasoning organize ways of being in the world? Who counts as an actor and why? What counts as knowledge?
How are we affected by non-human life once we allow the gaze of the animal to penetrate our consciousness? How much of the animal is in us, and to what extent is the idea of such an animal portion, or even of a clearly human identity, only a cultural construction? How do we have to rethink what it means to be human? In order to at least partly answer some of these questions, I will now look at two fictional texts about human-animal love relationships: one between a man and a female whale, the other between a woman and a male bear. One ends in a disaster, the other as a satisfying, enriching experience. Although both texts allude to the controversial topic of zoophilia, my reading focuses on the ontological equality between an animal and a human being and on the possibility of a reciprocal emotional bonding.¹

Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller: The Potential and the Failure of a Human-Animal Relationship*

*The Whale Caller* (2005) by South African writer Zakes Mda is a postcolonial, post-apartheid novel whose main protagonists are the eponymous whale caller, the town drunk Saluni and a female whale called Sharisha. All three are marginalized characters – the man and the woman belong to the poor, indigenous population living on the outskirts of society, and the whale, as an animal, is not considered to be part of society at all. Even so, they form a complex love triangle. The deep personal problems of the whale caller and Saluni are ultimately caused by the aftermath of the apartheid system, which despite utopian visions of a rainbow nation and the institution of democratic elections has left them psychologically insecure and vulnerable instead of turning them into free, autonomous and happy individuals. Economic progress in the age of globalization has made a few people rich, but placed a large part of the black population at a disadvantage. This is also true for the population of Hermanus, a small town in South Africa famous for its whale watching sites where most of the story takes place. Even though the tourist industry is growing there, ordinary people can, for example, no longer afford to buy property. In one of the few openly critical passages of the novel, the narrator bitterly accuses the rich "delicate souls" of erasing the racial and economic problems from their vision, forgetting

that only a few kilometres away there is another world that is not at peace with itself – a whole festering world of disillusioned, those who have no stake in the much-talked-about black economic empowerment, which is really the issue of the black middle class rather than of people like Lunga Tubu. While the town of Hermanus is raking in fortunes from tourism, the mothers and fathers of Zwelihle are unemployed. It is a world where people have lost all faith in politicians. (Mda 2005, 86)²

However, the economic dimension that produces this "festering world" not only affects the living condition of the poor and the strategies they develop to cope with their plight. The situation has consequences for culture and nature alike, turning the whales and their environment into commodities as parts of a system of exploitation and neglect. By focusing on the relationship between the man and the whale Sharisha, both marginalized by the dominant culture, I will explore the possibilities and limits of human-animal contact in the context of, and as a possible counterdiscursive strategy to, this story of commodified relations.

¹ For some controversial and clarifying ideas about zoophilia in the context of animal studies, see Singer (2001) and Garrard (forthcoming).

² Quotations from the novel will be indicated by page numbers only in the text.
The whale caller, who became an orphan when he was quite young, had "to fend for himself at the pilchard canning plants on the west coast" (31). We learn that as a consequence, his main occupation became that of an official horn player in the Church of the Sacred Kelp Horn. This is because "His Eminence the Bishop" considered it to be a natural musical instrument "that celebrated the essence of creation" (8) and brought the congregation closer to nature and to the spirit of the ancestors (9). Thus, for 35 years he had been wandering the coasts of South Africa in the service of the kelp horn until he settled in his hometown of Hermanus after the abolition of apartheid. His life on the road in close communion with nature had made him a recluse, ignorant of social norms and shy with other people; a man who flees from the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa and the messy entanglements of human relationships. He speaks only with an imaginary Mr. Yodd, who he believes resides in a grotto; and he communicates with the whale Sharisha. He can confess and pour out his heart to Mr. Yodd, which comes as a kind of self-flagellation that he undertakes regularly (80). Besides, he believes that his communication with Sharisha "will bring back his shattered dignity" (56). The whale caller is thus a man who finds solace and company in nature and with animals, of whom he is very considerate. For example, he chastises the "Bored Twins," two children living close to his abode, for wasting goat milk because "these goats have their kids to feed as well as providing the farmer with milk" (107). And he says he would never touch a whale like the tourists, knowing full well that it might injure their skin.

The person who draws him back into the human, social world is the town drunk Saluni, a woman who represents, as she believes, the "civilised" (71) part of South Africa. This 'civilised' part, however, turns out to be the ravages the new development has dealt poor people like her. Originally from the inland provinces, she settled in Hermanus, like the whale caller, after years of wandering and unsuccessfully searching for employment because she was attracted by the evangelical voices of the Bored Twins, who have been left to their own devices by their parents and are full of innocent mischief, playing tricks on others or torturing animals without knowing about the harm they cause. Grotesquely dressed in a fur coat and torn net stockings, with wild red hair and a face destroyed by alcohol, she insists on being a "love child" who "must be handled with care and consideration" (35). Unlike the whale caller, she is attracted by the material promises of South Africa. She seeks wealth and fame with a recording of the Bored Twins' voices, and after the whale caller has caught a big kabeljou, she greedily takes money from tourists who want a picture with the big fish, even though it means wasting its meat when she keeps it for a couple of days for photographing instead of eating it. Most importantly, she seeks to teach the whale caller "civilized ways" such as table manners or eating as a kind of "foreplay," even if the couple can only afford to go window shopping and eat all the delicacies with their eyes. She openly defies practices to protect nature; she puts rare flowers into a vase on their table and does not mind poached abalones, fur coats or wasting fish. In short, Saluni represents a dark side of modern South Africa – the marginalized, neglected, and abused part of the indigenous population. Because of her needs, desires and deepest fears (she is mortally afraid of the dark), she is not able to develop a healthy, sustainable relationship with her social or natural environment. Saluni is as much a victim of modern circumstances as are the Bored Twins whose parents are forced to leave them alone during their long working hours, or the poachers who catch the forbidden abalones because the village people have no other income, or the whales...
which are approached too closely by well-paying tourists. It is the local poor who make the smallest profit in a global economy. Among the human population of Hermanus it is they who actually suffer from the social and economic changes and are losing the more dignified, autonomous life they had in the past.

Although Saluni "is a transgressor of all that he holds sacred" (76), the whale caller is seduced by her. He envies her carefree spirit, but most of all, he enjoys their sexual relationship even though he considers his strong attachment to her to be a "physical illness" (91). Nevertheless, he feels reborn by sex, cleansed by "bathing" in her during many "breathless nights" (97). Ultimately, however, their love turns out to be destructive. Unable to communicate with each other, extremely needy emotionally and without any support from a community, they cannot negotiate differences, but instead demand impossible sacrifices of each other, the most important of which concerns Sharisha, the southern right whale, whom Saluni insists on ignoring. This whale not only complicates the human love relationship, she also invites questions about agency, forms of communication and border crossings which, in turn, challenge traditional notions of what it means to be human.

The whale is a complex living being whom the novel approaches from different angles, thus endowing her with a multiplicity of meanings. For one, she is a zoological creature behaving in well-known patterns – migrating, mating, emitting the typical whale sounds that humans call songs, and moving gracefully in the water. In addition, the reader is informed about pre-modern, mythological times when the Khoe, the people 'of old,' celebrated the whale as sacred. They respectfully used all the parts of a beached whale, thanking the "Tsiqua, He Who Tells His Stories in Heaven" (4), for the bounty, when Hermanus was still "young in the continent of Aboriginal Dreaming" (152). It was a time before whales were massively slaughtered by French, American and British whalers at St. Helena Bay in 1785 (16); or later harpooned by the Norwegians, the Japanese, or the Icelanders (55); before they were carelessly mutilated and killed by motor blades or touched by the tourist industry. Sharisha not only reminds the reader of all these aspects of whale existence, she is also an individual who transgresses species boundaries by entering into a relationship with a human being. According to Ralph Goodman, she occupies a liminal space, "being neither entirely black nor entirely white, [...] neither completely involved in the action nor entirely uninvolved in it, neither strictly speaking a fish, yet having the outward appearance of a fish" (Goodman 2008, 110). Resisting easy classification and definition, she has the potential to challenge forms of binaries in the narrative of South Africa, binaries that have led to the degradation and waste of human potential as well as the natural environment.

The whale caller is almost magically drawn into this liminal space because it offers him respite and solace. To him, Sharisha is a being on equal terms with humans – he abhors the idea of eating her flesh because it would be a form of cannibalism. Each fall when the whales return from the southern seas to Hermanus, he awaits her feverishly, dons a tuxedo and plays her special song to which she responds by moving closer, singing back, and slapping her tail. Although he anthropomorphizes her to a certain extent – he adores her "well-shaped bonnet" that sits "gracefully" on her snout and the white baleen in her mouth, which produces her "surf white smile" (41) – he does not force anthropocentric notions about animals on her. On the contrary, he is very sensitive about her needs. Instead of seeking direct contact or employing human speech, he communicates with her by sound, sight and dance. In his openness to the
whale's being, he is rewarded by a strong affection which grows into an erotic relationship. Blowing his horn with passion, he and Sharisha perform a mating dance; she is in the water and he is on the shore. Tirelessly they rock back and forth, while the horn assumes a phallic function: "[I]t penetrated deep into every aperture of the whale's body, as if in search of a soul in the midst of all the blubber." It finally left him "drenched in sweat and other secretions of the body. The front and the seat of his tuxedo pants were wet and sticky from the seed of life" (66). Although the narrator never allows us insight into Sharisha's mind so that one might even assume that she is a projection foil for the whale caller's fantasy, the text nevertheless grants her subjectivity and agency. The narrative voice attributes volition and emotions to the whale, thus persuading the reader to imagine a form of contact between animal and human being that crosses species boundaries. Not only does Sharisha respond (instead of "react") to the sound of the kelp horn, she also gazes at humans. When the whale caller dances naked, for example, she looks at him "wistfully" (134); and when Saluni, who is jealous of the "stupid fish," insults her by flashing her bare behind, she does not budge but rather "stares Saluni straight in the eye. She does not look scandalized […]. She looks defiant" (183). The objectifying gaze – in this novel particularly of the tourist – is here returned to the animal, granting her volition and autonomy, against notions of hyperseparation. Harry Sewlall aptly pointed out that "Sharisha's aggressive reaction to Saluni's insult countervails traditional Western knowledge about the alterity of animals inaugurated by Descartes in 1637 when he proposed that animals were mere mechanical bodies" (Sewlall 2007, 134). This whale is fully capable of willful behavior and intelligent responses. The whale caller even believes that she has her own whale culture in which she lets him participate with his kelp horn and his ecstatic dancing.

For years the relationship between the whale caller and Sharisha seems to have been one of reciprocity and mutual appreciation. They meet in what may be called a hybrid space, on the border between land and water, where the privileged form of communication is sound, not language, where movement on shore is answered by movement in the ocean, where two creatures obviously find happiness across spatial distance and the species boundary. This relationship is a satisfying and rewarding one because the whale caller allows himself to be mesmerized by the animal on her own terms. This is possible, the text suggests, because the animal is not totally other, but as Derrida maintained, a part of human consciousness, before language, before culture, which we can approach across an "abyssal rupture" (Derrida 2002, 399). South African critic Harry Sewlall argues, "in Mda's case it is the whale that represents the non-human world with which we need to connect to fully realize our own humanity" (Sewlall 2007, 137). In his dances with the whale, the whale caller connects to his own dignity; he is spiritually revived and emotionally fortified.

Why then does the relationship end in a complete failure, with Sharisha and Saluni dead and the whale caller a penitent, walking again from town to town and flogging himself with shame? For one, the whale caller cannot completely withdraw into nature and flee from the complexities of social life without paying a price. In his need to connect to a realm beyond crippling binaries, he neglects Saluni and runs from her world of consumerism and spiritual loss back to the promises of Sharisha – which leads to more nagging and bickering and frustration on Saluni's side and a renewed desire to escape on his. The whale caller fails Saluni because he has not learned to communicate successfully by language; he even confuses her with his beloved
Sharisha and almost drowns when he sees her struggling in the water and forgets that "not all women are at home in the sea" (78). He also confuses Sharisha with a human woman when he becomes jealous of male whales that mate with her before his eyes. Helplessly exposed to the demands of Saluni, vulnerable as a sensitive, humiliated man in South African society, he begins to lose a careful balance between his personal desires and the needs of others, woman and whale.

After an especially frustrating fight with Saluni, he runs to the sea to blow Sharisha's song and dance for her until he collapses on the mud and becomes one with it (215). His yearning to at least vicariously merge with a non-human being is a selfish death wish, one that neglects species difference and essential otherness and that, according to Roman Bartosch, comes across as grotesque and ludicrous, betraying the vanity of his attempts of becoming-animal (Bartosch 2013, 184). Whereas before the two met in a hybrid space in which communication outside of language was possible and both corresponded on non-hierarchical terms which imaginatively opened promising possibilities for border crossings that allowed a human being to recognize himself in and through the animal, they now do not heed each other's difference and literally come too close. The whale caller underestimates how much Sharisha desires to bathe herself in his sound until "she has recklessly crossed the line that separates the blue depths from the green shallows" (216). She gets stranded and cannot be pushed back into the sea. A rescue team has to blow her up with dynamite to put her out of her misery. The blubber covers the whale caller so that he is finally bodily one with his beloved. Too late, he discovers his responsibility; for the rest of his life he will remain a penitent. The Whale Caller thus demonstrates the precariousness of the hybrid space in which borders between species can be crossed. It shows the positive potential, but also the dangers of an attempted life beyond binaries. Whereas Astrid Feldbrügge and Marita Wenzel both believe that the whale caller failed because he "shifts to the other extreme of denying any differences between himself and the animal world" (Feldbrügge 2010, 161), and because "human nature is not the same as nature and the animal kingdom; it would be a transgression to assume it" (Wenzel 2009, 144), I believe that the text foregrounds the potential in a magical relationship which respects "partial connections" and "significant otherness." The failure might be due to what Goodman termed the "unpromising contexts" of the love stories "that […] emerge as barren and hopeless, and the protagonists are shown to have very little control over their fate" (Goodman 2008, 117). As such, it is a strong indictment of South African post-apartheid politics.

Marian Engel's Bear: A Partial Connection of a Woman and a Bear

The pleasures and dangers of entering a hybrid space are also explored by Marian Engel in Bear, a short novel published in 1976 – almost thirty years before The Whale Caller. It is a feminist text which investigates a woman's journey into the wilderness as a re-covering of her own, 'natural' self, beyond the constraints of civilization and patriarchal rules. Her adventures with a bear in the Canadian north invite crucial questions about the ontological and epistemological status of human and animal, and about the potential of their relationship. On what terms can human and bear meet? How does this meeting challenge common notions not only about species difference and human superiority, but also about gender roles in Western culture?

The plot is quickly told: Lou, an unhappy, middle-aged librarian has burrowed herself in her basement office in Toronto. She gladly accepts a job in northern Canada.
to inventory a nineteenth-century estate on a small island. To her surprise, the house comes not only with a library that promises new insights into Canadian history, but with a real bear who she is expected to take care of and who she gets to know intimately during her summer in the north. From the outset, the novel evokes, and then questions, dichotomies – between the south and the north, or the city and the wilderness respectively, between male and female, between mind and matter, but most of all, between humans and non-humans. These dichotomies, however, are not stable, as a strict separation between their poles is shown to be untenable. In the civilized, urban world, for example, Lou lived like a mole (1), her arms "slug-pale" (Engel 2002, 2). She was involved in an alienating, self-annihilating sexual relationship with the director of her institute. Even the so-called wilderness is occupied by an octagonal house, a remnant of an absurd "colonial pretentiousness" (25), full of books and archival material promising new insights into "the dim negative of that region's history" (4). Lou hopes to catch glimpses of an early, raw experience in the wilderness which historiographers have tended to destroy in favor of a more genteel image of Canada. She wants to look behind the façade of the house in order to discover a vital presence there, an effort that parallels her personal quest in which the bear becomes a guiding figure.

A prerequisite for her development is her openness and sensitivity to the natural environment. When she arrives on the island, she feels rejuvenated by childhood memories from earlier stays in the north. She touches, smells and sees the beauty of the land, never wanting to take possession of it like the historical Colonel Cary with his absurd house. Instead, she enters the forest with awe as if it were a foreign church, and she regards the abundant black flies as "a sign that nature will never capitulate, that man is red in tooth and claw but there is something that cannot be controlled by him, when a critter no larger than a fruit fly tore a hunk out of her shin through her trousers" (57). Lou is very aware of the dangers of the wilderness; she knows of people who perished because they could not endure the loneliness, or the harshness and the cold of the land, because they came with arrogant or romantic ideas about living in the wild. Her concept of nature thus allows no easy categorization as it is neither pastoral nor wild, nurturing or destructive. It is all of these aspects, experienced differently by different visitors to the place at different times.

Her insight into the vitality and agency of nature and of its versatility is sharpened in her experiences with the bear. This partly domesticated animal lives in a shed near the house, and it exists as a real, concrete presence that is disturbingly aware of her: "Bear. There. Staring" (22). Staring back, she wonders who he is and how to know him. Her encounter with this real animal's gaze leads her to philosophical speculations, just as the little cat led Derrida to question his own status as a human being. But unlike Derrida, she bases her answers – or her lack of answers – on a very personal, physical experience with this other, which implies abandoning preconceived notions about Ursus ursus. First, she gives up any ideas about bears as cute toys; then she believes she can manage him because he appears "as a middle-aged woman to the point of being daft" (25), although he is indubitably male. From the very beginning of her encounter, she mixes categories of wild and tame, male and female, old and young. In the course of the novel she will call him many things: dog, lover, baby, a large-hipped woman, a groundhog, a raccoon, even a fur coat. But she never gives him a name, unlike the whale caller, she never takes this decisive step of

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3 Quotations from Engel's novel will be indicated by page numbers only in the text.
appropriation. She realizes that in order to know the bear she cannot rely on the depiction of "animals clothed in anthropomorphic uniforms" (46) in children's books, nor can she rely on the notes of anthropologists, zoologists and other scientists, which fall out of the books in Cary's library. These notes provide her with scientific facts as well as pre-historic, mythological stories about human-animal relationships, in which man and nature lived in unity and were symbolically and spiritually significant for each other, "where magical transformations gave hope and vitality to life" (Cameron 1977, 85). Although I agree with Stacy Alaimo who argues that these "disembodied fragments of information," these "perspectiveless, bloodless notes" (Alaimo 2000, 151) are distanced from and at odds with her own lived experiences with the bear, which, in contrast, "embody situational knowledges that Lou and the bear mutually enact" (Alaimo 2000, 154), I do believe that some of the notes incite her fantasy about a possible interspecies marriage and the birth of heroes, the impossibility of which I will come to later. Most importantly, however, neither the scientific facts nor the cultural imputations help Lou to solve the puzzle of the presence of this creature. She must admit that she "had no idea what animals were about. They were creatures. They were not human" (46), and that it is easy to project her own needs and desires onto the bear: "she had discovered she could paint any face on him that she wanted, while his actual range of expression was a mystery" (57). Nevertheless she does not objectify or define him, but recognizes him as a being with his own free will and thoughts, and who lives in his own ontological space that she has no access to: "There was a depth in him she could not reach, could not probe and with her intellectual fingers destroy" (102).

How can she relate to the bear if not with accumulated cultural knowledge? How do the two become friends across the species boundary? And how does their relationship change Lou's understanding of herself? As a first step, Lou takes the animal off his leash, literally and symbolically liberating him from a human's controlling power. She then approaches him on very basic, physical terms. They sniff each other, eat and defecate together, take baths in the river and walks across the island. Unleashed, the bear is no longer a passive lump to be pondered, but becomes an agent. He even enters the house, climbs upstairs to the library and stands there in an upright position before he settles on the rug. If we understand the house as a symbol of civilization and the library as representing the rational human brain, as S.A. Cowan does (Cowan 1981, 78), or more elaborately, Donald S. Hair (Hair 1982, 36; 37), then we must infer that the bear intrudes Lou's intellect and asserts his presence there. It is nevertheless crucial that Lou's tentative dealings with the bear are met by the animal's own approaches to her; he is definitely not a dumb object defined by her ruminations.

However, the bear not only enters her mind, he even licks her skin to which she responds with erotic sensations and with cries of relief. Instead of feeling guilty about this transgression of the species boundary, she feels reborn, splendid, blissful, and loved. For the rest of the summer, she enjoys a deeply satisfying physical and emotional relationship with the bear, finally at ease with herself and her environment. Again, it is the bear who has initiated this change in Lou. Although we never get to know his inner life, we do see how he acts and responds to her. As Stacy Alaimo argued, quoting Donna Haraway, "it is the bear himself who transgresses the subject/object divide and forces Lou's knowledge to become 'situated:' 'Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource'" (Alaimo 2000, 152). The transgression of the species boundary is potentially dangerous though. Not only does Lou retreat from the
rest of the world which has grown meaningless to her, she becomes smelly, grubby, and idle, her outer appearances more and more resembling that of a beast, frightening herself when she looks into a mirror. When one day she tries to break a final taboo and mount him, he rips her back with his claws, shocking her out of her mythic dreams of a human-bear marriage and of herself bearing heroic offspring. All of a sudden aware of the wildness of the bear, who might attack her when he smells her blood, she locks him up, washes in the river and cleanses herself with a disinfectant. She thus re-assumes a human condition in which the animal is again kept at a distance. Although he is back on his leash, he is not fully tamed though. He remains an enigma, unfathomable, an animal beyond the grasp of the human, not the desired companion of Lou's fantasies. But he is not totally 'other' any more either. Lou has internalized her experience with the bear, she is fortified psychologically and returns to the city self-assured and healed of the alienating effects of a loveless sexual relationship and a deadening job, something she realizes she had been doing to herself (78).

Critics have almost unanimously interpreted the failed sexual relationship between Lou and the bear as a reassertion of the boundary between humans and animals. Elspeth Cameron acknowledges the bear's function as linking Lou with some sort of primal energy (Cameron 1977, 88), but she also argues that "Nature itself draws the boundaries; the balance is righted" (91). Coral Ann Howells observes "the inviolability of the natural order" (Howells 1991, 73) reestablished in the novel, while S.A. Cowan believes that a full union with the bear "would symbolize both the violation of biological law and the denial of human identity" (Cowan 1981, 86). Like Cowan, Donald S. Hair insists on the final separation between the two species: "the bear releases Lou into her full human identity by marking the limits of kinship, and finally separating animal from human" (Hair 1982, 38). Only Stacy Alaimo reads the text not as re-establishing the barrier between nature and culture, between animals and humans, but – especially referring to the erotic relationship between Lou and the bear – as a parody of phallic centrality (Alaimo 2000, 153). She emphasizes 'situated knowledges,' which not only deconstruct fixed gender identities (the bear cannot easily be classified as male or female), but also rigid species definitions, and which "refuse to distance, denigrate, or objectify the natural world" (156).

Alaimo implicitly answers the legitimate question whether Marian Engel has perpetuated the association of woman with nature, which has justly been identified by ecofeminists as a trap because it consolidates the nature-culture divide as well as gender dichotomies. As has been shown, Engel evokes, but then subverts, this association. Lou needs to retreat for a while from the patriarchal order of her urban world to be able to explore her own desires undisturbed by role expectations. At the same time she does not immerse herself totally in a wild realm, although she comes very close to it. She lives in a grand house and keeps cataloguing and categorizing just as she had done in the urban library. She does not finally give up her rational, intellectual side, but she has to discover her emotional, physical life in order to become whole. Her openness to another, non-human being whose enigmatic, but very vital, presence she cannot categorize, or even fathom, puts her in touch with her own buried psyche, which she cannot grasp linguistically or intellectually. Once she has blurred the species boundary and allowed herself to be gazed at and to be touched by a concrete other living being, she is rewarded with a new understanding of her own potential. This is only possible, of course, because she accepts the other as someone with a rich life of his own, someone with agency and dignity who is thinking, even if he
is thinking his own impenetrable thoughts. Lou does not make the mistake of believing to know what it is like to be a bear. She meets him on his own terms, beyond confining pre-established categories and distancing methods of objectification. Thus she leaves him his integrity as a creature with an unfathomable depth whose touch has made her "clean and simple and proud" (117).

When he is picked up by local people, who will take care of him after Lou has left at the end of her stay, "He did not look back. She did not expect him to" (119). Her encounter with the bear must remain a "partial connection," a connection, however, which has psychological as well as material consequences for her. Lou returns to Toronto as mentally and physically strong woman who can now face the demands of her urban, patriarchal environment. Unlike the whale caller, who was seeking a total connection to his beloved animal but failed, she is luckier in that she could escape this danger zone with only a mark on her back, which she reads as a sign of her strong affinity with a non-human being. Although the whale caller's love ends in death and destruction and Lou's in self-fulfillment, both novels show how a human-animal relationship can be deeply affective and rewarding when the strict species boundary is recognized as tenuous. Both novels demonstrate that communication between species is possible; that once humans are alert to the gaze of the other, a new understanding of what it means to be human will emerge – the whale caller finds his dignity as a man, at least for a while, and Lou a fullness of being that was denied her (or that she denied herself) in the city. In both cases, it is the concrete experience with and openness to a very real, living animal that triggers this understanding.

Works Cited


