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Archiving

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ABSTRACT

What do animals teach us about historiography? This intervention explores this provocation by restaging a methods workshop that sought to radically rethink the archive as animal and archiving as an iteration of animal play and politics. To do so it recounts what happened when a group of human geography Master's students, armed only with a few key readings and some gloves, were introduced to a collection of feathered remains. With no interpretive materials to accompany these remains, the students were prompted to respond to their immediacy and materiality and thus place them at the heart of archival enquiry.

1 WORKSHOPPING TRANSSPECIES HISTORIES

A black bird, wing, and plume are stored within a box marked “FEATHERS.” On careful removal and close inspection, it becomes clear from the responses they elicit that they are fashioned creatures that would have once adorned hats. For example, the black bird “fascinator” is described as “the preserved head, wing and display plumes” of a bird with “iridescent throat” plumage. Meanwhile the black wing lacks “original bone-structure” but the feathers are “glued in shape” and attached to its underside is an aged-brown label stating: “Paris: NO. 8062.” And the “voluminous” black plume is “probably ostrich” in origin yet shows subtle evidence of manufacture: tiny knots act as “feather extensions” to every individual barbule. Although these avian-accessories clearly archive their fashioning by human hands, Steve Baker directs us that if “tattiness, imperfection and botched form count for anything, it is that they render the animal abrasively visible” (2000, p. 62). These botched-birds therefore also actively archive their prior existence as living creatures, prompting the question: are they animal or artefact? However, for a group of geographers workshopping what these botched-birds might teach us about transspecies histories, Massumi (2014) warns that the logics of classification and categorisation can only lead to dead-ends. Rather it is our aim to enact their “mutual inclusion,” which Massumi says “knows nothing of exclusive oppositions” (2014, p. 46), into not just the workshop but historical understanding and practice.

Historical geographers are productively bringing animals into their analyses (Forsyth, 2017; Garlick, 2015; Lorimer, 2019; Pearson, 2016). Yet they must also overcome perceived archival

absences and inarticulacies. For example, as dead and animal the botched-birds might be considered doubly mute. However, Massumi (2014, p. 21) disagrees with the humanist presumption that animals cannot “comment on” things because they do not talk. Drawing on Gregory Bateson's observations of wolf cubs, he argues that animals in play are simultaneously reflexive and expressive. Thus, although dead and dismembered, we play with the botched-birds' reflexivity and expressivity in the workshop. They are reflexive in that they archive their lives as living birds. But working out which requires ornithological study. We recognise black bird as a dyed bird-of-paradise species, possibly Raggiana, while black wing is fashioned out of farmyard feathers, perhaps duck, and the black plume's distinctive morphology gives it away as ostrich. Rather than limit our enquiry to “species-identifying” (Philo & Wilbert, 2000, p. 6), we refocus on their reflexivity. Given the botched-birds archive their *prior* livingness, they also archive the event of death, an act of killing most likely perpetrated by human hands. And on closer inspection they reveal workings of human design: a glass eye and millinery fastening on black bird, traces of glue and a provenance label on black wing, and knotted feather extensions on black plume. All are dyed-black.

Still, the botched-birds' animal expressivity ensures that they are more than an object enframed by human designs. Therefore, while much is given through their reflexivity, what is clear is that the subject/object is not. The botched-bird's excessive sensual and semiotic effects ensure that they resist classificatory clarity and embody aesthetic and ontological ambiguity. This excess links to what Massumi (2014, p. 32) calls the animal ability to yield an aesthetic surplus, understood as “the gestured expression of the as-yet inexpressible,” through the expressivity of play. And just as in the wolf cub's ludic gesture – “this is a nip, not a bite” – “two logics are gathered together in one metacommunication,” the botched-birds’ – “this is and is not a bird” – also activates such a paradox. However, where animals in play affirm paradox by “charging the situation with possibilities that surpass it,” humans are “agitated by it,” illustrated by our initial inability to pin the botched-birds down (2014, p. 7).

Yet rather than agitate over categorisation and meaning, the botched-birds' charge the situation with possibilities to surpass it. For just as the logic of play does not observe “the sanctity of the separation of categories, nor respect the rigid segregation of arenas of activity” (2014, p. 6), nor do the botched-birds. They do not observe the sanctity of the separation between animal and artefact, nor, indeed, do they respect the segregation between the arenas of natural and human history. Moreover, by placing them at the heart of our enquiry, they demand an exploration of archiving not as a human impulse but as an iteration of animal play and politics.

2 ARCHIVING AS ANIMAL PLAY?

Hal Foster (2004) has already articulated archiving as a mode of creative practice and the archive as a site of creation. However, his depiction of “an archival impulse” privileges the “play” of the archivist and thus depends on anthropocentric and individuated understandings of creativity (2004, p. 5). Following Massumi, it is more accurate to consider play to be animal in origin and to view human creativity on “the continuum of animal life” (2014, p. 3). Subsequently, rather

than creativity being a capacity only the human individual possesses, it is “closer to a set of relations or forces in which beings [of all kinds] find themselves” (Calarco, [2015](#), p. 4). Geographers are increasingly drawing on and out the creative forces and relations enacted by encounters with archival materials (Bide, [2017](#); Mann, [2018](#); Patchett, [2017](#)). By privileging the play of the botched-birds in the workshop they push us to meet them in the “included middle,” a “zone of indiscernibility” where we must relinquish our human sovereignty and exceptionalism and reconnect with our own animality (Massumi, [2014](#), p. 6). And it is through this sympathetic realignment that we begin to *feel* the ways in which we are moved by the botched-birds and how they can be mutually included in the unique event of the workshop.

Feather-light and animate to the gloved touch, the botched-birds retain an animal expressivity that mobilises our affections. However, the clear marks of human intervention also indicate that this vivacity was historically to their detriment. Although this suggests the botched-birds as witnesses to the mass avicides of the feather trade (1860–1920), as they come with no accompanying documentation additional evidence is required to enable fuller appreciation of such marks. However, given Massumi ([2014](#), p. 18) views play as an attempt to invent “the new,” introducing an interpretive framework at this point might be considered a deadening gesture. Yet it is important to acknowledge that even these curated materials – including natural histories, customs export returns, scientific papers, fashion catalogues, and wild-bird protection campaign materials – were produced in the collaborative company of the hundreds of millions of birds caught up in the feather trade and that our creative interplay with them and the botched-birds in this context has the potential to generate new relations and insights. As Kevin Hetherington ([2001](#), p. 26) argues, archival play “has indirect ways of telling us stories ... about power, agency, and history” that can be missed through conventional forms of historical enquiry.

With black bird we are transported to the rainforests of Papua New Guinea where we learn about the seductive appeal of birds-of-paradise, how they have for millennia been commodities, ornaments, and gifts, and the key role they played, via their entanglement with Alfred Russel Wallace, in the theory of sexual selection, which articulated that the birds’ sought-after plumes evolved according to their own aesthetics. With black wing we learn the arts and crafts of the Parisian plumassier, the staggering scale and global reach of the feather trade, and the female-led campaigns against “Murderous Millinery,” which led to the first wild bird protection laws and forced plumassiers to work wonders with farmyard feathers. With black plume we are confronted with the colonial violence of South African ostrich farms, the hazardous working conditions of plumage sweatshops in London and New York, and the “willowing” work carried out by tenement children that produced the tiny knots for the “plumes that pay.”

Emerging from this mode of archival play, although still feather-light to the touch, the botched-birds are now weighed down by both the slow violence of colonialism and the corporeal violence the Capitalocene (Haraway, [2016](#)). This is because the “lived importance” of the botched-birds – their telling of animal aesthetics, mass avicides, eco-feminist activism, and feather-work and workers – actually “corresponds to the *ethical*: the anchoring of incorporated experience in the imperatives expressed in the already given” (Massumi, [2014](#), p. 38). However, if we are to commit to archiving as an iteration of animal play and politics, Massumi argues we must “leverage creativity ... even out of the most denunciation-worthy situations” ([2014](#), p. 74). The

surviving vitality of the botched-birds offers such leverage, as it enables them to resist being completely pinned down by “the already given” and even gestures towards future ways of realigning human–avian relations along more sympathetic lines of flight: “how are the botched-birds Merle?”

We arrived at this sense of care and custodianship in the workshop not simply through the intellectual exercise of relinquishing human exceptionalism but also by recognising our shared vulnerabilities as animals: the wearing of gloves being essential to protect not just the botched-bird bodies from further damage but to also protect our own bodies from traces of arsenic. And it is through this movement beyond the entrenched ontological divide of humans and animals in historical understanding *and* practice that we might better safeguard the shared vulnerabilities of humans and birds in the Anthropocene at large (van Dooren, [2014](#)). For it was only through the botched-birds’ mutual inclusion at not just at an intellectual level but also at a visceral and affective level in the workshop that we simultaneously came to feel and care for the ways in which our histories – past, present, and yet-to-be – *coincide* with avian ones. This is because, to echo and extend Dipesh Chakrabarty ([2009](#), p. 220), the animal-play of these avian-archives contests “in quite fundamental ways the very idea of [human exceptionalism], historical understanding,” and archival practice.

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