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Empathy, Violence, and Guilt in a Girl-Chimp Experiment:
An Analysis of Human-Animal Relations in Karen Joy Fowler's
Novel *We Are Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013)

The relations between human and nonhuman animals have long been dominantly conceptualized in dichotomous terms. The current discussion of animal rights and the criticism of the ascription of epistemological and ontological privilege to human animals, known as speciesism, are essential themes of critical and cultural animal studies. According to the dichotomous view of human-animal relations, a categorical border separates humans, who are seen as moral subjects with personal rights, and whose internal life is psychologically accessible, and animals, some of whom can be companions, but who always have a lower (or no) legal and cultural status, and whose minds remain inaccessible. However, literary texts have been challenging such a strict animal/human divide, and respectively, a nature/culture dichotomy for a long time. A particularly powerful example is Franz Kafka's narrative *A Report to an Academy* (1917), in which the liminal figure Rotpeter narrates the rapid "evolution" from ape to human as a process of perpetual violence that mutilates body, mind, and soul: For Rotpeter "the arrival in human culture is only possible through the separation from nature" (Neumeyer 391) and implies "an act of violence" (393). With the ape's painful search for a means to escape from confinement, Kafka's text subverts the categorical boundaries between animals and humans, and questions cultural and institutional structures in which the distinction is embedded. Of course, the text can be read both ways: Humans are also natural, and animals are also cultural beings.

Remarkably, the relationship between humans and primates has been the topic of three recent and widely celebrated novels: Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* from 2013, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014, Ulrike Draesner's *Sieben Sprünge vom Rand der Welt* [*Seven Leaps From the Edge of the World*], nominated for the German Book Award in 2014, and Bettina Suleiman's debut novel *Auswilderung* [*Return to the Wild*], also published in 2014. Draesner's entertaining fictional novel puts the non-aggressive but notoriously sex-seeking bonobos center stage, and deploys the perspectives of a retiring primatologist and his three-generational family. Suleiman's novel follows the complex and often unforeseen difficulties

of an attempted reintroduction of domesticated gorillas into the wild. In contrast, Fowler's novel—the most subtle, enthralling, and compelling of the three books—explores the liminal space of nature/culture as a recovery from trauma, told as a quasi-autobiographical narration focusing on Rosemary's time at UC Davis where she studied Literature as a twenty-two-year-old. Rosemary works through the suppressed loss of her chimp “twin-sister” seventeen years earlier. The first-person narrator addresses a peer—maybe the reader, maybe a fictional other—in a colloquial and intimate tone. The text combines a close description of feelings, compassion, and grief with elaborate reflections on animal experiments, animal welfare, and animal rights. Portraying a high level of moral reflection on inter-species relationships, the narrator investigates and articulates in depth her own part in the violence against animals, who are not even protected when perceived as a beloved “sister” chimpanzee.

As Gisli Palsson stated in 2014: “Chimpanzees seem to occupy a special position in recent writing on the nature/culture divide, as a liminal species at the main border of modernist discourse” (166). Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* negotiates the permeable boundary between human beings and animals with regard to their closest biological relatives, i.e., primates, and particularly chimpanzees. The novel is also inspired by the famous real-life experiment of the Kellogg family, who in 1931 tried to raise a baby-chimp like a human, along with their own child. This experiment was soon terminated when the Kelloggs observed that their infant son began adopting chimp behavior.¹ In contrast, the fictional experiment in Fowler's book lasts five years and the final separation from the chimp has a lasting destructive impact on the whole family: The father, whose scientific reputation is destroyed, becomes a problem drinker; the brother turns into an underground animal activist and joins the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) after he finds out that his chimp sister has been deported to an animal laboratory; the mother becomes depressed; and the daughter cuts herself off from the memory of the episode that led to her “twin” sister's loss. The book explores numerous subtle similarities and differences between humans and chimps and thereby challenges the hierarchal and dichotomic model of human-animal relationships.

The paper will proceed in three steps. First, I will address four current concepts that explore the relationship between humans and apes. I will then

¹ Cf. the interview with Karen Joy Fowler: karenjoyfowler.com/we-are-completely-beside-ourselves-qa/. Web. 20 Aug. 2016.

explain Kellogg's experiment as an eminent background to Fowler's novel. Finally, I will analyze the main plot of the novel, which unfolds when the main protagonist realizes her own role in the disappearance of her chimp sister Fern, and I will discuss the novel's contribution to current critical debates about human-animal relationships and animal rights. Focusing on the complex human-animal entanglements, the article examines an eco-zoopoetics which features the transition of interspecies companionship and togetherness to human superiority and instrumental asymmetry and thus narrates an environment that brings about (non-)human trauma and loss.

Humans and Animals: Reflections on an Ambivalent Relationship

In a compact article on humans and apes, the German Studies scholar Gerhard Neumann discusses the boundary between nature and culture. Conceptualizing nature as a performative process of semantic production, Neumann (94-99) distinguishes three positions: The first position is comprised of behavioral research on the development stages of primates. An example is Frans de Waal's book *The Ape and the Sushi Master* (2001), which analyzes primates as evolutionary descendants of humans and demonstrates that humans are not the only species with a culture (Laland/Galef). The second position is articulated by Giorgio Agamben in his book *The Open: Man and Animal* (2003), where he develops a theory of the "anthropological machine," a perpetual set of discourses, practices, and techniques employed to (re-)produce the construction of humans in contrast to animals dealing with inclusions and exclusions of what is considered human and nonhuman. The third position has been proposed by Benjamin Bühler and Stefan Rieger in their book *Vom Übertier. Ein Bestiarium des Wissens* (2006)—roughly translated as *On the Über-Animal. A Bestiary of Knowledge*. This study considers animals as figurations of knowledge [*Wissensfiguren*]; the "Über-Animal" serves as a condition to enable speaking about nature and culture, about humans and machines, and as a paradigm of human incompleteness. While the primatologist de Waal aims to minimize the difference between humans and apes in emphasizing their common origin, Agamben stresses the power relations between humans and animals as a narrative of cultural force, and considers the descent of humans from animal ancestors as a strategy of biopolitics. For Agamben, the distinction from "the" animal constitutes what a human being is and does (Borgards 239). By contrast, Bühler and Rieger emphasize the deficits of humans in comparison to animals; it is a reversed

view on the same relationship pointing at the use of the animal as a medium of knowledge. Neumann regards the long history of attempts at drawing a boundary between nature and culture as the history of an “identity shock” in the face of otherness. According to Neumann, the fundamental experience of otherness is the paradigm for human self-conception in modernity (101). From this perspective, looking at animals appears to be an experience of otherness that mediates human self-construction and self-understanding.

While de Wal stresses the similarities between humans and apes—e.g., in contrast to primatologist Michael Tomasello who emphasizes the differences (cf. the overview by Laland/Galef on the contentious question of similarities and differences between animal and human cultures)—Agamben and Bühler/Rieger reconstruct not only how humans have defined (and still define) themselves as clearly distinct from animals, but also highlight the constitutive function of animals for humans. Neumann’s list of arguments has to be complemented by a further important position that has been developed by Donna Haraway (cf. also Bekoff) and which turns the attention to the mutual relation between human and nonhuman animals. In her book *When Species Meet* (2008), Haraway develops the idea of “companion species” by emphasizing the practice of “becoming with” as the condition of “becoming worldly” and shaping an “alter-globalization,” a peaceful and fairer globalization (3). She assumes that all creatures constitute themselves through interactions: They form figures through “material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another” (4); their identity is the result of the “dance of world-making encounters” (249). Instead of regarding nature as an object of scientific and philosophical observation, Haraway stresses the interdependency of human culture and nature, or what she calls “natureculture” (2) in her book *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003). Here, she shares the theoretical outlook of Bruno Latour’s science and technology studies. Humans appear as part of a mesh of interactions and intra-actions with other species and agencies. By exploring the history of relations between people and dogs, Haraway demonstrates that “dogs are fleshly material-semiotic presences in the body of technoscience” and “[t]hey are here to live with” (5). She describes her personal involvement and the situational mutual transformations integrating her own experiences with those of her dog, Ms. Cayenne Pepper. In criticizing Derrida’s reflection on his shame in reaction to his cat’s gaze, Haraway turns the attention to relationships of response and mutual respect that, for her, are the conditions of understanding animal intentions. A zoopoetic perspective allows for an analysis of the variegated representations of interspecies relationships and

takes into account both (non-)human agency as well as the preconditions of (non-)human boundaries and limitations.

Coming back to Fowler's novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, it appears that the main protagonist Rosemary has been an attentive reader of Haraway, using Haraway-congruent vocabulary when describing the intimate relation to her chimp-sister Fern. Rosemary regards Fern as a responding companion whom she believes to understand. But there is also a harsh split that had separated the two. When the twenty-two-year-old Rosemary is confronted with her brother's accusation that she was guilty of Fern's separation from their family, she begins to recall the experiment and its "premature and calamitous end" (99). In the course of the narration, Rosemary concludes that her life is divided in two—the time *with* Fern and *without* Fern. As the process of remembering is not linear, neither is the narration, going back and forth, spiraling and zigzagging towards the moment when the "twin sisters" got separated. Piece by piece, Rosemary reconstructs the emotional impact on the family and the "shadow of grief" (Charles) that the events have left—and this includes the grief of caged Fern as the reader realizes at the very end of the book when Fern and Rosemary face one another through the separating glass of the cage (308). By exploring the apes as a liminal space, the book refers to former experiments, particularly that of the Kellogg's which meant to compare the development of humans and chimpanzees, but focuses on the emotional impacts on all involved members of the experiment.

Variations of the Kellogg's Experiment in Fowler's Novel

Winthrop and Luella Kellogg, comparative psychologists at Indiana University, cross-fostered their son Donald and the chimpanzee Gua in 1931 in order to compare the development of their emotional behavior and language acquisition. After nine months the experiment was stopped when they observed that their son had adopted animal behavior. The Kelloggs concluded that environmental influences play a "tremendous role ... upon captive wild animals before they are brought to laboratory" (Kellogg 174), assuming that "humanizing the ape," so the title of a famous article in 1931, would require bringing up the "anthropoid with a human baby of about the same age" (175). In Fowler's book, the chimp Fern has been found in the Congolese jungle as a neglected baby and is adopted by the Cook family. The experiment is finally stopped after five years when Rosemary complains that she is growing increasingly "afraid of" her sister Fern (270). The complaint is triggered by a gruesome experience: Rosemary has given Fern a kitten to

share her affection and compassion, but the chimpanzee squeezes the small animal in her hand to death. Rosemary's complaint encourages her parents to call the experiment off, so as not to risk someone getting hurt by Fern. In the subtle architecture of the book, the reader only learns towards the end that the Cooks had brought Fern to a medical laboratory where she was caged, harassed and raped by older male chimps, delivered three children and gradually managed to move up the social ranks in the caged troop. The novel "shares kinship with both animal studies and animal rights activism" in the US, exploring the degree of similarity between chimps and humans (Lopičić and Petković 125).

In comparison to Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, Kellogg's *The Ape and the Child* (1933) "follows the scientific standards" in distributing scientific data with the "negative side effect" that "the chimpanzee is objectified and has no voice" (Stolle 30). The Kelloggs refer to Gua as a "subhuman organism" and regard the chimp "as less than a human" although they address both their son and the chimp as "subjects" (29), while Fowler's novel sets up narrative situations that create an empathetic closeness between the "sisters," with Rosemary trying "to give Fern a voice" (30). Here, the novel's nonlinear structure is remarkable: Rosemary's story begins somewhere in the middle of her life and unfolds her memory in numerous non-chronological episodes, in which she as a first-person narrator looks back on the time with her sister Fern. She talks about her family constellation, including her father, a psychologist at Bloomington University; her mother, agreeing to the real-life experiment when friends were searching for a new home for the chimpanzee; and her elder brother Lowell, who, like Rosemary herself, soon regards Fern not just as a companion pet but rather as a sister. In this family constellation, Fern appears to gain the status of an equal subject or a person.

Rosemary describes many situations in which she "used to believe [to know] what Fern was thinking. No matter how bizarre her behavior" (98). She states: Fern "was my twin, my fun-house mirror, my whirlwind other half" and adds: "It's important to note that I was also all those things to her" (79). The description of the relationship is grounded in great empathy, the idea of mutuality and the belief in true mutual understanding. This seems also affirmed by the novel's title *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, which refers to a scene in the novel where Rosemary, Lowell, and Fern are completely immersed in joyful, unrestrained play in the snow. The colloquial title expresses a situation of unquestioned similarity, community, and equality when they share a feeling of exhilarating joy. While the novel draws on patterns of a family story, the unusual and uncanny creeps in.

Although Rosemary emphasizes the mirroring effect that Fern had on her, she observes how important differences between the two gradually unfolded, particularly in language development, so that she still speaks of “twins” but “disparate potentials” (99). She also describes how she “developed the habit of speaking for her” and concludes that Fern “seemed to develop the expectation that I would,” so that she “was already serving as Fern’s translator” at the age of three (100). The urge to talk for two turns Rosemary into a very talkative girl, as is repeatedly emphasized. On the one hand, looking back, Rosemary acknowledges that she experienced a slight feeling of superiority because of her language skills. These would not only compensate for other motoric skills in which Fern, as she has to admit in retrospect, was always superior (82), but it would also compensate for Rosemary’s feeling of being neglected and receiving less attention than Fern, which makes her increasingly jealous of her. On the other hand, Rosemary doubts the relevance of human language in general, and herewith fundamentally questions the aim of her father, who wanted Fern to communicate with humans (98). Rosemary, however, turns the tables, finding the question, “[C]an Rosemary learn to speak to chimpanzees?” (100) or, more generally, “Can humans learn to speak chimpanzee language?” much more appropriate. In recalling the constellation, Rosemary questions the preconditions of the experiment in which psychologists wanted to find out whether primates were able to learn human language. In contrast, she points to “a secret language of grunts and gestures,” an “idioglossia” (100) or a “visceral” understanding (Lopičić and Petković 119) which she shares with Fern and which only the graduate students working as research assistants have recognized. Indeed, current research on primates acknowledges the relevance of gestural and mimic movements for emotional communication proved in experiments (Liebal; Palsson 177-78). In Rosemary’s story, the validation is the intuition of the younger self who “always used to believe [to know] what Fern was thinking” (98). The narrator Rosemary suspects that communication is possible by mimicry and gesticulation only—a suspicion that she found at least partly confirmed by significant examples in her college life later on, like the hand-sign W for “whatever” or L for “loser” (131).

A further important layer of Rosemary’s story is her strong imitation of chimp habits—typical for human infants raised with chimps—to the degree that in kindergarten she was considered a “monkey girl” (84), provoking the typical “uncanny-valley response” (102) with the result that she was bullied quite harshly. Before school enrollment, her mother had given her instructions on how to behave:

Stand up straight.

Keeping my hands still when I talked.

Not putting my fingers into anyone else's mouth or hair.

Not biting anyone, ever. No matter how much the situation warranted it....

Not jumping on the tables and desks when I was playing. (102)

So, it is understandable that Rosemary considered it a “triumph” to be seen as “normal” (132), even if she still got teased by her fellow students. While the Kellogg’s experiment at the college was stopped exactly because of this reason (adoption of chimp behavior by the human son), the fictional Cooks’ experiment is continued much longer and has a much stronger and finally disastrous impact on everyone involved, with feelings of loss, trauma, suppression, grief, and guilt. These feelings not only mirror the violence that Fern has to experience after being separated from her family and after getting imprisoned. They are also the counterpart to the violence that her brother Lowell adopts in order to take revenge on his parents who had decided to hand Fern over to medical treatment—a treatment he considers as animal abuse.

Self-Conception through Otherness, Guilt, and Atonement

When Rosemary’s life is split in two, the longer part of her life is the time after Fern’s disappearance; this part also represents the much longer part of the narration as such. Here, the non-linear temporal structure of the narration is important: Although the novel is composed of a regular structure of six parts with seven chapters each, the course of recollection appears to follow the fragmented and tangled logic of a traumatized person, who hesitates but cannot avoid the re-emergence of a suppressed past boiling up in unexpected moments as well as in shredded form. It would be worthwhile to analyze the narrative structure from the perspective of trauma research—and this analysis should include Fern’s trauma, too. In the remainder of my argument, I focus on the intricate composition of the plot, which only unfolds step by step and herewith painstakingly explores the liminal position of the chimpanzee in human self-recognition. In doing so, the text represents the complex and also traumatic entanglements of human-nonhuman relations.

The cornerstones of the plot are two situations in which Rosemary is falsely imprisoned, undermining long periods of suppression. This aligns the human’s and the animal’s perspective while highlighting asymmetrical structures. In the opening scene of the book the reader finds Rosemary in a university cafeteria where she observes a young couple quarrelling until the

girl, drama student Harlow, starts demolishing the café interior. Rosemary, who only contributed to the mess through her reaction, dropping a glass of milk, finds herself arrested by campus police. But Harlow does not speak up to defend her and the waitress who tries to speak up for Rosemary is also getting ignored by the cop. After a night in prison, Rosemary is finally released thanks to her father's intervention. Hence, the narration starts with the experience of sudden internment and the need for an interceder to regain freedom. This will later be mirrored in Fern's situation after being unjustly deported to the experimental lab to which her brother criminally gains access but from which he fails to rescue her.

The injustice and brutality experienced by Fern weighs heavily on Rosemary's brother Lowell, who joins the radical ALF after finding Fern in the lab. In the course of the narration, Lowell is hunted by the F.B.I. suspecting him of having been involved in destroying the primatology Thurman lab at UC Davis (139-40). A series of further violent actions finally leads to his arrest, so that he also experiences incarceration. Now classified as environmental terrorist in post 9/11 America, he faces a long prison sentence. In contrast to Fern, however, Lowell knows that he could face imprisonment and finally regrets that he has made this decision.

In the second key situation, Rosemary finds herself in a cold concrete room of the local police station, waiting to be interrogated in the case of her brother. Ironically, it is this experience of confinement that triggers her lost memory and makes her aware of her own role in Fern's disappearance. She feels guilty and finds herself a traitor when she remembers how she reacted to Fern's behavior, denouncing her and saying she is "afraid of her" (270). Despite being only five years old, Rosemary is accused by her elder brother Lowell of effectively demanding her parents to choose between the two of them. Rosemary now realizes that, in spite of feeling like a twin-sister to Fern, she had adopted and enacted the common objectification and degradation of "the animal." After her complaint, her parent's decision is structured by the unequal status of Rosemary and Fern, where the latter is considered not a legal person but a companion animal, a being with lower status that has no voice, no saying in the matter of its deportation. This insight is also mirrored by a meaningful situation in which Rosemary, waiting for her interrogation, finds a wood louse in the room that has no chance to escape. In an empathetic mood she takes the bug out with her as she is finally allowed to leave the room. The rescue of the little bug functions as a symbol of freedom which, however, can only be achieved through human intervention.

During her long day in the interrogation room, Rosemary decides to assume responsibility for her brother (cf. 254) and finally to “take care of” her sister Fern (274). It is remarkable that her new role as responsible liberator constructs a congruence and similarity between her brother and the chimpanzee. Rosemary has come to accept her own fault which led to Fern becoming a victim of violence in the medical lab; at the same time, she now allies herself with Lowell whose actions have turned him into a victim of governmental violence. The novel ends in an atmosphere of atonement when Rosemary and her mother move near Fern’s chimpanzee estuary in Vermillion, South Dakota. Rosemary accepts a position as a school teacher for young children whose gesticulation and mimicry she understands quite well and collects money for her brother’s legal fees with TV interviews she gives on a children’s book about her own chimp-sister story which is based on her mother’s diaries. The articulation of her trauma not only liberates her emotionally, it also becomes the means for raising the money required to help her brother and her chimp sister.

When Rosemary concludes at the end that she should not have accused Fern of mistreating the kitten, she concedes to the difference between herself and Fern:

I’d never thought that Fern would deliberately hurt me.... But her remorselessness, the way she’d stared impassively at the dead kitten and then opened his stomach with her fingers, had shocked me to the core....
 That there was something inside Fern I didn’t know.
 That I didn’t know her in the way I’d always thought I did.
 That Fern had secrets and not the good kind.
 Instead I’d said I was afraid of her. (270)

These sentences show a double disappointment: On the one hand, Rosemary cannot transfer her love for an object of affection to her chimp sister. While this could also happen among two human siblings, the second disappointment makes the book really compelling. Rosemary’s assumption of empathy across species is not met by the animal Other. Importantly, the core scene involves a third animal, the kitten. When the chimp dissects the small cat, the human girl discovers that her assumption of empathy and understanding was not reliable. She is equally horrified by the brutality of the act and the inaccessibility of the animal mind. So, this part of the novel includes not only a human-chimp relation but a triangle of interspecies relations (human, chimpanzee, and cat). Ironically, the brutal turn of the play of three sets the energy of Rosemary’s latent jealousy free, which then leads to the

collapse of the entire experiment in interspecies cohabitation in the sense of Haraway.

Different from the Kellogg's case, Fowler's fictional experiment is stopped not because the human is animalized through imitation but rather because the interspecies relation hits the boundaries of what humans can comprehend when it comes to non-human agency. Rosemary has to admit that the thought process of the animal Other was not fully accessible to her. Although there are different studies on the empathy of apes with kittens, for example, Harry Harlow's experiment with gorilla Koko, who took care of a kitten (cf. Moore and Hannon), in Fowler's book the interaction in the interspecies triangle has a different outcome. It is not without irony that the name of Rosemary's closest, albeit rather ambivalent, college friend—and later ALF-combatant of her brother—is also Harlow. In this intra-species triad, Rosemary again appears as the jealous person who tends to defend social norms against the others.

Recalling again her betrayal of Fern in the last part of the story, Rosemary reflects on this very moment by concluding: “still I knew I had not made up that kitten” (266). Although this insight certainly does not disprove the general possibility of chimpanzees' empathy with a kitten, Rosemary interprets this situation as an awareness of difference that leads to her self-recognition: “I realized that I did know who I was” (266). Focusing on the broad range of similarities between humans and chimpanzees, as well as their space of interrelations and interactions, the novel also investigates the pitfalls of a chimp-human experiment that entails not only empathy, community, and mutuality, but also jealousy, misunderstanding, and violence.

In conclusion, the article has shown that the experience of uncanny otherness triggers an “identity shock” (Neumann 101) and facilitates human self-conception. It can be also seen as an initiation of “‘the shock of recognition’ in the reader” whereby Fern functions as a “mirror image” (Lopičić and Petković 123). At the very end of this coming-of-age novel, Rosemary is much more cautious about her interpretation of Fern's emotions and ability to recognize her during visits. The position of the chimpanzee as liminal species is again focused in the story's closure, which depicts an emotional image of simultaneous interspecies understanding without dissolution of a structural separation, captured as a transparent but dividing glass panel. Rosemary's self-recognition, which seems to have a positive effect on her personal development and to help her in overcoming her trauma, coincides with an awareness of guilt and betrayal. Rosemary blamed Fern for frighte-

ning her, leaving Fern, who lacks a shared language, defenseless and unable to disprove the charge. While a human child might have been punished for a similarly gruesome act, the chimp loses the almost person-like status of a family member, is turned into an object and removed to a laboratory. As a punishment this would have been disproportionate. The comparison encapsulates the whole dimension of the current animal/human-divide and sheds light on the uncertain social status and inferior legal status even of primates.

With the mirroring motifs of the imprisonment of Fern and the brother, the novel also invites the reader to consider what it means for an animal to be detained. It brings to mind the potential consequences of lacking legal status, rights and one's own voice to defend oneself, whether that may be because of one being a chimpanzee or otherwise. In doing so, Fowler's novel offers a fresh and critical reflection on notions of human superiority that only seem to justify a categorical separation of humans and animals. Those who feel strong inter-species empathy will find this highly oppressive. So, the novel features not only animal's interests but also exposes the social and emotional loss when humans are separated from companion species. Overall, Fowler's text invites the reader to reflect on the epistemologies and ethics of interspecies relations as parts of an eco-zoopoetics. Setting the interspecies relationship as a family drama implies a highly emotional approach that asks the reader to experience empathy with the non-human animal.

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