

The Borderline in Sarah Hall's 'Bees'

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One word has been travelling around along with the COVID virus: zoonosis, which designates a disease transmitted from animals to humans. It encapsulates one of the major challenges raised by the current crisis as it is a reminder that humans are not just social beings but that they have bodies impacted by the interactions with other animal bodies. Today biologists, among whom the French expert ecologist Gilles Boeuf, contend that the large scale destruction of animal habitats around the world along with intensive farming result in the increased pace of developing zoonoses like SARS or MERS (see collectif, *Le Monde*, 6 May 2020). Seizing the pandemics as an opportunity for critical thinking, *Critical Inquiry* created a dedicated blog entitled 'Post from the Pandemics' in which Bruno Latour once again called for recognition of the variety of 'actants', including viruses, that collapse the notion that human society is strictly social while Achille Mbembe reads the crisis as a reminder that the human body is mortal, 'a vehicle for contamination, a vector for pollen, spores, and mold'. The current crisis serves to highlight human-animal relations which are not oedipalized, that is not governed by metaphor or hierarchy, as zoonoses emphasize physical transmission through intermediaries. Posthuman philosopher Rosi Braidotti calls for a new bioegalitarian ethics that no longer distinguishes between *zoe*, the raw force of life, and *bios*, the self-reflexive, political life of human citizens. Contemporary texts mirror those emerging de-anthropocentric perspectives. How does contemporary literature address what Stacy Alaimo calls 'transcorporeality'? How does the literary imagination figure the entanglement of a great variety of agential networks, 'human bodies, animal bodies, ecosystems, technologies and the wider world' (Alaimo, 17)?

The consideration of the human animal body, the raw flesh of humanity, has been a constant preoccupation of writer Sarah Hall's:

What civil lives we lead. So mannered, so controlled. Everything tidy and safe, everything put in its place. How hard we try not to be frightened, not to let the mind and body misbehave, not to come undone. Look at us in our ties and our stockings, taking vitamins and buying prophylactics, arranging mortgages and emptying the bins, ameliorating, ordering. We've almost convinced ourselves.

But underneath, closer than we dare to think, is the reddish nature of humanity, the strong meat of our anatomy. (Hall 2016, 1)

Hall is an environmental artist who regularly uses her native region, the Borderlands, in her novels and short stories. The human-animal relations also feature prominently in her texts, most famously the transmogrification of a woman into a fox in her acclaimed short story from 2013, 'Mrs Fox'. It is my contention that her poetic work with similes and analogies, rather than metaphors, helps pave the way for the 'radical imagination' Mbembe advocates for the 'day after'. This paper takes the example of her 2011 short story 'Bees' published in *The Beautiful Indifference* to exemplify the 'natureculture' continuum (Haraway) that the COVID crisis dramatically exposed. Additionally, 'Bees' can be read as the forerunner to the more radical transformation in 'Mrs Fox'.

The story, told in the second person, is that of a 'rural emigrant' (70) from the North settling in London. Although it might seem at first glance to be set around such binary oppositions as north and south, countryside and city, it is a story about border crossings (see Hansen). In this story, the second-person woman narrator is an abused woman who leaves the Northern family farm for London. Her unemployed status and her raw emotional state mean that she spends much of her time in the small garden of her friend's flat. She wonders about a strange decimation of bees whose cause she cannot identify until she finally discovers that a fox has been killing the bees. The fox is the emblematic intruder that has become adept at crossing over the human urban and suburban demarcations to claim its own habitat unexpectedly. Its omnivorous diet, exemplified in the text by its preying on bees, knows no nutrient bound and earned it its reputation as a scavenger. It mirrors the many instances of intersecting environmental and man-made elements woven in the text's similes like the 'hedgerow towers' of London (69), or the bees 'moving like Zeppelins' (78). It further echoes the Northern setting of 'the Borders' (73) with the text's mention of the Solway Firth (82). Thus the city displays unexpected signs of rurality like the night noises of 'nocturnal barking and foraging', 'eerie yowling', 'noises that seem out of place in this urban setting' (75). Similarly the road to the rural north is invaded by urban markers: 'tracking north now, along edgelands, past spoil heaps and stands of pylons, under motorway passes' (75). Redistributing, as Hall does, the sensorial and physical markers of the rural and the urban opens the way for the central poetic figure of the analogy.

The text indeed draws an analogy between the woman and the fox by way of the colour red. The narrator is experiencing a mental breakdown following the heartbreaking decision of ending her marriage, which accounts for the second person mirroring a dissociative split. This split is materialized by the arresting image of the woman's heart having fled her body: 'something rose up inside your chest. It split you open. It tugged itself through the walls of

muscle, slid to the floor and moved off into the crowd' (71). This leaves the narrator feeling like a 'loose pink sack of human being' (71) who has lost a vital part of herself she calls 'that prime red aspect' (71), 'that historical red piece that clawed away and is missing somewhere now, that urgeful hybrid creature, carrying flames along its back as it moves' (83). The missing part of herself reappears at the end of the text in the form of the hunting fox and its fiery imagery, 'as if the creature has been stoked up from the surroundings, its fur like a furnace [...] it shakes its red head furiously' (85). The anthropomorphic analogy that traces in the fox the most human part of the narrator's self helps to cross the hierarchical border between human and animal. As Jane Bennett advocates: 'a touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyse a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations' (Bennett, 99). The fact that Hall is not using a metaphor empowers the image of the fleeing organ as 'strong meat', an expression of *zoe* materialized in the wild animal. It brings to mind the Deleuzian concept of the body without organs which Braidotti calls upon to signify the virtual potentialities of becoming animal: 'forming anomalous and inorganic alliances, not oedipal and hierarchical relations' (Braidotti, 527). Additionally the dissociative split experienced by the narrator recalls Deleuze's reinterpretation of schizophrenia as a heightened state of intensities. Thus when the narrator tours London, she describes it as a synesthetic experience, where movements and sounds blur together, overwhelming her with sensorial information. While she feels gutted, she also becomes 'a receptacle for information' (70), opening herself up to unpredictable aggregations. These unexpected 'assemblages' as Braidotti calls them, or 'isomorphisms' – the word used by Bennett to emphasize equality – helps throw new light on the human-animal relationship: it is not a relation that seeks to subordinate but that looks for kindred mutations. Hall will go further in 'Mrs Fox' with the husband narrator quietly accepting the surrogate paternity of a litter of cubs.

Why does the story's title then focus the attention on bees? It aligns with the story's overall poetics of contiguous alliances as it helps further the parallel drawn between abused women and threatened species. Hall adopts an ecofeminist perspective by establishing a correspondence between the defence of women's rights and that of the environment, raising the issue of human embodiment and environmental embeddedness. The narrator wonders about the possible causes of death of the bees. The various explanations she comes up with are then echoed further along in the text through her own experiences. Thus considering how the bees may have been suffocated by 'mites in their throats' (71) mirrors the later forceful description of how she had to submit to forced fellatio with her husband: 'the tenderness at the back of

your throat from choking on him, being forced to' (82). Hall gives very vivid depictions of abuse through verbal and physical assaults like anal rape: 'complaining if you weren't wet enough, pulling out and moving it into a tighter place' (82). The reason why the woman narrator ultimately flees from her husband is the complicity of the local authorities in denying her complaint for domestic violence. Hall also uses the bees to evoke the forced pollination of 'the almond industry, bees flown in on jumbo jets to pollinate' (79). It resonates with the issue of abortion later broached in the text, thus paralleling the exploitation of female and animal bodies. Diseases are also mentioned with the death of the bees possibly caused by 'infected hives' (71). This echoes the woman's experience of unprotected sex which leads to a bladder infection. The extinction of bees finally brings up the subject of human extinction: 'is this the beginning of the holocaust that will lead to the death of grass and cattle, the collapse of the pollinated food chain' (71-72). The bees-woman analogy enlarges the comprehension of the interdependence of *bios* and *zoe* by tackling the issues of reproduction and diseases, sex and death.

The confederation of bees-woman-fox in Hall's short story resonates powerfully today as scientists and philosophers all over the world are calling for a new understanding of the natureculture continuum and justice claims are being made on behalf of non-human entities to grant legal rights to natural phenomena such as rivers, lakes or mountains. By making parallels between women's rights and animal rights, Hall makes clear the feminist legacy in posthuman critical thinking: collapsing the borderline between subjects and objects, human and non-human, nature and culture makes way for the 'new images of thought' Braidotti feels we are currently in need of (527). The COVID zoonosis blatantly exposed the human vulnerability in connection to the environment's own susceptibility to the changes wrought by the Anthropocene. Imagining zoomorphisms, as Hall does, may further a paradigmatic change in collapsing anthropocentric perspectives in favour of making kin (Haraway 2015). The analogy in 'Bees' was Hall's first step towards writing about becoming animal, which 'Mrs Fox' radicalized with an actual schizophrenic metamorphosis. In her latest collection of short stories, *Sudden Traveller*, published in 2019, Hall again conflated transmogrification, justice and women's rights with the first story 'M' portraying a female lawyer turning into a winged avenger: a harpy-like killer of rapists and an incubus-like abortionist for abused women. Hall makes use of both zoomorphism and anthropomorphism to defeat the paternal metaphor, the oedipal hierarchy, and bring to light the commonalities between women, animals and the land, crossing the borders between kinds to devise new rights and new responsibilities that may well be the response that the COVID crisis demands.

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