

**Animal Languages: The Human-Animal
Binary in the Works of Clarice Lispector
and Jorie Graham**

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the human-animal divide plays a key role in the work of the writers Clarice Lispector and Jorie Graham, and that their explorations and complications of the divide in turn shed light on its persistence and the challenges that it poses for linguistic representation and for our understanding of human and animal alike.

The human-animal binary refers to the divide that separates the human from all other animal beings. On the one hand, this distinction seems insubstantial: humans are an animal species, and the intelligence and subjecthood of nonhuman animals are increasingly recognised in science and law. On the other, to suggest that no difference exists between humans and other animals is a foolishness similar to suggesting that no difference exists between any two species. Although some scholars have claimed that the division has outlived its usefulness, attempts to transcend the human-animal divide, both in scholarship and in literature, are paradoxically often those most plagued by the return of the binary they seek to overcome. The human-animal binary represents an energetic and restless distinction that, as Lispector's and Graham's work shows, cannot be finally resolved into either a simple division between human and animal or an undifferentiated continuity between two indistinct terms.

Lispector's and Graham's interest in writing about animals derives both from the mysterious self-worlds of animals and from a preoccupation with testing the limits of representation itself. Lispector and Graham make critical use of certain rhetorical strategies—specifically adynaton, defamiliarisation, and anthropomorphism—to imagine what it *might* be like to be the described animal without claiming to definitively state what that experience is. Further, they reciprocally consider the consequences of representing the human as animal: Graham worries about the possible loss of moral accountability entailed by a biological explanation of human selfhood, whereas Lispector seeks to dissolve the human subject into a wider continuum of animal life and matter as an alternative to humanising the world through symbolic thought and language. Comparing the authors' works here makes conspicuous the implications of dismantling the human-animal binary and of shirking our moral responsibilities as humans.

Ultimately, this thesis concludes that, while authors like Lispector and Graham cannot eradicate the human-animal binary altogether, they can complicate and diversify what each of these terms—*human* and *animal*—represents.

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Introduction

Not being fish, how do we know their happiness?

But we may express our feelings in painting.

In order to probe the subtleties of the ordinary,

We must describe the indescribable.

—Zhou Dongqing, “The Pleasure of Fishes”

What is the difference between a human and an animal? On the one hand, the distinction can seem insubstantial: humans are an animal species, and science and law are increasingly recognising the consciousness, complex cognitive skills, emotions, social systems, and value of nonhuman animal lives. This recent acknowledgement of traits that were previously considered the sole property of humans supports Charles Darwin’s percipient statement that “the difference in mind between man and the higher animals ... certainly is one of degree and not of kind” (1981, 105). On the other hand, to suggest that there is no difference between humans and other animals is a foolishness similar to suggesting that no difference exists between, say, a lion and a goldfish. Jacques Derrida expounds on this point:

To suppose that I, or anyone else for that matter, could ignore that rupture, indeed that abyss, would mean first of all blinding oneself to so much contrary evidence; and, as far as my own modest case is concerned, it would mean forgetting all the signs that I have sought to give, tirelessly, of my attention to difference, to differences, to heterogeneities and abyssal ruptures as against the homogeneous and the continuous. I have thus never believed in some homogeneous continuity between what calls *itself* man and what *he* calls the animal. I am not about to begin to do so now. (2002, 398; original emphasis)

Approaching the human-animal binary, in the Western tradition, at least, thus represents a significant difficulty—one which is energetic and restless, and which cannot be finally resolved into either a simple division between human and animal or an undifferentiated continuity between two indistinct terms. What this thesis will demonstrate, however, through reading the works of Clarice Lispector and Jorie Graham, is that thinking and writing about the relations between humans and animals need not fall into either of these positions, but can instead work to complicate and deconstruct (without ever entirely dismantling) the human-animal divide. By complicating but not effacing the human-animal binary, authors such as

Lispector and Graham can hope to de-naturalise harmful narratives about human exceptionality. They can also hope to counteract examples where the distinction between human and animal is entirely elided such that we neglect that, as humans, we are reliant on representations of animals in order to understand them, and that these representations can have tangible effects on both their and our own lives.

To some scholars and critics, particularly those working in the areas of postcolonial, posthumanist, and intersectional feminist schools of thought, focussing on a binary relationship between humans and animals—or, “self” and “other”—may seem outmoded. There is a strong drive in contemporary scholarship, and in particular new materialism, to generate new schema to conceptualise the correspondence and interrelations between various beings and their environment. For example, social quantum theory describes the relations between the world’s diverse agents (both human and nonhuman) as a web of interdependent and response-able parts, modelled as entangled particles in multi-nodal networks (see in particular O’Brien 2016; Barad 2007; Barad 2010). Alternatively, Donna Haraway imagines human-animal relations as the bonds of “oddkin,” joined together as collaborative and connected players in a game of “string figures” (Haraway 2016, 2–3). These theories have great merit as a means of recontextualising our relationships to other species by decentering the human subject. They also offer an attractive framework for emphasising the agents’ ability to affect one another as a system of interconnected nodes that are contingent upon each other in a material world, even when unaware of others’ actions or presence.

I contend, however, that it is overhasty to assume that we can simply move on from the human-animal binary. In fact, the greatest efforts to transcend the human-animal divide are paradoxically often those which are most plagued by the return of the binary they seek to overcome. In the theories cited above, for example, the animals that are represented by hypothetical nodes in interconnected networks are actually further from our understanding as individual living beings than the subjects of scientific studies that observe and describe animals from a single, human point of view, or anthropomorphising stories that at least attempt to describe what it might be like to be such an animal. The animals in these “post-binary” models resemble moving parts in a simulation or game with the effect that these models cannot offer any further understanding or imagining of the animals’ diverse conditions and experiences of being. The animals’ existence in these models is purely that which is afforded to them within the play of human hypotheticals.

While these post-binary models may not have yet provided a satisfactory alternative to the binary that currently defines human-animal relations, the necessity of rethinking our

relationships with other species remains urgent. Increased awareness of the cruel conditions of industrial farming, growing evidence of diverse animal intelligences, the enormous loss of biodiversity in the Sixth Mass Extinction due to climate change, and the resulting turn of large numbers of people towards vegan or vegetarian lifestyles (Hancox 2018) have contributed to a corresponding growth in the study of animals and human-animal relations in the humanities over the past twenty to thirty years.¹ Gathered together under the umbrella term “animal studies,” this interdisciplinary field loosely includes any work that enquires into the economic, cultural, or aesthetic relations between humans and animals, and/or the quandaries of animal representation by humans—both in the sense of “*portrayal*” and “*advocacy*” (McKay 2018, 308; original emphasis).

While some animal studies works are avowedly “post-binary” (see Oliver 2009; Ohrem and Bartosch 2017; Westling 2017), the vast majority of this literature—including many of those same “post-binary” studies—are explicitly engaged in interrogating the relations between humans and animals (rather than, say, considering the relations between a number of different nonhuman animal species), and the work of representation that occurs on the “human” side of this divide. The extent to which human-animal relations touch nearly every field in the humanities is evident through the large number of disciplines that have contributed work to animal studies, including ethics and politics (Oliver 2009; Oliver 2017; Creed 2017; Ohrem 2017; Simons 2002), analytic philosophy (Nagel 1974), film and media studies (Creed 2017; Malamud 2017), theology (Meyer 2018), narratology (Herman 2016; Herman 2018; McHugh 2011), literary studies more generally, and poetics—or “zoopoetics”—more specifically (Moe, 2014; Driscoll and Hoffman, 2018). For this project, I am particularly interested in the vein of animal studies which examines the uneasy yet productive interaction between animal lives and the abstract human language used to describe them (see Malay 2018; McKay 2018; Oerlemans 2018; Pick 2011; Roscher 2017; Simons 2002).

Capturing animal lives in language poses an intractable problem: writers of animal texts may be able to describe an animal’s appearance, behaviour, and its relationships with other animals, but they cannot describe for certain what it is like to *be* that animal. Thus, when describing an animal, authors are presented with two unhappy possibilities. They can

¹ For a brief overview of the history of animal studies, see Lori Gruen’s introduction in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies* (2018, 1–5).

approach the animal in ironic, provisional language that attempts to respect the animal's difference and unknowability. These attempts, however, often result in the animal disappearing into the author's idiosyncratic language, such that they remain at an unbridgeable distance of complete otherness from the language in which they are described. This technique often leaves the living animal in second place to the verbal gymnastics or ingenuity of the author. As Michael Malay puts it, "this kind of difficulty" in textual strategy, while signalling an attempt towards "an ethical act, a stubborn gesture aimed at preserving the otherness of the stranger," may instead "tell us nothing about ecological others and everything about the poet" (2018, 199).² Alternatively, authors may approach this problem by describing their animal figures in straightforward terms that are made comprehensible to a human reader by anthropomorphising the animals' experience so that they fit within the scope of human understanding and expression. This second approach, however, also falls short of accurate animal representation because it trivialises the alterity of the animal's experience.

In short, an animal's representation in text can overwhelm the actuality of the living animal that it describes. As we will see from the works analysed in this thesis, even attempts at the most concrete representation of an animal (one that closely attends to the animal's particularities and ways of being) also always read, to some degree, as a metaphorical and allegorical—i.e., human-orientated—figure. In fact, it is often when language is used to signify most earnestly and ardently its author's desire to describe an animal, and to acknowledge its distance from what the author can know about it, that the text conversely achieves the opposite and the animal becomes wrought in highly figurative language.

Rather than this crisis of representation being a total impasse, however, I argue that the apparently insoluble and layered boundary between the human and the animal can instead stimulate particularly creative and ingenious aesthetic responses. These responses not only prove productive for the authors of such work but can also provide new ways of approaching or imagining animal life for the reader.

² Malay makes this point only to suggest that, while the poetics of Les Murray (the author to whom he was referring) might present difficult texts whose estranging tactics tell us very little about the animals they describe, they do still represent a concerted effort to respect the difference of those animal beings.

This thesis asks: what can writers teach us about the human-animal divide, its paradoxes, and its persistence despite efforts to try to overcome it? And, moving from the opposite direction, how does this binary stimulate and influence the works of those who seek to think and write about animals and animality?

The works of Clarice Lispector (1920–1977) and Jorie Graham (1950–), in particular, offer revealing and sophisticated responses to the human-animal divide and its effect on animal representation. Rather than turn away from this formidable challenge, Lispector and Graham instead stay in the discomfort of the uneasy distinction between “human” and “animal,” and probe the binary “not to efface the limit, but to multiply its figures, to complicate, thicken, delinearise, fold, and divide the line precisely by making it increase and multiply” (Derrida 2002, 398). And, in writing such texts, both writers respond to the difficulty of animal representation while also helping to illuminate the reasons for this difficulty in the first place.

Lispector and Graham are both distinctive for their exploration of—or perhaps, more accurately, worrying at—the limits of human perception, thought, and language in their desire to think and write “where the incomprehensible begins” (Cixous 1990, 56). And both use animals as a focal point for rendering this preoccupation concrete and identifiable in their works. For Lispector and Graham, innovative and unorthodox approaches to language are required in order to respond to the contradiction at the heart of animal representation. Both authors recognise, on the one hand, that the animal’s experience is beyond the boundary of language’s descriptive powers. But, on the other hand, they also recognise that animal representations are necessary tools for drawing attention to, and suggesting, the different-from-human experience of those same animals (a movement that also mirrors the distinct/continuous nature of the existential human-animal boundary).

Lispector and Graham also share a position of “outsider from within,” as women who migrated to other countries, and who write in their second and third language, respectively (Eberstadt 2009; Vieira 2009; Edemariam 2017). Their consequent awareness—both of how the signifiers assigned to experiences and objects in the world are essentially arbitrary in their designation, and of how these designations can fail to account for experiences “other” to dominant structures and modes of being—lends their work a certain affinity or sensitivity towards animals, as beings whose experiences are at an even further remove from recognition and containment in language. The authors’ interest in writing animal figures, then, derives both from the animals themselves and from the act of representation and what it can and cannot achieve.

Despite the abundance of animal figures in both Lispector's and Graham's works, scholars have largely neglected the role of these animals in their philosophical, historical, psychological, and formal readings of the texts.³ As I will show, however, reading Lispector's and Graham's texts through the lens of animal studies offers new insights into all these elements of their work—from philosophy to form—and, more broadly, into the literary problems and possibilities of animal representation.

Unlike many animal-centric writers, Lispector and Graham approach the human-animal binary from both sides of the divide (inasmuch as this is possible when writing from “the human” side of the binary). Not only do they imagine what the subjectivity of an animal might be, they also consider what it means to be a human animal. While there are many authors who have written animal characters and imagined their lives (with more or less success), far fewer have imperilled the safety of their position as humans to “become” animal, and fewer still maintain this uncomfortable imagining without it somehow returning to a fable or commentary on human society. Whether or not Lispector and Graham manage to successfully bracket their humanised ways of seeing when imagining animal life—or whether or not this is, in fact, achievable at all—is debatable. I argue, however, that what sets their work apart is their earnest attempt to reach into the folds of the human-animal divide, not only by diversifying and enriching our idea of what it is to be an “animal” but also by interrupting and making multiple the category of the “human.”

Attending to the form and rhetorical strategies of Lispector's and Graham's texts is critical to this project. Literature provides an essential contribution to animal studies through its strong tradition of exploring alternative ways of being without these imaginings being confined to statements of fact—something apparent, for example, in the fantasies of science fiction, or, for our purposes, when describing the experience of what it might be like to be a given animal. Through this rhetorical mode, literature is able to distance readers to some

³ There are some exceptions to this claim in the case of Lispector. A small number of scholars have found purchase on her novel *The Passion according to G.H.* using Deleuze's and Guattari's essay “Becoming Animal” (Braidotti 1994; Goh 2009; Goh 2016; Ittner 2005). Apart from Jutta Ittner's chapter, however, which does spend some time considering the effect of how Lispector anthropomorphises her animal characters, my project varies from these essays in that they treat Lispector's animal figures as true-to-form animal beings, without concern for how they are represented (through metaphor) in her texts.

degree from their typical attitudes and understandings of the objects and relations described. Animal-centric literature, in particular, can help readers to identify and recognise the relations between humans and animals that might otherwise go unacknowledged, and, at times, can even help destabilise or edit the structures that shape those relations. It is this characteristic that differentiates this kind of literary practice from other, still vitally important, disciplinary practices. For example, biologists and ecologists provide essential information about animal lives that also influence attitudes towards animal being, but they can only do so within the scientific method of gathering information to support or reject certain hypotheses. The subjective experiences of animals cannot be tested for or falsified, however. Literature does not have to say definitely how or what something is, or is not, in order to imagine how it might be, and is therefore able to be more flexible in its claims. Lyn Hejinian writes that, by operating in the rhetorical space of “*as if*,” perspectival and experimental exercises in writing are able to “to know that things are. But this is not knowledge in the strictest sense; it is, rather, acknowledgement—and that constitutes a sort of unknowing. To know *that* things are is not to know *what* they are, and to know *that* without *what* is to know otherness” (Hejinian 2000, 2). Writing this *kind* of provisional text—that is, a text that creates a space for the experience of an other without ultimately stating what that experience actually is—can serve as an “acknowledgement as a preservation of otherness—a notion that can be offered in a political, as well as an epistemological, context” (Hejinian 2000, 2–3). When applied to animal representation, Lispector and Graham use the formal and rhetorical capabilities of literature to assert *that* animals do have a subjective experience, even if we cannot state exactly *what* this experience is (as it is necessarily perceived and imagined from the human author’s point of view). By doing so, the authors preserve some of the “otherness” of the animals they describe.

In this sense, animal representations need not be automatically viewed as the failure of language to grasp the true reality of its living animal object. They can instead be understood as the possibility to imagine the experiences of nonhuman animal beings that could otherwise not take place. This tension between understanding animal representation as inherently limited or as a conceptual tool for imagining life beyond the human is comparable to the tension that Christopher Prendergast identifies as defining representation more generally. Prendergast refutes the claim that, in certain circumstances, representation is not possible:

Everything is representable ... What is presumably meant when we say that something is unrepresentable is that any given (or conceivable) representation

is inadequate to what it seeks to represent, thus invoking, if only negatively, the model of *adequatio* and an associated correspondence theory of truth. It is not that representation as such is impossible, it is rather that it fails in its task, thus failing under a negative valuation or, more radically, under prohibition. (2000, 2–3)

This model of “*adequatio*,” he acknowledges, however, can be turned another way:

An alternative view ... has been to invoke *adequatio* (or its converse) on pragmatic grounds: a representation is adequate to some purpose or other, and human purposes can vary according to needs and interests in ways entirely irrelevant to the epistemological concerns of a correspondence theory of truth. A corollary of this alternative view is *mise en abîme*: the contingent origins and partial dimensions of a representation are and should be—there is some uneasy sliding between the descriptive and prescriptive—marked in the representation itself, rather than merely suppressed in the reach for a correspondence between the representation and the truth of the (or a) world. (3)

It is important to note, as Prendergast does, that representations shaped to human needs or purposes irrespective of their correspondence to lived “truth” invest the tool of representation with a certain degree of power—particularly when the “truth” it describes is that of an animal which cannot speak for, or represent, itself. Foregrounding language’s workings and rhetorical strategies is therefore one way to advertise that any description an author undertakes is one that contains certain assumptions, originates from a certain background, and is reliant on “human choices and conventions” (Prendergast 2000, 9). Thus, by emphasising the provisional and perspectival nature of their works, authors can create self-reflexive texts that attempt to counteract representation’s “strong in-built tendency to self-naturalisation” (9).

Lispector and Graham are two such authors. Both make the workings of their representation visible within the representational act. In general terms, they achieve this visibility through a complicating or disrupting of language’s typical syntax and form, drawing attention to how the language works to represent (or fails to represent) its described objects. More specifically, Lispector and Graham use the tools of defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*) to unsettle naturalised approaches to animals and animality, and adynaton (*impossibilia*) to suggest the ultimate impossibility of capturing “true” animal experience in human text.

Coined by Viktor Shklovsky in 1917, defamiliarisation operates through estranging descriptions of the familiar and everyday so that readers might be plucked from their automatic or “default” perspectives to see the world afresh—or, in some cases, from the point of view of an “other” (Shklovsky 2015). In fact, Shklovsky’s key example of literary defamiliarisation is provided from an animal’s point of view. Quoting a section from Leo Tolstoy’s short story “Strider,” Shklovsky describes how—by using the perspective of the horse Kholstomer—Tolstoy defamiliarises readers from the human institution of property and re-introduces them to its absurdity:

Thinking about this all the time, and only after the most diverse experiences with people, did I finally understand what meaning they ascribe to these strange words. Their meaning is this: in life, people are ruled not by acts but by words. They love not so much the possibility of doing or not doing something as the possibility of talking about different things using certain words, on which they agree beforehand. Such are the words “my” and “mine,” which they use to talk about different things, creatures, topics, and even about land, about people, and about horses. They agree that only one person may say “mine” about any particular thing. And the one who says “mine” about the greatest number of things, in this game whose rules they’ve made up among themselves, is considered the happiest. (Tolstoy quoted by Shklovsky 2015, 164)

Tolstoy here uses the imaginary perspective of the horse to provide an external view on the workings of human society and their “strange words” that designate the ownership of everything from land and objects to living beings. In this example, Tolstoy uses defamiliarisation to provide an apparently “animal” view on human affairs. The technique can also be used, however, to imagine how another creature might experience reality by describing events or objects in ways that may seem unusual to the human reader, but which reflect the point of view of the animal’s sensory world. Both uses of defamiliarisation seek to offer the reader a renewed imagining of their world through an estranging point of view. Lispector and Graham use defamiliarisation with a certain critical restraint, demonstrating the new perspectives or awareness that this trope can engender while staying wary of some of its proponents’ more utopian claims.

Adynaton is a rhetorical trope used by an author to suggest the failure of language, often through an act of hyperbole so excessive that it parades its own impossibility (Galvin 2017; Griffiths 2007, 93–110). To use an example from Shakespeare, adynaton suggests that

there are such experiences in reality that: “more it is than I can well express” ([1594] n.d.). Lispector and Graham both use *adynaton* in order to persuade the reader of the impossibility of representing their animal figures in text. The trope offers the authors a certain duality or flexibility in their representation: they are simultaneously able to suggest, or make a presence for the other life worlds of the animal figures they depict while also advertising the failure of their language to accurately describe those same animals. The authors generally do not use *adynaton* in service of facetiousness or false modesty, however, but instead as a sincere attempt to remain responsible to what cannot be said about the non-linguistic, nonhuman animal worlds they describe.

The earlier of the two authors, Lispector, was primarily interested in animal representation as a means of finding new ways to communicate experiences that lie outside of dominant modes of expression. While considered a prodigy in her home country of Brazil following the publication of her debut novel at age twenty-three, Lispector only garnered an international reputation some years later. She was particularly celebrated in France for her innovative and philosophical investigations into the interplay between language (and human structures more generally) and subjecthood (the awareness of one’s being), drawing parallels with philosophers such as Spinoza, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Agamben (Marder 2013; Sousa 1989; Shiminovich 1993; Jones 2007). Her work has been labelled as the “missing link between ... existentialism and structuralism” for its liminal position between “risk, choice, [and freedom] achieved by throwing off learned social roles and received categories of thought,” while recognising that these “categories of thought ... [are] inescapably binding because they are embedded in language itself” (Ruta 1989).

Lispector’s philosophical play, and the tension between “throwing off” categories of thought simultaneous to an acknowledgement of their embeddedness “in language itself,” find a fitting home in her representation of animal figures. Through imagining animal life, Lispector imagines an alternative way of being—one free from social mores—but also encounters the lively difficulty of representing that unmediated and unabstracted state within the structures of human expression.

Lispector attempts to write from both sides of the human-animal binary to reach into the liminal spaces in between. First, in her animal-centric short stories, Lispector describes a range of exotic and domestic animals from a distinctly human, anthropomorphising point of view. I have selected two representative examples to discuss in this thesis: “The Buffalo” (2015; “O búfalo,” 1998b) and “A Chicken” (2015; “Uma galinha,” 1998b). In my analysis of these stories, I demonstrate Lispector’s unusual use of anthropomorphism and what her

writing can teach us about this much-maligned trope. Anthropomorphism is widely criticised for interpreting animal behaviours in ways that assume human-like intentions, understanding, and experience of the world. Lispector uses this trope in a way that recognises its necessarily limited, human point of view to demonstrate that it is still possible to suggest the rich self-world of animals, even when we can only apprehend these other worlds through the frames of human perception and understanding. In the two novels that I analyse—*The Passion According to G.H.* (2012; *A paixão segundo G.H.*, 2013) and *Água Viva* (1998a; *The Stream of Life*, 1989⁴)—however, Lispector meditates upon the human characters’ own animality. These texts explore the implications of recognising the self as an animal whose existence is not based on social conventions, rules, or declarative structures, but on an inherent *livingness* that extends across all animal species.

In the first of these two approaches, Lispector’s animal representations are elegantly placed so that they are neither dry philosophical ruminations on the animal condition, nor sentimentalised accounts that diminish the unknowability of the animals she describes. In the second, Lispector is concerned with capturing the prelogical and prediscursive parts of the human setup that she suggests precede our sense of self and autobiographical consciousness. She finds these moments in experiences where subjectivised description and consciousness fall away, so that the individual feels only their sensation of being—as when in passion, beatitude, and ecstasy. In describing these moments, however, she becomes troubled by how, or indeed whether, she should create abstract forms for such experiences, as “to say something betrays something. What is tragic is that the word separates” (Cixous 1990, 16). The burden of being human is that “‘thinking’ is born right away and becomes part of the tragedy” (Cixous 1990, 29). Lispector’s novels thus attempt to reconcile a binary between felt, sub- or un-conscious “animal” sensation and structured, thinking, “human” consciousness that coexist within the self.

Graham, too, is interested in capturing those elusive parts of one’s experience that escape conscious thought. Her poetry mines the visible world for those ephemeral or immaterial things that hover adjacent to the lyric subject’s perception. The primary tension in

⁴ The 1989 English translation used the title *The Stream of Life* in a nod to the title’s literal translation as “living water” while also referring to its stream-of-consciousness narrative style. This choice limits the alternative readings of the novel’s title (which I will discuss in the fourth chapter of this thesis), and later translations have chosen to retain the Portuguese.

Graham's work exists in the gap between "the given" of the world's matter and the interpretation of the human mind that works to understand it (Vendler 1995, 92; Vendler 2003). This fixation has rendered much of Graham's poetry a study of frustrated vision, in which the lyric subject is unable to capture the objects she describes, finding instead that "what's real slides through" (Graham, "Manifest Destiny," 1993).

Graham evokes this bewildering loss of descriptive potency in a number of ways. First, rather than a single, dominant voice, Graham captures the given moment through a multiplicity of voices, strung between hyphens or captured in parentheses, presenting a multifractal view of the objects they describe. Here, "I" becomes a cipher for an assemblage of selves that must frame and re-frame their objects, as each single perspective misses something of what they attempt to capture in sight, thought, or language. While her style changes from book to book, Graham has become known for her disconcerting changes in line length, an idiosyncratic use of em dashes (and more recently colons), the Hopkins-esque "outrider,"⁵ and placeholders in her text such as indefinite pronouns ("it"), vague nouns ("thing"), algebraic substitutes ("x"), and blanks ("_____"), all of which circumvent the need to name the unpronounceable things that exist alongside the speaker's articulated experience (Kirsch 2008; Henry 1998; Gardner 2005; Bedient 2005; Frost 2005; Yenser 2005; Shifrer 2005; Costello 2005; Spiegelman 2007). Graham's unusual syntax and fractured language enact her hunger to view poetic objects from every possible angle in order to capture *all*, while also making visible—through concrete acts of adynaton—those gaps in perception where some hidden quality of the objects resides. Graham's choice to include her struggle to see and describe within her representational acts has led to her poems being characterised as "provisional victories over their own inefficacy" (Chiasson 2015).

However, while many critics have identified Graham's struggle to represent reality in text, few have recognised the centrality of animals to that struggle.⁶ This thesis aims to correct this omission. I demonstrate that by attending to how Graham depicts animals we can learn a great deal both about the challenges of animal representation—especially when

⁵ The indenting of a single word, or pair of words, along the right-hand margin.

⁶ Just under half (twenty-eight out of sixty-one) of her first volume of collected works, *The Dream of the Unified Field* (2002a), and a little over half (twenty-six out of forty-eight) of her second volume of collected works *The Taken-Down God* (2013) include animal figures (either literal and metaphorical, or, more accurately, always somewhere in between).

considered through the poetry of an author renowned for her careful attention and philosophical rigour—as well as how these difficulties have in turn influenced and shaped her works.

In Graham's first two collections—*Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980) and *Erosion* (1983)—animals appear as highly wrought, avowedly metaphorical stand-ins for some other meaning Graham wishes to convey. Later, they begin to slip from poetic control, signifying an absence in her knowing and a failure of her language such that the animals simply disappear into ellipses or blanks. During this middle period, animals also tend to represent a pre-Edenic ideal of an innate union with nature of which humans are bereft. No longer able to experience and know the world without the mediation of thought and language, Graham's speakers are filled with a desire to describe and make models of it, no matter how limited, in order to give it shape, and to know it through representation so that there is the *sensation* of knowing and “rightness seems to root” (Graham, “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia,” 1998). However, at this point in her career, we can already see the beginnings of a change in Graham's animal descriptions and an increased awareness of their experience in the world as subjects in their own right. This change sees her representation of animals transform from completely unknowable others to fellow creatures, and, further, creatures who might also be able to reveal something about what it is to be human.

While Graham has long tested the limitations of human perception, thought, and language as biologically mediated processes, her exasperation about what these limits might mean for the future of humans and other species only becomes fully apparent in her collections *Never* (2002b) and *Overlord* (2005). *Never* reflects Graham's distress at the onrushing climate crisis and the mass extinction of animals (around nine species every minute at the time of her writing), while *Overlord* grieves the transformation of the unified human subject into an object of scientific study that is increasingly described in impersonal terms. Responding to the rising dominance of cognitive sciences, and the associated belief that “everything psychological is biological,” Graham worries deeply about the loss of political agency and ethical responsibility that may occur if we choose to see humans as biologically determined creatures (Skillman 2016). She is also deeply troubled about the harm humans might perpetuate within and across species lines if we are to shirk a sense of discrete human selfhood that can be held accountable for the consequences of its actions.

In examining the human-animal binary through a close reading of selected works from Lispector and Graham, I will first work from one side of the binary then the other—with the understanding that these two categories are not clearly distinct, that there is no one,

clearly defined way of being “human” or “animal,” and that there will necessarily be some overlap between the scope of the two approaches.⁷ These two approaches will form the two movements of the thesis: “Representing the Animal” and, to borrow Deleuze’s and Guattari’s term (2007), “Becoming-Animal.”

To first clarify the theoretical and representational issues of writing animal characters, I start from the “animal” side of the human-animal divide. This first movement includes two chapters that identify the strategies each author uses to represent animal beings. In the first chapter, I analyse selected poems from Graham’s oeuvre to show the development of her approach towards writing into the human-animal binary—from her early poetry that clearly positions her human speaker as the observing subject of the animal object she describes, to animals that disappear or slide from her text and understanding, and then her later recognition of animals not only as a rhetorical or linguistic challenge but as sensing and experiencing subjects in their own right. In the second chapter, I compare two of Lispector’s short stories to demonstrate how she uses both a naïve and a more critical approach to anthropomorphism to represent her animal figures. In discussing these two forms or levels of anthropomorphism, I consider the difference between an anthropocentric and an animal-centric reading of animal being, and judge which might engender a more substantial and enduring change in how human individuals conceive of, and care for, animal others.

In the second movement of the thesis, which is also divided into a further two chapters, I begin from the “human” side of the human-animal binary to explore the consequences of writing about the human as animal. In chapter 3, I analyse Graham’s concerns about modern science’s dedication to thinking of the human subject as a biologically defined (perhaps even determined) being, and the possible loss of agency this creatural selfhood entails. In chapter 4, and in direct contrast to Graham’s appeal for maintaining a belief in the moral human self, I illustrate how Lispector embraces the dissolution of the human subject into a wider continuum of animal being in her novels *The Passion According to G.H.* and *Água Viva*. For Lispector, animal figures and animality offer a way of apprehending the innate *livingness* of being that pre-exists the human shaping of the

⁷ Of course, one cannot ignore the inevitable skew toward the human author when approaching the human-animal divide from either side, but nor should we consider the author alone; the animal, too, collaborates in textual practice through their own being and makings that prick the author’s interest and stimulates their desire to describe that moment in text.

world through language and consciousness—a state she desires to access in order to see the world *as it really is*, uncoloured by acculturated and socialised modes of seeing. It should be noted that, although this movement is called “Becoming-Animal,” there is no single, definitive way of being or becoming “animal.” Beyond the human there are countless animal worlds and ways of being that are as equally complete and distinct from each other as we conceive the human world to be. What I am interested in demonstrating in this second half of my thesis, then, are the ways in which Graham and Lispector imagine and explore their own animality as human beings. My focus is thus not restricted to exploring how human characters might imagine or embody animal modes beyond the human (although this is something I will touch on in chapter 4). I am instead more concerned with investigating how these authors deeply consider their characters’ own conditions of being—as humans, and, therefore, already as animals.

The question that I posed at the outset of this thesis—“What is the difference between a human and an animal?”—was, as is already apparent, deceptively straightforward. And while there may be no easy answers to this question, there are still significant consequences that result from how we conceive of and represent the profound continuities and differences between human and nonhuman ways of being. Our relations with nonhuman others touch on almost every sphere of our daily lives, including our diet, clothing, land use, religions, economy, and innumerable other instances where human lifestyles are intimately dependent upon animal lives. In our current period of imminent environmental collapse, in particular, we urgently need tools that help us to deeply consider, and really *feel*, the presence of those rapidly disappearing worlds of other animal species. Further, we need tools that help us to conceive of our own human selves as equally fragile animal beings. Lispector’s and Graham’s works provide insight into how we might achieve these tasks, the difficulties we might encounter, and the crucial role literature plays in helping us to imagine worlds beyond the human.

First Movement: Representing the Animal

1. Graham's Animal Figures: Animal Signs and Human Making

Jorie Graham opens her poetry collection *The Errancy* (1998) with an epigraph from Sir Thomas Wyatt: "Since in a net I seek to hold the wind." Wyatt's expression of unrequited love (figured as a forsaken hunter trailing behind his quarry, a deer) takes on new meaning when Graham uses it to gloss the poems that follow. These poems struggle to catch the wealth of reality in the porous net of static language that is directed and limited by the interpreting mind: "reaching forever towards a contour of sense-experience deeply known in the body, but unavailable in language except through the mind's mediation" (Vendler 2003). Graham is particularly interested in those things which are not readily available to our comprehension and representation—whether it be the action of perception itself, the unlocatable meeting place of our environment and consciousness, or the palimpsestic lingering of history and the implications of the future condensed within the present moment. Through her poetry, then, she seeks to perform an impracticable task: creating a web of material signs that might "capture or name the ephemeral, the invisible, the unnameable" (Spiegelman 2007, 194). Writing texts that deal in the ineffable repays the author with myriad frustrations, and Graham's attempts to grasp her diffuse and intangible objects in sight, thought, and language prove as exasperating as Wyatt's yearning to stay the wind. And this is especially true for her poems that seek to represent the unknowable worlds of animal others. For Graham, like Wyatt in his pursuit of the hind, capturing animals in the net of text offers its own "vain travail" (Wyatt n.d.).

Graham's early animal figures are opaque. They are wholly inscrutable others that stand as a reminder to the speaker of what she cannot know beyond the edge of her own necessarily limited perception. If understanding other humans can be difficult, Graham's animals demonstrate that "the vast interstices between human points of view are nothing to the differences of perspective that gape between species—species whose modes of perception, behaviour, and thought reflect specialised purposes" (Skillman 2016, 214).

The abyss between human and animal ways of being constitutes a significant difficulty for Graham's animal poetry. Human individuals typically share a similar sensory system and the ability to use symbolic language, and it is this second trait—even if the language spoken between the human subjects is not the same—that makes it relatively easy

for people to assume and assign complex and familiar mental states to others.⁸ This “theory of mind” relies upon a “leap of analogy” that helps us to “infer the nature of conscious experiences in other people” through comparison with our own (Stamp Dawkins 1998, 12). Animal needs and behaviours are not human needs and behaviours, however, and, when attempting to understand them through analogy with the human, the results can ultimately stifle and even harm animals’ distinctly different conditions of being.⁹

Jakob von Uexküll names the “phenomenal” or “self-world” of animals, including the human, their *Umwelt*. To understand this concept, he encourages his readers to imagine “a soap bubble around each creature to represent its own world, filled with the perceptions which it alone knows” (1992 [1934], 319). The first principle of von Uexküll’s *Umwelt* theory is that “all animals are fitted into their unique worlds with equal completeness. A simple world”—that is, one that relies on few perceptual cues to elicit behaviour—“corresponds to a simple animal, a well-articulated world to a complex one” (324). Our greatest mistake when considering the *Umwelten* of other animals, he argues, is when we assume “that the relationship between a foreign subject [i.e. a nonhuman animal] and the objects in his world exist on the same spatial and temporal plane as our own relations with

⁸ The degree to which this attribution is afforded to others does, of course, vary. The difference in willingness (unconscious or not) to assume these traits of other people is perhaps the most characteristic symptom of prejudice—for example, where it manifests as dehumanisation based on race, gender, sexuality, or difference of ability.

⁹ Take, for example, the phenomenon of capture myopathy or a “catastrophic surge of adrenaline” resulting in illness or death due to close contact with a potential predator—an event that often occurs when wild animals are kept in captivity by humans. The cardiologist Barbara Natterson-Horowitz recounts being called to Los Angeles Zoo to help perform a heart surgery on an emperor tamarin. Before the surgery, she describes wanting “this defenceless little animal to understand how much I *felt* her vulnerability,” and so crouched close, opening her eyes wide and cooing as she had done over the years with human patients to “establish a trust bond” and put them “at ease” (2012, 4). Natterson-Horowitz’s behaviour was not in line with the needs of the monkey, however, and after being warned by a colleague about the risk of capture myopathy, she realised that: “my compassionate gaze wasn’t communicating, ‘You’re so cute; don’t be afraid; I’m here to help you.’ It said ‘I’m starving; you look delicious; I’m going to eat you’” (4).

the objects in the human world. This fallacy is fed by a belief in the existence of a single world to which all living creatures are pigeonholed” (327).

Reality, according to von Uexküll, does not determine our subjective experiences, but rather our subjective experiences determine our reality, our *Umwelt*:

Only when this fact is clearly grasped shall we recognise the soap bubble which encloses each of us as well. Then we shall also see all our fellow men in their individual soap bubbles, which intersect each other smoothly, because they are built up of subjective perceptual signs. There is no space independent of subjects. If we still cling to the fiction of an all-encompassing universal space, we do so only because this conventional fable facilitates mutual communication. (1992, 338–339)

To accept the position that an objective shared space between human and nonhuman subjects is a fallacy—except when it is realised in the moments where the perceptual signs of their *Umwelten* overlap—is distressing to writers like Graham who are, in fact, attempting to communicate within and across species lines. Here, Graham confronts the double-faced dilemma of being limited by her own *Umwelt* as well as being barred access from the equally self-contained phenomenal worlds of animal others.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously poses von Uexküll’s proposition exactly in a thought experiment that demonstrates our limited ability to imagine and describe another animal’s experience using the example of a bat—an animal that we are fairly happy to afford a rich *Umwelt* as a mammal, but one which also uses a vastly different sensory apparatus to the human (Nagel 1974, 436). Due to the bat’s difference in morphology and perception (one that relies on sound over sight), Nagel argues that there is “no reason to suppose” that being a bat “is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine” (438). He surmises that “reflection on what it is like to be a bat seems to lead us, therefore, to the conclusion that there are facts that do not consist in the truth of propositions expressible in human language” (441). We can observe the bat closely, and make a record of these observations in statistics and linguistic signs, but we are unable, Nagel asserts, to make any verifiable statements on what it is like to subjectively *be* that bat.

Nagel’s statement—that there are facts of life not expressible in human language—presents a perfect crisis in animal representation. And this crisis is keenly felt by a poet like Graham who “thirsts” for a vision with “no errancy,” and who harbours a desire to see and know reality without the restriction of the mind’s narration (Graham 1998, 78). There are times in Graham’s poetry where the limits of her perception, especially when tasked with

representing the unknowable world of an animal other, place such stress on her language that she fails to find words at all. We can see this breakdown of language in “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia,” for example, which describes the speaker’s miscarried interaction with a cricket in her garden. On drawing near to the insect, she encounters an animal who falls through the net of the poem’s text, creating a gap or hole in its representational continuity:

Yellow sky.
Faint cricket in the dried-out bush.
As I approach, my footfall in the leaves
drowns out the cricket-chirping I was
coming close to hear

(Graham 1998, 1; original ellipsis)

Despite the speaker “coming close to hear” the cricket, she provides no further description of the insect or its song. Instead, the weight of her physical, intentional, and linguistic approach “drowns out” the cricket’s chirping, and the sentence breaks down into an ellipsis. This concrete act of adynaton speaks to the difficulty of representing not only the cricket but all animals. Even if the speaker had been able to see, hear, and describe the cricket, she could not recreate the reality of the creature for the reader beyond what is available to her human senses (and therefore understanding and language), leading to a frustration of vision and a “tautological nightmare,” whereby “description begets only more description” but not the animal itself (Skillman 2016, 213). In order to be responsible to what she cannot know, then, Graham creates a presence for this absence—her unknowing of the cricket’s subjective being—through the ellipsis.

By including the ellipsis, as a “gap” or “fissure,” Graham performs what Susan McHugh identifies as a “poststructuralist aesthetic” in contemporary animal-centric poetry (2011, 11). This poststructuralist trend emphasises language’s “inadequacies and shortcomings” in the face of animal representation as a way of exhibiting its failure to fully describe creaturely beings. However, while such “ostentatiously mismanaged” animal representations might seek to preserve the enigmatic self-worlds of animals, they can also risk creating an even harsher divide between human and animal ways of being (McHugh 2011, 11). To assume that *any* representation of animal being is fundamentally impossible is to deflect from the necessity of trying to do so. This assumption also prevents us from acknowledging what we do already know about creaturely others as sensitive observers, and as animals ourselves. It is this apparent conflict between the limits and still-vital importance of attempting animal representation that Graham’s poetry attempts to balance.

Graham's early attempts at animal poetry often sidestep representing animals by explicitly advertising their rhetorical and metaphorical status within her texts. Her intertwining of animal bodies with abstract concepts is particularly evident in her first collection, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980), in poems such as "One in the Hand" and "The Geese" which conflate animal bodies with language itself, or other codes of signs not fully available to the speaker's understanding. In making these poetic objects—animal and language—one and the same, Graham interrogates the limits of language by symbolising it using an animal figure that is itself the index of language's failure to fully represent. The final poem from this collection, "A Feather for Voltaire," provides a good example:

The bird is an alphabet, it flies
 above us, catch
 as catch can

 And each flight is an arc to buttress the sky,
 a loan to the sky.
 And the little words we make of them, the single feathers, dropped
 for us to recover

 A feather,
 pulled from the body or found in the snow
 can be dipped into ink
 to make one or more words: *possessive, the sun.*
 (Graham 1980, 66; ellipses added)

In this passage, the birds merge with language itself as forms that give shape to our experience of the world. Their flight gives the sky a temporary structure—a "buttress"—creating a shape the mind can grasp against what would otherwise be a vast formlessness, just as language gives structure to the formlessness of reality. The shapes we perceive from the birds' flight may not represent the real world, interpreted as they are by humans below—"catch / as catch can"—but in perceiving the flight, we begin to be able to form our own "little words" and "buttress" of language and thought that give names to things in the world from the "single feathers" that drop from it. Observing the birds' flight gives us a shape of the world, and we describe this shape using our own, secondary tool for shaping—language—and, in turn, create our own flights of imagination, interpretation, and representation. However symbolic or figurative Graham's birds are, then, their presence in the text is still

predicated upon the existence of the animal being that is beyond our knowing. The birds that appear in the poem are read by the interpreting mind, and from the position of the human, but their otherness remains untouched while also provoking an awareness in the speaker of her own *Umwelt* that acts to shape her world. Even the most allegorical or symbolic representation of animals cannot, therefore, be disentangled from their actuality.

Following from the inseparability between the figurative and the actual in animal representation, Graham directs our attention towards how language also literally depends upon the animal body: “A feather ... can be dipped into ink / to make one or more words.” From this observation we can make further, more sophisticated observations about how human language relies upon animal being (including, of course, our own). In his essay “The Animal That I Therefore Am (More to Follow),” Derrida describes the relation of human to animal as being at once both “I am” and “I follow” (2002, 371–372). We both are and follow animals in many ways: those things that are intrinsic to being human—interpersonal communication, abstract thought, emotion, and play—find their precursors (or equivalents) in animal behaviours. Symbolic language is no different; it is both continuous with and distinct from animal modes of being, having at once developed from animal traits that persist in our language¹⁰ while also being the single most salient difference between human and nonhuman animal being. John Berger elaborates on this point:

The parallelism of their similar/dissimilar lives allowed animals to provoke some of the first questions and offer answers. The first subject matter for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. Prior to that, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal ... If the first metaphor was animal, it was because the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric. Within that relation what the two terms—man and animal—shared in common revealed what differentiated them. And vice versa. (1992, 7)

Berger argues that we were only able to establish a concept of human selfhood through initial contact with animal others. These animals perceive the human from their own place of alterity—a place that causes the human “to become aware” of themselves as individuals,

¹⁰ For example, vocalisations that serve as intersubjective communication for the purposes of warning other family/group members of threats, to signal the desire for a mate, to find one’s parent or child amongst a crowd, or simply to be companionable or in the service of play.

“returning the [animal’s] look” (5). According to Berger, then, how we conceive of the human intimately depends upon the question posed by the familiar difference of the animal, a difference that required metaphor to be approached:

What distinguished man from animal was the human capacity for symbolic thought, the capacity which was inseparable from the development of language in which words were not mere signals, but signifiers of something other than themselves. Yet the first symbols were animals. What distinguished men from animals was born from their relationship with them. (1992, 9)

Animals and ideas of animality are critical to the development of human metaphor—as can be seen in the ubiquity of animal characters and iconography in human stories and art around the world. What is absent from both Berger’s theory and Graham’s early poems, however—both of which focus mostly on the importance of animals and animality to metaphor and self-understanding—is the lived experience of the animals themselves. In Berger’s expansive statements about the role of animality, for example, no specific animal is mentioned. Metaphor and analogy may be unavoidable as the very mode we use to understand and represent animals, but the portrayals offered by Berger and Graham give little hope that such metaphors can ever communicate something about the phenomenal worlds of animals themselves without inevitably saying more about how humans perceive the world instead.

These representations thus become guilty of imagining animals into political or aesthetic life “only by bracketing off the significance of embodiment in space and time” (McHugh 2011, 11). And so, while unable to be completely removed from the living birds that pique the author’s structure-hungry mind, Graham’s birds are still overwhelmingly textual objects. They act as visible but impenetrable symbols for the material world and for the action of the human mind as it works to understand it. The birds’ flight through Graham’s poem might tell us a great deal about human perception, thought, and organisation of reality through language, but it can tell us next to nothing about the experience of flight for a bird. This is to be expected—after all, Graham makes it very clear that these are figurative animals operating more as a metaphor for language than as representations of literal avian beings.

In Graham’s second collection *Erosion* (1983) her animal figures become disentangled from their explicit doubling as metaphors for the signs of language. She instead begins to rely on the cultural connotations of animal figures to express and embody certain abstract ideas. Perhaps even more than her earlier poetry that conflates animal bodies and linguistic signs (which at least advertise the way language is used to shape her animal representation), this later work that favours the poet’s play with allusion over the animal’s

own self-world creates an even sharper distinction between the poet as a describing human subject and her described animal object. “I Watched a Snake” (1983) supplies a good example of this separation.

In the poem, Graham focuses on how the animal’s body can be read as a “visible trace” of the “invisible mechanics”—whether they be hunger, passion, or desire—that guide all human and nonhuman action (Smithers 2014). In this case, Graham traces these mechanics over a monumental time scale that includes the coming and going of individual lives. First, the speaker watches the snake:

in the dry grass
 behind the house
 catching flies. It kept on
 disappearing.
 (Graham 1983, 34)

Then, she applies a first layer of human abstractions—“lust,” “work”—onto its moving body:

And though I know this has
 something to do

 with lust, today it seemed
 to have to do
 with work.
 (Graham 1983, 34)

Graham then draws back the poetic frame from a close focus on life in her backyard, where the snake catches flies and eyes a butterfly, to muse instead on the passage and progress of humanity over history. With this shift in focus, she figures the now-visible, now-invisible snake as a metaphor for the “stitching” of human bodies on Earth as they relentlessly appear, disappear, and reappear over time:

This must be a perfect progress where
 movement appears
 to be a vanishing, a mending
 of the visible

 by the invisible—just as we
 stitch the earth,
 it seems to me, each time

we die, going
 back under, coming back up. . . .
 It is the simplest
 stitch, this going where we must,
 leaving a not
 unpretty pattern by default. But going
 out of hunger
 for small things—flies, words—going
 because one’s body

goes.

(36–37; original ellipsis)

Following this passage there is a brief stanza describing the snake with “his tiny hunger” (tiny in comparison to the hungers that drive humanity, perhaps) retrieving the “necessary blue- / black dragonfly,” before he is removed from the poem completely. This stanza, initially, at least, indicates a certain similarity between the human and animal figure with their comparable hungers and drives. But then the speaker breaks down the poetic frame she has constructed to this point, summarising:

All this to say
 I’m not afraid of them
 today, or anymore
 I think. We are not, were not, ever
 wrong. Desire

is the honest work of the body

(37)

Deconstructing the poem this way (“All this to say...”), Graham discloses that the snake’s presence in the poem is, to a large extent, not about the particularities of his snakely being so much as his allegorical import. The snake’s purpose in the poem is mostly to function as an object onto which the poet can apply her various personal, historical, and cultural readings.

The serpent or snake has long served as a subversive and dangerous emblem for many of the “invisible mechanics” that drive us, including those Graham names as “desire,” “passion,” and “lust.” In Genesis 3, the serpent introduces Eve to her hunger for knowledge by encouraging her to eat the forbidden fruit. Once Eve and Adam eat of the fruit, they

become self-aware and ashamed of their nakedness, signifying the loss of their innocence and the irrevocable separation of the human from nature.¹¹ In her poem Graham uses the snake, with its fragile body (“one that won’t even press / the dandelions down”) and laboured work (“It took almost half / an hour to thread / roughly ten feet of lawn, so slow”), to indicate her reassessment of desire’s place in and for humanity. For Graham, passion, desire, and lust are not things that undo people, but rather give them purpose and meaning over an individual and historic timescale:

Passion is work
 that retrieves us,
 lost stitches. It makes a pattern of us,
 it fastens us
 to sturdier stuff
 no doubt.
 (37)

We can see in this poem that Graham’s animal figures are thus not intended (or, not *only* intended) as depictions of real animal being, but are rather useful stand-ins for other immaterial or abstract ideas she wishes to express.

Graham does, however, become increasingly worried about what might be lost if she fails to consider the subjective experiences of animals, and the real-life harm that this kind of neglect could effect on their lives and bodies. To see how Graham problematises animal representations that remove the experience of the living animal itself, I will now turn to her poem “Reading Plato.”

“Reading Plato” describes a fly fisherman making and using artificial flies. The central animal figure in this poem is not a living being, then, but its human-made copy, demonstrating what is absent when the life and subjective world of an animal is bracketed in

¹¹ Derrida associates this first human awareness of nakedness, and first attempt to dress oneself, with all following attempts to “clothe” the world in language, culture, and reason. He suggests that the humanity’s shame at our nakedness (and at being naked in a way that no other animal can be) reveals our even more profound sense of “nakedness” in reality—the embarrassment of our separation or “fall” from nature, and our unique need for clothing, tools, and language to survive (2002, 373–374).

order to create an exact and gratifying (if static) animal representation that the human mind can comprehend and enjoy. The poem begins:

This is the story
 of a beautiful
 lie, what slips
 through my fingers,
 your fingers.

(Graham 1983, 6)

On one level, this “story / of a beautiful lie” is about the fishing lure that represents a perfect simile of an animal body but which lacks the *livingness* that defines animal being. On another, the lie is the poem itself that (re)creates the story of an event, but which also fails to capture its lived reality. Thus, from the opening, we see that both Graham and her character are engaged in making forms that, as representations rather than the *thing* itself, let some of its lived reality slip through their grasp. Much of the makers’ need for a faithful mimesis of the reality they represent in their “beautiful lies” is simply pragmatic, intended as they are to convince the fish/reader to be enticed and bite:

Flies
 so small
 he works with tweezers and
 a magnifying glass.
 They must be
 so believable
 they’re true—feelers,
 antennae,
 quick and frantic
 as something
 drowning.

(6)

There is a point, however, where the *idea* of the animal and poem begins to overwhelm and obscure its living model, and it is the artful crafting of the fisherman instead that becomes what is “true”—just as Graham’s poetic retelling of events becomes their “truth” once the moment has passed. Thus, the human penchant for abstraction and representation takes precedence over the flies’ actual living being (made literal by the fact that these “flies” are of

course already a human construction in the poem), with the fisherman reaching towards some perfected Platonic form of the concept “Fly.”

Graham emphasises this connection to Platonic thought through the poem’s title, so adding another layer to her filtering of the mundane through philosophical abstraction. Plato posited that material objects are only imperfect shadows of their ideal or form: “The world that appears to our senses is in some way defective and filled with error, but there is a more real and perfect realm, populated by entities (called “forms” or “ideas”) that are eternal, changeless, and in some sense paradigmatic for the structure and character of the world presented to our senses” (Kraut 2017). In the poem, the lures that the fisherman crafts are even more exemplary than the insects they are modelled on. They are a “paradigm” of insect being: they cannot change (under their own volition, at least), and they cannot die. Further, they are pleasing as useful tools of human skill and labour that can extend the fisherman’s horizon of touch and vision—“Past death / past sight”—becoming prosthetics that can perform his actions beyond his typical, embodied access. In short, they are a “good idea”:

He makes them
 out of hair,
 deer hair, because it’s hollow
 and floats.
 Past death, past sight,
 this is
 his good idea
 (Graham 1983, 6)

This “good idea” is not without effect in the material world, however. It is in this stanza that Graham begins to enmesh the immaterial forms with their material presence, revealing how very contingent Plato’s world of abstracted ideas is upon the world of our senses. The fishing fly is not *only* a representation of a fly and a “good idea,” it is also a material object, and one that is made from an animal body: the “deer hair” that is “hollow / and floats.” The properties of this hair receive more attention from the fisherman than their source, the animal body, which has been “dismembered, remembered,” and only becomes “finally alive” as the lure skips over the water’s surface in a movement that echoes the deer’s skipping over land. Thus, it is not the deer (or its hair) itself that Graham encourages us to imagine joining the flies swarming on the river, but rather our *knowledge* of this graceful deer:

upriver, downriver, imagine, quick
 in the air,

in flesh, in a blue
 swarm of
 flies, our knowledge of
 the graceful
 deer skips easily across
 the surface.

(Graham 1983, 7)

By subdividing the animal body into the properties of its parts, we risk “pulling apart” the animal into abstract forms of human knowledge that neglect the unknowable whole from which this knowledge came: “Graham’s menagerie of animal visual objects...raise the question of what becomes of the irreducible anima not only when it is reconstituted as a visual mental representation but when the empirical methods of deriving and organising knowledge, necessarily dependent on embodied processes of observation and reason, analogously ‘pull apart’ the sentient into the materially ‘true’” (Skillman 2016, 214).

Forms are powerful because they have real, material effects. The lure is not only an immaterial idea; it is an idea that hooks and kills fish. This is an illustration of a larger problem: the “ideas” and static representations we create from animals can risk deemphasising their subjective experience in service of focusing on their material parts in ways that indulge a human lust for knowledge and resources.

What Graham also suggests, however, is that these abstracted representations are an incontrovertible part of how the human mind interacts with the material world of nature. The ideas, representations, and stories we tell that reflect and create our world are an innate part of how we perceive and learn to understand our place in it—even if that means creating beautiful falsehoods, as when Graham describes the sky above the men fishing along the riverbed at dawn: “Above / the stars still connect up / their hungry animals” (1983, 7).

The “beautiful lies” or representations that humans create—as suggested by the name Graham gives them—are not necessarily, or only, negative and harmful. The fisherman, in his act of making, pays very close and fine attention to the fly that he models with both love and art. “His heart / beats wildly / in his hands” (6) as he responds to the unique wonder of the insect body. His exacting desire to create the perfect insect body is one of appropriation and mastery, perhaps, but it is also one of homage. The fisherman has more interaction with the insect and knows more about its relations with other species and its environment than those who do not make such models. While the lure cannot re-present the life and subjective experience inherent in an insect’s body, the act of its making recognises and respects its being

through minute copying and faithful description in an ardent attempt to understand. And, perhaps, the poet can perform a homage in the same way.

Graham herself provides one such homage in her poem “Thinking” from *The Errancy* (1998). This is a poem that, while aware of its reliance upon human systems of understanding and representation, also acknowledges the extent to which human knowledge is dependent on its interactions with the world and other, nonhuman ways of being.

“Thinking,” like Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” offers a shifting series of frames for how we could “look” at, or conceive of, an animal other. In this case, the animal is a crow who perches above the speaker on a powerline scanning the world below him before flying away. Stevens’s poem is a playful attempt to represent the mind in action as it interprets or elaborates on the material world. Importantly, Stevens acknowledges that, whatever frame one applies, ultimately, “the blackbird is involved / In what I know” (n.d.). There is a blackbird, actual or imagined, with which the speaker interacts. Perhaps its nature cannot be fully understood, but it exists, and, as the mind works against it, the bird becomes co-constructive in the production of the poetic object. Graham’s “Thinking” plays with this knowing and unknowing, the presence of the other and the observer’s inability to comprehend it fully, as well as the intermingling of the mind’s interpretation with reality’s matter, and, finally, the animal’s construction of its own *poiesis* to which the poet is witness.

Graham’s crow is a textual object. It is a “version of a crow, untitled as such” (Graham 1998, 40) that is placed not only between the powerlines and phonelines but also amongst the speaker’s lines of sight, thought, and text. Graham’s description is precise, and makes her writing “hew so close to its object” that “it forces us to confront the difficulty of keeping that mental crow on its mental wire” (Chiasson 2015). This difficulty—of description, of capturing the bird in text—makes the crow uncomfortable, so that he hangs “like a cough” to his wire (Graham 1998, 40). Perched on this human-made construction that is at once the powerline and the line of text, he finds that it does not offer quite enough support for the weight of his being:

The wire he’s on wobbly and his grip not firm.
Lifting each forked clawgrip again and again.
Every bit of wind toying with his hive of black balance.
Every now and again a passing car underneath causing a quick rearrangement.
The phonelines from six houses, and the powerlines from three,

flight, and encourages her readers to themselves imagine the crow's different-than-human sensation of moving through air.

These final stanzas of the poem—the event of flight, the interaction between human and crow, and the poem that is born of it—are co-constructed. Without the crow's being and flight, the speaker's mind would not be pricked by the otherness of what she encounters. Further, her poetic attempts to describe and find “well-edged” meanings for what she has experienced would not exist, and the crow would not become a part, through her experiments, of what she knows about the world. While the crow is indeed a textual object, he also writes his own “sentence of black talk” with his flight. In this sense, the crow is perhaps not so much an “other” as a companion: a fellow maker and living being.

In an interview with Katia Grubisic, Graham remarks: “I am always encouraging my students to try and write in the voice of something not human—not that this is a thing that one could actually do—but it is a very tonic illusion, a very existentially bracing exercise” (Graham 2010). “Thinking” is close to being one such “bracing exercise” through imagining the crow's sensation of flight, if still from a human perspective. It is a poem that foregrounds its own textuality while also acknowledging that the crow exists independently from the text. Although the poem cannot say, definitively, what it *is* to be the crow, it can imagine what it *might* be like, and that, simply, might be enough.

Graham's poetry from her first collection *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* to her mid-career volume *The Errancy* demonstrates a marked change in her representation of animal figures. By the end of this change, describing animal lives for Graham no longer represents only the lonely separation of the human mind unable to grasp and understand its object through language. It also represents the possibility of expressing wonder at and homage to those enigmatic beings of reality that she cannot ever fully know, but which contribute nonetheless to her understanding of the world and her place in it. Thus, while Graham cannot entirely dissolve the distinction between the human and the various worlds of the animals she describes, she can imagine those alternative animal lives through the parameters of her body and language—parameters which are not only barriers to understanding but also points of contact with the world beyond the self.

2. Lispector's Critical Metaphors: Anthropomorphism and Storying Animal Lives

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Graham represents animals first through acts of adynaton that brackets animals' subjective experience and then through a recognition of animal subjectivity that seeks to imagine their self-worlds from within the constraints of human-oriented creative expression. Graham's tactics are certainly not the only possible response to the difficulties of animal representation, however. Studying Lispector's animal-centric works reveals yet another key literary strategy for how to represent the *Umwelten* of animals in text. In contrast to Graham's early uncompromising approach, which distances animal experience through explicitly figurative representations or through the complete disappearance of the animal into the text, Lispector instead draws these animal worlds closer to human language and understanding through the trope of anthropomorphism. This approach, too, involves certain in-built limits due to its enforcing of a human frame onto the self-contained worlds of animals. Nonetheless, anthropomorphism remains an important tool for imagining animal lives. Unlike the lapses and absences of adynaton, anthropomorphism at least attributes a subjective experience to creaturely beings, and one that, if attuned to the animals' actual conditions of being, can teach us something about the animal world it describes.

Not all instances of anthropomorphism are used with equal respect towards the unknowable self-worlds of animal others, however. If Graham's early writing distances animals a little too thoroughly, some of Lispector's descriptions of animal life (or more accurately her characters' descriptions of animal life) are perhaps overly comfortable depicting animal characters in exacting human terms. As I will demonstrate, the risk of these humanised accounts that smother the alterity of animal experiences is that they can be used to serve human narratives without any meaningful change in the way that those people see or treat other animal beings. In this chapter, I will compare two short stories in which Lispector employs a naïve and a more sophisticated form of anthropomorphism—"The Buffalo" ("O búfalo") and "A Chicken" ("Uma galinha")—from her second collection *Family Ties* (in *The Complete Stories*, 2015; *Laços de família*, [1960] 1998b).

In "The Buffalo" ("O búfalo"), Lispector tells of a spurned young woman walking through a zoo after being refused by her former lover. In response to her rejection, the woman seeks an animal rage to replace her unwanted feelings of love. And, as she moves from cage to cage, she "experiments ... with her own projection onto the animal" (Ittner 2005, 106),

searching for the creature that can show her how to live without tender feelings and unburdened by thought. In her passage through the various enclosures, the woman's observations create "an exquisite vignette of animal existence" (Ittner 2005, 106). We meet the giraffe—"a virgin with freshly shorn braids," "that silent wingless bird ... more landscape than being" (Lispector 2015, 222–223); monkeys who are "happy as weeds"—including a female who looks at the woman "with her resigned, loving gaze," and a male with "his emaciated arms outstretched in a crucifix, his bare chest exposed without pride" (223); an elephant, "his eyes, with an old man's benevolence, trapped inside that hulking, inherited flesh"; and a camel, "in rags, humpbacked, chewing at himself, absorbed in the process of getting to know his food" (224). A coati looks at the woman "with the silence of an inquiring body ... asking her a question the way a child asks" (226–227); and, finally, she encounters the buffalo: "The buffalo with his constricted torso.... he was a body blackened with tranquil rage" (230).

Clearly, Lispector describes these animals with metaphor and allusion that superimpose the woman's own subjective experience onto their bodies. The giraffe is of course not a "virgin with freshly shorn braids," nor is it "a silent wingless bird." The monkey does not outstretch his arms with a Christian idea of crucifixion, nor can the woman know that the female monkey is looking at her with love and resignation or that the elephant is "benevolent" by nature. These animal descriptions are trifling characterisations compared to what the woman projects onto the buffalo, however. To the woman, the buffalo represents the object/embodiment of her rage. In front of its powerful body she becomes "nearly absolved" (231) of the schism inside herself between her lust to hate and the already-budding forgiveness she wishes to resist. The buffalo, for her, provides a startling and refreshing point of cathexis for her dissonant feelings.

Ultimately, this woman's search centres on the self. She is not interested in the animals for their own sake, but as some external object that might teach her how to be something other than she is. As Jutta Ittner states, "It is important to know that in this powerful story about the impact of the gaze of the Other, the buffalo's role is assigned by the human viewer. What appears to be the animal's 'hatred' is, of course, the woman's projection" (2005, 106). While regrettable in its imposition, to read the animal's body in this anthropomorphising way—that is, to intuit within the animal some kind of human quality on the basis of their physical form—may be impossible to avoid altogether. Lispector artfully captures the ways in which the woman interprets and relates to the world through anthropomorphism, and, in doing so, she exposes the woman's own *Umwelt*.

The protagonist's experience is one of solipsism, heightened by her emotional distress. She is unable to escape her individual interpretation of the world and its objects, including the animals she encounters. However, as readers, we are aware that her experience, as it is relayed to us through the free indirect discourse of Lispector's narration, is not the only possible or objective account. It is instead the result of the interaction of the intending mind and its object, whose reality is beyond the individual's intention or construction.

Lispector's animal descriptions are carefully ironic, and she chooses to story her animal lives in ways that subvert her own character's preconceived attitudes towards them. She begins "The Buffalo" with the word "But" ("*Mas*"): "But it was Spring. Even the lion licked the lioness's smooth forehead. Both animals blond" (2015, 222). "But" appears twice more within the opening paragraph: "'But this is love, it's love again,' railed the woman trying to locate her own hatred but it was spring and the two lions had been in love" (222). "But" crops up repeatedly throughout the story, where its incessant repetition signals the continual rebuff of the woman's expectations. She has come to the zoo with preconceptions about what she will find in the animal kingdom—violence, base instinct, and ruthless uncaring—and yet reality is too much and too different for her narrative to persist. She repeatedly fails to assign her desired meaning onto the animals' living bodies: "*But* the giraffe was a virgin"; "*But* the elephant withstood his own weight"; "*But* not the camel in ragged burlap"; "*But* where, where to find the animal that would teach her to have her own hatred?" (223–227; emphasis added). Using this contrasting conjunction, Lispector indicates the refusal of reality to be rendered according to the woman's predictions.

The animals, in particular, have a reality that is separate from how the woman reads them. They are not only able to be looked at, but can also *look back*, and, in their own way, read the woman. When, filled with a hunger for violence, the woman moves close to the monkeys' cage, she imagines that she will "kill them with fifteen dry bullets ... she'd shoot the monkey between the eyes, she'd shoot those eyes that were staring at her without blinking" (223). Her actual encounter with the monkey proceeds quite differently:

Suddenly the woman averted her face: because the monkey's pupils were covered with a gelatinous white veil, in his eyes the sweetness of sickness, he was an old monkey—the woman averted her face, trapping between her teeth a feeling she hadn't come looking for, she quickened her step, even so, turned her head in alarm back toward the monkey with its arms outstretched: he kept staring straight ahead. "Oh no, not this," she thought. And as she fled, she said: "God, teach me only how to hate." (Lispector 2015, 223)

The reality of the monkey's gaze, and his frailty and old age, makes it impossible for the woman to maintain her embittered anger against him.

Lispector also uses this encounter with the monkey to draw attention to the woman's own condition as an embodied, biological being. Looking at the monkey prompts a physical-emotional response: the unwanted feeling that she "trap[s] between her teeth." By describing the scene in this way, Lispector emphasises the situatedness of the woman—in her body, and in her own metaphorical "cages" of outraged feeling, human thought and language, and her circumscribed ability to perceive and interpret reality. Like the other animals, Lispector gives the woman no proper name. The fragile condition of her own, animal body, too, is exposed through direct comparison with the other animals. When we meet the camel "getting to know his food," we learn that "she felt weak and tired, she'd hardly eaten in two days" (Lispector 2015, 224). When she visits the elephant "inside that hulking, inherited flesh," she finds herself "trapped inside the patience of her inherited flesh" (224). And when observing the animals, like the coati, she stands with her forehead "pressed against the bars so firmly that for an instant it looked like she was the caged one and a free coati was examining her" (227). From this interaction, the woman concludes: "The cage was always on the side she was" (227). She is unable to extricate herself from the confines of her senses, emotions, and mental representations.

The woman's despair at her inability to escape either her feelings or physicality is further marked by a brief interlude where she rides a rollercoaster and finds her body at the mercy of forces beyond her control:

But all of a sudden came that lurch of the guts, that halting of a heart caught by surprise midair ... the deep resentment with which she became mechanical, her body automatically joyful ... the enormous bewilderment at finding herself spasmodically frolicking, they were having their way with her, her pure whiteness suddenly exposed. (Lispector 2015, 225)

Far from a dispassionate surveyor, this is a human body "bewildered" at its fact and hotly embarrassed by being exposed—both by the rollercoaster and by the betrayal of her former lover. She is a person who is uncontrollably contingent on her physical surroundings and, as part of this world, she is also able to be acted upon, rejected, and transgressed.

The woman's journey through the zoological gardens is a quest to escape herself, and, to an extent, through the buffalo she does. At the end of the story, the woman collapses: "before her body gently crumpled the woman saw the whole sky and a buffalo" (231). While the buffalo, on a literal level, did not cause the woman's collapse simply by the force of its

overpowering presence, neither was he uninvolved in the woman's slide into unconsciousness. She ascribes to the buffalo a meaning and intention because he physically matches (as she perceives him) the thing she seeks: a masculine, primal animality to contrast with what she feels is her "fragility" as an "imprisoned female" (228). She displaces her painful and conflicted emotions upon him: "I love you, she then said with hatred to the man whose great unpunishable crime was not wanting her. I hate you, she said beseeching the buffalo's love" (231). She finds a certain catharsis through facing the animal otherness of the buffalo, through which she can confront her ex-lover, and against and in which she can define herself. This is of course a projection and tells us very little about the buffalo himself, who stays still and unchanging throughout their interaction:

He approached, the dust rose. The woman waited with her arms hanging alongside her coat. Slowly he approached. She didn't take a single step back. Until he reached the railings and stopped there. There stood the buffalo and the woman, face to face. She didn't look at his face, or his mouth, or his horns. She looked at him in the eye.

And the buffalo's eyes, his eyes looked her in the eye. And such a deep pallor was exchanged that the woman fell into a drowsy torpor. Standing, in a deep sleep. Small red eyes were looking at her. The eyes of the buffalo. The woman was dazed in surprise, slowly shaking her head. The calm buffalo. Slowly the woman was shaking her head, astonished by the hatred with which the buffalo, tranquil with hatred, was looking at her. (Lispector 2015, 231)

The woman is clearly affected by the buffalo, but this psychic drama is the result of her own internal conflict rather than a meaningful engagement with the buffalo's actual being. Her buffalo is a product of naïve anthropomorphism, and serves a human narrative. In her impression of the other animals, too, she pays no real attention to their lives and needs except where their captivity mirrors her own.

The naïve anthropomorphism demonstrated by the woman in "The Buffalo" is of limited use to those who seek to represent animals in ways that apprehend—if not fully comprehend—their nonhuman *Umwelten*, as it tells us nothing about how the animals themselves interpret, interact with, and create their own conditions of being in the material world.

We might not be able to escape anthropomorphising animals as a means of understanding them. We can, however, attempt to be self-aware of how we use anthropomorphism, and recognise that the stories we tell about animals are always partial,

and always filtered through human ways of being and knowing. If informed by the animals' own conditions of being, these stories can even serve as useful tools for generating hypotheses about animals' actual experiences (Herman 2018, 5). This process may never reveal *exactly* what it is like to be a given animal, but it can help formulate better-considered speculations about animals' subjective experiences. Provisional forms of anthropomorphism have been used for some time in ethology, and have been variously dubbed "critical anthropomorphism" (Bunghardt 2007), "biocentric anthropomorphism" (Bekoff 2009; Bekoff 2013), and "animal-centred anthropomorphism" (de Waal 1999). Unlike naïve anthropomorphism that results in simplistic animal caricatures created for the purposes (amongst others) of satire, socialising young children through fables and fairy tales, or children's films that show a harmonious and benevolent world of nature through the "Bambification" of what are often the violent or indifferent relations of animals to one another (de Waal 1999), critical anthropomorphism attempts to be informed by those things we *can* know about an animal's perception, ecology, and evolutionary history when making inferences about their experience.

For advocates of critical anthropomorphism, the danger is not anthropomorphism itself but *anthropocentrism*; or the failure to attempt to bracket one's human point of view when imagining the self-world of an animal other. What is of course paramount when using such analogies is to remain vigilant of the fact that anthropomorphism does not actually describe animals' mental lives, but is instead a heuristic that can be used to develop plausible statements about those experiences. Such indefinite explanations might seem insufficient, but it is better to afford animals some conscious experience than to be "militantly agnostic" about animal awareness and, in doing so, negate the possibility—and responsibility—of attending to and imagining the alternative worlds of nonhuman animals (Bekoff 2013, 65).

Lispector better approximates this critical approach to anthropomorphism in her short story "A Chicken" ("Uma galinha"; 2015). In this second short story, her human and nonhuman characters occupy the same environment and their lives and relations are more closely intertwined than in "The Buffalo." "A Chicken" focuses on just one animal, describing the escape and capture of a hen intended for a family's Sunday lunch. When the hen is caught and returned to the family home, she lays an egg on the kitchen floor. The young daughter interprets this act as the chicken caring for the family, and, now taken with her, the father and daughter decide to keep the hen as a pet. For a while, she lives with the family, occasionally remembering her great escape, until, as the story concludes, "they killed her, ate her and years went by" (Lispector 2015, 130).

To describe the chicken, Lispector weaves together multiple frames or ways of seeing her to create a multifractal view. No single frame represents a complete image of the hen, and none is intended to have more weight than any other. Each frame instead offers a certain reading or “truth” about the hen from the standpoints of the history of her species, her cultural value, her biological fact, and her significance as an individual living being. Avoiding any single, defining description helps Lispector to go some way toward overcoming the perspectival nature inherent in any one reading of the chicken: the hen is not *only* a specimen of *gallus gallus domesticus*, nor only a pet, nor only dinner, but neither is she not any of these things. No single definition will suffice, and so Lispector works together the many strands of her being.

The first frame for viewing the hen is introduced in the opening sentence: “She was a Sunday chicken” (127). This characterisation of the chicken is a markedly anthropocentric one, operating as it does on the conventions of time, day, and custom—the Sunday roast. Yet even this sentence indicates more than a one-way relationship of mastery between human and animal. The hen’s body might be subject to human custom, but the culture of the Sunday roast would also not exist without the bird.

A second, related framing of the hen simply describes her as “a chicken,” one among innumerable others that have been bred to suit human needs. She is so overbred, in fact, that when she is chased over the rooftops of the town the separation between her ancestral origins and her present, over-cultivated state is made clear:

Ill-adapted to a wilder struggle for life, the chicken had to decide for herself which way to go, without any help from her race....

... Her sole advantage was that there were so many chickens that whenever one died another emerged that very instant as alike as if it were the same.

(Lispector 2015, 128)

Lispector is unsentimental in her description, and the hen is not represented as a special, individual case. Rather, she is: “neither gentle nor standoffish, neither cheerful nor sad, she was nothing, she was a chicken. Which shouldn’t suggest any special feeling” (129).

However, balancing the narrator’s apparent indifference are moments of real concern for the pathetic figure of the hen, who, “without father and mother,” sits on the kitchen floor giving her warmth to “a thing that would never be more than an egg” (128). Within the story’s plot as well, despite being a very ordinary hen, she does come to hold (for a short time at least) a special place in the family. Indeed, she becomes “the queen of the household” (129).

The hen's temporary rise to beloved pet demonstrates the role of storying in human interactions with animals. The mother, who deals more intimately with the killing and preparation of the bird for family dinners, was simply "tired" and "shrugged" when her husband and child vowed never to eat chicken again in their lives (129). Unlike her husband, she does not believe (with pretence or otherwise) in her daughter's fanciful story that the hen laid the egg out of love for the family. And it is this naïvely anthropomorphising narrative shared by father and daughter that fades into unconcern once the excitement of events has passed.

The mother holds a much more pragmatic view of the hen, its understanding, and intentions. She has a more immediate relationship with the bird, both in its life and in its death. In this, she exemplifies a relationship with animals that Berger describes:

Animals came from over the horizon. They belonged *there* and *here*. Likewise, they were mortal and immortal. An animal's blood flowed like human blood, but its species was undying and each lion was Lion, each ox was Ox. This—maybe the first existential dualism—was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed. Today the vestiges of this dualism remain among those who live intimately with, and depend upon, animals. A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is happy to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*. (1992, 6–7)

Having bought rather than raised the hen—"select[ing] her, feeling up her intimate parts indifferently" (Lispector 2015, 127)—the mother is perhaps less attentive to, and fond of, this little hen than the "peasant" of Berger's idyll, but neither is she under any illusion about how the roast chicken appears on their dinner table. For the mother, the hen is a member of the household *and* their dinner, while for the father and daughter a "*but*" dissociates these two views.

Thus far, I have only covered human views of the chicken. "A Chicken" does not solely use human frames of reference, however. The chicken herself is given a subjectivity and feeling. At times, these are low-level attributions based on what someone could feasibly perceive from observing the hen, including statements such as "she, hesitant and trembling, was urgently determining a further route" (127). At other times, however, the hen is afforded the high-level attributions of memory and emotion, even an emotion so complex as nostalgia:

Every once in a while, though increasingly rarely, the chicken would again recall the figure she had cut against the air on the edge of the roof, about to proclaim herself. That's when she'd fill her lungs with the kitchen's sullied air and, even if females were given to crowing, wouldn't crow but would feel much happier. (Lispector 2015, 129–130)

In the space of fiction, this rhetorical representation of the animal's experience—like the story the daughter and father tell themselves—can foster sympathy for the hen's life and wellbeing. However, Lispector's weaving together of the various ways of seeing the hen means that her narrative is more robust, with any single standpoint balanced and kept in check by other, contrasting points of view.

Lispector further extends her play with point of view by using defamiliarising tactics that also work to expose what might be the reader's own unexamined attitudes towards the little hen that she describes. David Herman hypothesises that “literary writing can at once draw on and hold up for investigation available frameworks for conceptualising animal worlds as well as human-animal interactions” in a bottom-up process that might ultimately help shift wider cultural attitudes towards animal beings (2018, 234). His theory hinges on storytelling as a means of extending current ideas of what constitutes a “self” so that they grow to contain both human and nonhuman subjects in a “bionarratology” that reaches across species lines (249). To support his argument, Herman cites the French philosopher and hermeneutic phenomenologist Paul Ricœur: “Ricœur follows hermeneutic tradition in linking understanding to top-down, pre- or nondeliberative use of available schemes for sense making, and explanation to the bottom-up, deliberative modification of those schemes; such modification is required when default assumptions about how the world works fail to find purchase” (Herman 2018, 234). Herman argues through Ricœur that literature which “holds open” the world of the text, and which uses self-reflexive irony and phrasing, can at once generate and respond to moments when default assumptions fail to make sense of reality (240). Literature, he maintains, can achieve this through a process that Ricœur labels “distanciation,” whereby “initially taken-for-granted frameworks of understanding are bracketed, reconstructed as targets of explanation, and then reassimilated into (reprocessed as) new forms of understanding” (Herman 2018, 235). By applying “distanciation” to animal-centric literature, Herman proposes that “default assumptions about nonhuman agents and human-animal interactions are what come into question—and, in the process make possible new ways of orienting to modes of creatural life that extend beyond the human” (235).

Before the reader is re-orientated, however, norm-challenging literature must first disorientate them. Defamiliarisation is one method that encourages readers to distance themselves from their default behaviours and attitudes and to enter instead into a transitory state of existential awareness stimulated by an aesthetic experience. Through this estrangement, Shklovsky—who developed the concept of *ostranenie* or “defamiliarisation” in his essay “Art, As Device”—argues that defamiliarising art can “restore the sensation of life,” and “deautomatise” one’s everyday interaction with the world, “in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stoney” ([1917] 2015, 162).

“Deautomatising” the characters’ (and readers’) “everyday interactions” with the little hen is exactly what Lispector does in her short story. She estranges the reader from their default attitudes toward the chicken and the rituals that surround her body by representing them in unorthodox and idiosyncratic ways—as if they were being “seen for the first time” (Shklovsky 2015, 163). For example, in “A Chicken,” Lispector defamiliarises the Sunday roast by reintroducing it to the reader as absolutely contingent upon the chicken’s flesh—a commonly known but rarely *felt* fact. She estranges the hen herself by describing her external appearance with unusual metaphor and by exposing the unseen, fragile organs of her body: “She sat on her egg and stayed there, breathing, her eyes buttoning and unbuttoning. Her heart, so small on a plate, made her feathers rise and fall” (Lispector 2015, 128). Finally, Lispector also holds up for examination the human characters’ reactions to the hen, and, in doing so, brings to the readers’ consciousness their own attitudes to the bird that might otherwise pass unacknowledged: “The father, the mother and the daughter had been staring for quite some time, without thinking anything in particular. No one had ever petted a chicken’s head before” (129). By making salient the rarely considered attitudes and practices around the chicken’s body and being, Lispector distances the reader from their typical idea of the hen, “holding open” the world of text in a way that might “reorient” readers towards the animal life described.

In these passages of “A Chicken” and other animal-centric texts like it, defamiliarising tactics re-present the animal so that it can be seen for its specificity, rather than as a generic iteration of its species intended to be read in an automatic or generalised way. Focusing on the individual animal has ethical implications. The philosopher Kelly Oliver insists that it is this kind of fluid “response-ability” to individual animals that is missing from systems of animal rights that rely on generalisable and abstract human laws. These systems fail, she argues, to achieve meaningful improvement in the lives of animals “by addressing the symptoms, but not the structures, of oppression, including material and

economic structures” (2009, 31). Oliver concludes: “Rights might be better than nothing, but they still leave oppressive power structures and values intact” (31).¹² She thus favours interactions with, and responses to, the actual living animal individual rather than the preposterously large category of beings labelled as “the animal” in philosophical or moral questions. In literary texts, defamiliarisation has the potential to create this fluid ethical response due to its re- or disorientating tactics that bring its subject/reader into a more profound awareness (and imagining) of the described animal.¹³

Responsible descriptions focusing on the individual animal, and which operate in a rhetorical space of “as if,” may offer a meaningful, non-totalising way of imagining animal alterity without using deflecting tactics that reduce animals to absolute others or the objects of naïve anthropomorphism. To maintain such a stance for any length of time may be more aspirational than practical, however, as this stance requires that writers and readers entirely dissociate from the metaphorical, historical, and scientific readings that linger alongside their interactions with animals, and which are inherited in language itself. Even approximating this defamiliarised “mode of attention” toward the animal is effortful and “difficult to inhabit.” It is “impossible to sustain” indefinitely, and advocates for a hypothetical stance of self-

¹² Oliver’s comments on animal rights are developed from Wendy Brown’s position on women’s rights and their basis either on “characteristics specific to feminine or female identity and thereby reinforcing a subordinated or abjected identity” on the one hand, or “universal characteristics associated with masculine and male identity and thereby continuing to devalue femininity and female identity” (30) on the other. This question of whether to base rights on “feminine” or “masculine” traits becomes further complicated when considered from a place of intersectional feminism that recognises how race, class, sexuality, and gender-queer identities affect how individuals are perceived and treated. In short, no concrete set of rules has yet reached the same level of response-ability at the level of the individual as relations that depend upon a fluid and personalised ethical response.

¹³ One must be careful not to place too much trust in the “liberal imagination” to occupy the space of oppressed others and to deride the institution of rights too readily, however. As Amia Srinivasan states: “Feminists have pushed hard against the idea that the moral imagination is as powerful as liberals tend to presume—that oppressors can simply place themselves in the shoes of the oppressed—in turn insisting that imaginative representation give way to actual political representation” (2018).

distancing which “seems to be saying two things: imagine, but also acknowledge the impossibility of truly imagining” (Malay 2018, 1). At its very limit, this heightened sensitivity can “lead to a breakdown of perspective, an overpowering of self” (1) for the subjects and readers of animal-centric texts. Further, bracketing our “human” ways of seeing and identifying with the animal’s perspective is not necessarily or always virtuous. Indeed, as Michael Malay notes, “identification can be a very dubious aim” as a means of achieving ethical response (2018, 21). He argues that one need only look at Ted Hughes’s *Crow* or the paintings of Francis Bacon to know that an affinity for animality can be morally ambiguous (136).

The literary critic Rita Felski, for her part, questions the assumption that readers or spectators of estranging art and poetics will automatically be “enlightened” to the “true” state of their world and thus be inspired to take action to correct any previously overlooked injustices. She states: “Defamiliarisation of course is not just an aesthetic device but one that is invested with an amplitude of political virtues. To attain a newly invigorated perspective on everyday life is to be critically enlightened; it is simply taken for granted that estrangement will serve the social good” (2002, 610). She argues that people need “everyday” or “automatic” responses in order to manage the countless tasks and flow of stimuli that they encounter in their daily lives—something we can identify in the mother’s “tired” and largely unaffected response to the hen in “A Chicken.” Felski points to Edmund Husserl’s concept of “lifeworld,” a term that refers to “all that must remain invisible in order that we be able to see, the dense, tangled thicket of preconscious presuppositions that underlie our thoughts and actions” (2002, 614). Building on this definition of one’s “lifeworld,” Felski adds: “much of the unthought of our thought must remain opaque, recalcitrant and beyond the reach of understanding and critique. One’s own form of life is never fully available for retrieval and analysis, thanks to the irreducible embeddedness of thought and action, the impossibility of turning all of one’s background into foreground” (614–15). That much of one’s “form of life is never fully retrievable,” she argues, is not to say that “implicit knowledge can never become explicit; clearly, many tacit beliefs do become newly visible and open to question, often as a result of the estranging effect of historical change or cross-cultural encounter” (614). Felski’s bottom line, then, is not that we should let unacknowledged and potentially unjust attitudes perpetuate, but that we cannot do away with “unexamined” and unconscious processes altogether. It is simply unfeasible for people to exist in a state of constant existential awareness—a state that is more likely to result in a paralysis of personal agency and decision making than radical political action.

While a hypothetical position of constant response-ability and ethical awareness towards animal lives would certainly be desirable, humans need tacit structures and codes in order to navigate the world without constant cognitive stress. Improving these structures so that they best serve a sustainable and respectful way of living with others is less likely to depend upon a perpetual state of radical awareness than on recurring periods of (re-)negotiation, achieved through renewed attention and care so that the “default” position of a social group, and the individuals within it, moves toward better inclusivity and flexibility towards those previously considered “other”—both within and across species lines.

If we return to Lispector’s “A Chicken,” we can see that after a brief period of intense interest the father’s and daughter’s attitude towards the hen reverts back to its previous unconcern. In writing characters that demonstrate such inconstant affection, Lispector shows both the productive possibilities of estrangement as a way to foster sympathy and awareness for another’s life and wellbeing, as well as its tendency to collapse when this newfound awareness fails to be integrated into the structures of everyday life. The father’s and daughter’s temporary attentiveness to the hen does result in their attributing to her a subjective experience—one in which she would lay an egg to let the family know she cares for them. However, this narrative is naïve, perhaps even knowingly incorrect, and does not result in a continued respect for the hen. The father and daughter also fail to extend this same concern to other hens or animals beyond the lone, special chicken they have chosen to (temporarily) dote upon. Lispector’s humorous, if sceptical, representation of human-animal relations thus suggests the fickle nature of humanity’s concern for animal lives when their understanding of animal others is based on shallow, anthropomorphic caricatures that cannot be meaningfully incorporated into daily life. The father and daughter impose a narrative upon the hen rather than sincerely attend to the specificities of her animal self. Here, Lispector places a story within a story, framing their naïvely anthropomorphic story within the wider frame of her critically anthropomorphic tale.

Lispector’s tactics for animal representation, like Graham’s in the previous chapter, never fully elide the differences between human and animal ways of being. Lispector does create texts, however, that carefully manage how they represent animals by balancing estranging and anthropomorphising techniques that foster sympathy for animal others (often in ways that are unavailable to the story’s characters themselves) with a realism about how these frames of understanding are limited by their human point of view. She is also realistic about the unlikelihood of defamiliarising tactics can effecting lasting change unless the

attention that they stimulate is integrated into people's everyday understanding of, and relations with, other animals.

In this first movement, I have demonstrated how Graham and Lispector approach animal representation in ways that do not foreclose the possibility of imagining animal experience while still respecting the alterity of those animals' being through the tropes of adynaton and anthropomorphism. I have also demonstrated how both authors use defamiliarising descriptions to encourage readers to briefly suspend their default ways of understanding the world, and to imagine the point of view of an animal other—with a recognition, in Graham's case, that this does not necessarily reveal what it is like to actually *be* that animal, and, in Lispector's case, that the awareness this estrangement provokes does not always assure a long lasting, systemic change in how animals are perceived and treated by their human counterparts.

In looking at these authors, I have illustrated some of the challenges that writers encounter when attempting to represent animal lives. I have also shown how these challenges have, in turn, affected Graham's and Lispector's works so that they have come to develop richer, more nuanced approaches to animal representation. In the second movement of this thesis, I will argue that this increased attention towards animals and animality influences not only how the authors perceive nonhuman animals, but also affects how they conceive of and write about the human.

Second Movement: Becoming-Animal

1. Graham and the Impersonal Biology of the Self

Graham is infamous for her persistent probing of the indistinct divide between the material and the immaterial in her poetry (Vendler 1995; Vendler 2003). Her interest in testing the enigmatic limits between material bodies and immaterial minds, in particular, extends not only to testing the limit between the human and the animal—as I demonstrated in the first movement of this thesis—but also to questioning where this divide occurs within the human. Where, or at what point, does our material and animal body separate from what we experience as the thinking human self?

Through her interrogation of what it is to be a human animal, Graham grows particularly concerned about what might be lost if we consider the human to be a creature whose thoughts, emotions, and sense of self are wholly dependent upon impersonal biological processes. These poetic investigations lead Graham to question whether the nature of the material body resides in “its ecstatic livingness or its cold otherness”? (Vendler 1995, 105). In other words, is our animal body a “world opening” (Bartosch 2017, 46) that enables our sensation and experience of reality and that provides us with the opportunity to participate in the world? Or is the animal body instead that which restricts and defines our perception and understanding of the world, limiting what would otherwise be the boundless access of an immaterial mind?

As a lyric poet, Graham also explores how the limitations of the material body place stress on the lyric subject’s power of description (Skillman 2016, 14). From a biological standpoint, it cannot be assumed that what the lyric subject describes is a universally shared, objective, and *true* depiction of events; it is instead a depiction limited by the subject’s point of view, and the allowances of their animal body. Further, beyond the question of whether the human subject can see and describe the world as it really is, Graham is fascinated and deeply concerned by what a materialist understanding of the self means for the human individual’s sense of agency and personal responsibility. Apprehending that there is more to be lost than a sovereign selfhood with unerring vision, Graham worries about the dangers of a materialist understanding of human consciousness and behaviour—behaviour that we prefer to think of as freely chosen rather than defined, even dictated, by biological mechanisms.

In this chapter, I will first analyse a number of poems where Graham detects the inherent limitations and capabilities of the human body through comparison with animal others. I will then turn to the poem “Dawn Day One” (2004), which describes the “sacrifice”

of a monkey in a cognitive sciences experiment aimed at advancing understanding of the human visual system. On the one hand, this monkey provides a close analogy to the human eye, helping human scientists to better understand how we engage with and understand our world. On the other, Graham provides us with a chilling example of what seems intuitively wrong about seeing human and animal bodies as cold machines—particularly when the unique subjective experience of these beings is overlooked. A strengthened belief in the inviolable nature of the self emerges in this poem and comes to influence how Graham writes about human and animal subjects in her later career.

Sight is the first sense through which Graham intuits and investigates the consequences of her material animal body. What Catherine Sona Karagueuzian calls Graham's "frustration with the limits of sight" (2005, 44) is perhaps the most commented-on aspect of her poetry. Another critic, Willard Spiegelman, states that "regardless of the genuine, wrenching, and dramatic changes that she has made in her books—correcting, undoing, and revising earlier work—one element remains constant: her visual delight in the world is matched by an opposing resistance to the visible" (2007, 176–77). He notes that Graham's seeing is in fact always bracketed, stating: "Graham does not see: if she did, she would have clear direct objects of vision. Instead, she must look *at*, *toward*, above all, *through*. 'To look' is never a transitive verb, no matter how much one wants it to be. The prepositions make a frame" (187–88). Most literally, what Graham must look through to frame her objects is the physical, animal organ of her eye.

The failures of Graham's language in her early poetry thus come to reflect failures of sight itself so that her increasingly fragmented and disorientating descriptions render the poetic objects "hard to see" (Spiegelman, 2007, 187)—a characteristic that reached its peak in her collection *Swarm* (2000). These descriptions that obscure just as much as they reveal dramatise Graham's concerns about what any single, embodied point of view might miss of reality. Consequently, she also worries about what might be neglected from the theories and frameworks used to represent and model this reality when they are based on biologically-limited, human sight. In particular, Graham worries about the harm that unacknowledged gaps or biases in our perception might cause on a planet that has become shaped and dominated by human representations, theories, and models. As a result, Graham's poetry demonstrates a discomfort with straightforward descriptions that naturalise her point of view, and that might suggest that she is able to describe her objects *as they really are* rather than how she perceives them to be.

One way she problematises her descriptions is by clinically analysing the biological mechanisms of sight. In writing about this typically inconspicuous process, she makes it an explicit part of what defines her speakers' sensory and poetic acts. Her poem "Salmon" (1983), for example, compares the flow of perceptual data through the eye to the instinct-driven journey that salmon make upstream:

not even hungry, not even endangered, driving deeper and deeper
 into less. They leapt up falls, ladders,
 and rock, tearing and leaping, a gold river
 and a blue river traveling
 in opposite directions.
 They would not stop, resolution of will
 and helplessness, as the eye
 is helpless
 when the image forms itself, upside-down, backward,
 driving up into
 the mind, and the world
 unfastens itself
 from the deep ocean of the given. . . . Justice, aspen
 leaves, mother attempting
 suicide, the white night-flying moth
 the ants dismantled bit by bit and carried in
 right through the crack
 in my wall. . . . How helpless
 the still pool is,
 upstream,
 awaiting the gold blade
 of their hurry.

(Graham 1983, 40; original ellipses)

In this passage, visual data from the real world ("the deep pool of the given")—tree leaves, the remembered sight of a mother's attempted suicide, and her watching of the pulled-apart body of a white moth being carried away by ants—travels into the smaller, "still pool" of the mind. Graham exhibits a scientific understanding how the eye captures the stuff of reality: how the convex lens of the eye refracts light to flip the received image so that it hits the retina "upside-down, backwards," ready to be carried on via the optic nerves and translated into

underlying neurological (i.e. material) processes. That is, cognitive sciences assume that everything psychological is also biological, and that it is our body—with its intricate systems of sense organs, electrochemical messages, and neural pathways—which determines both our perception of the world as well as our most intimate, personal experiences.

We often find it easier to imagine a biologically constrained perspective on the world when looking at other animals. We might ask, for example, as Michel de Montaigne did in the sixteenth century and Jacques Derrida did at the end of the last, what understanding does a little cat have of herself and her surroundings (de Montaigne [1576] 1877; Derrida [1997] 2002)? Our answer is usually to assume that it is not an objective understanding, but one that is attuned to her specific needs and morphology. When it comes to applying the same question to ourselves, as humans, however, we are much less inclined to come to the same conclusion about how we perceive the world; not as “metaphysical entities,” but as individual beings contingent upon the functioning of biological processes (Metzinger 2003).

Indeed, Graham often relies on animal figures and their similarity/difference of consciousness and perception to feel the limits of her own human consciousness and perception. In some cases, this results in poetry about an apprehended failure to perceive the world in the same way as the animal she describes, including her own poetic cat who “does not mistake the world, / eyeing the spots where the birds must eventually land” (Graham 1998, 109). At other times, this involves an explicit failure to accurately perceive the animal itself. In “Subjectivity,” Graham’s speaker scoops up the unmoving body of a monarch butterfly from the footpath on a cold morning intending to press its “2 inches of body and 5 inches of wing” between two dictionaries (1993, 31). Only when a visiting neighbour informs her that the butterfly is not dead, but simply needs the sun to warm its body, does the speaker realise how close she was to flattening a living animal (ironically, between books of words) in her desire to have a beautiful object to look at. Placed on the lawn, the butterfly (“the yellow thing, the specimen”) rises “up out of its envelope of glances— / a bit of fact in the light and then just light” (1993, 31).

This poem does more than capture an abrupt moment of awareness about the danger that the speaker poses to the butterfly by attending only to its status as a beautiful object rather than as a living subject, however. Graham also swaps positions with the butterfly to imagine what it would be like “if being an object and being a subject were equally sentient conditions, and one could undergo the process of becoming, rather than forming, a mental image” (Skillman 2016, 217). There is an interlude in the middle of the poem in which the observing first-person speaker becomes an observed third-person “*she*” under the felt gaze of

a beam of light falling across her body. In this passage, she pictures what it would feel like if she herself were intelligently observed by an inquiring mind (Graham 1993, 26–29). In the context of her interaction with the butterfly, then, Graham is able to explore a number of angles on what it is to be an embodied animal being: she is able to sense the limits of her own perception and interpretation of the world, more closely consider the life and self-world of another animal, and, further, imagine her own being-in-the-world as if she were being observed in the same way that she observes the insect.

Graham extends this exploration in her later poem “Dawn Day One” (2004), performing a lengthy investigation into the implications of understanding the human experience as subject to the same biological limitations as other species. The poem begins with an awakening into the body:

A gunshot. The second, but the first I heard.
 Then the walls of the room, streaked with first light,
 shot into place. Then, only then, did my eyes open.
 We come about first, into waking, as an *us*, I
 think. Sometime between the first and second instant
 there is still the current that carries one in
 and deposits one in singleness. The body’s weight is
 a beaching. Back behind, or underneath: infinity
 or something which has no consequence. Then consequence, which
 feels like walls and the uprighting of self one has to do
 in them, then the step one has to take once roused, and how it
 puts one back on the walking-path one stepped off of
 last night.

(Graham 2004, 30)

From unconsciousness—and the unregistered gunshot and walls that “shot into place” without her witnessing—she wakes, and is “beached” in the body and into the “singleness” of the self.

Now awake and conscious, Graham’s speaker engages in a close and defamiliarising focus upon the physical specificities of her body—in particular, the eyes—first reaching outside the containment of the poem to directly address the reader and draw them into this uncanny self-separation:

Are your eyes shut? I put cream on my lids
 and rub it in. I feel my eyes in there under the skin.

How impersonal they are, these hardnesses, barely
attached, in their loosely protected sacks.

(2004, 30)

The disquieting sense of “me, but not me” that the speaker experiences when feeling her own eyes under their lids foreshadows her later exploration of the same strange division that occurs when cognitive scientists coolly make human consciousness an object of study. But first she explores this at the individual level by feeling her eyes, at once indivisible and separate from her.

The speaker’s eyes enable her to see and respond to the world, but without her (conscious self) having any explicit control over the workings of their vision. She can only see what these eyes allow her to see with their specific biological parameters, and they are “impersonal”—both physical and metaphorical “hardnesses.” Skillman notes in her reading of the poem that, “in their total alienness as objectified organs, the eyes become—in a way that makes Graham bristle—stripped of intention and thus accountability” (2016, 223). Graham relies, as all humans must, on her sense organs and on the brain’s rendering of their data to provide her with her sense of reality. And all of these, too, are “impersonal” workings.

In 2003, Graham joined neuroscientist Antonio Damasio and philosopher Thomas Metzinger for a panel discussion on “Emotion, Cognition, and Consciousness” hosted by National Public Radio. As an eliminative materialist, Metzinger argues that there is no such thing as a “self,” that “what exists are ‘self models’” (2003). That is, what we intuit to be the self is simply and finally the result of specific patterns of neurons firing in the brain and does not correspond to anything that we could call a discrete and unified selfhood. He summarises his position in the discussion:

We are much more processes than things ... and, if we start to think about these issues, it becomes clear that the contribution that, for instance, neuroscience currently makes to our self-understanding has great cultural ramifications too, because we depart from an image of man that has been very dear to us for many centuries. (Metzinger 2003)

This “image of man,” one which believes in the reality of the self as that which distinguishes “human” consciousness and autonomy from the automatic or “animal” processes of life that support it, has had undeniably negative consequences in the past. Violence both between groups of humans and by humans towards other animals has, in part, been due to a belief in a sovereign selfhood and the related belief that these “others” do not have the same refined consciousness and understanding that the aggressing group perceives within themselves. We

can take the “civilising mission” of imperial colonisers as just one example. Or, in the geopolitical context that “Dawn Day One” was written in, “the denigration and exploitation of various groups of people, from Playboy bunnies to prisoners at Abu Ghraib who were treated like dogs as a matter of explicit military policy” (Oliver 2009, 38).

Recognising that all human and nonhuman animal experience has a material basis can lessen a self-aggrandising belief in sovereign selfhood. Cary Wolfe, a posthumanist scholar, argues that a materialist understanding of human being is fundamental to moving beyond outdated notions of human exceptionalism, explaining that “posthumanism in my sense isn’t posthuman at all—in the sense of being ‘after’ our embodiment has been transcended—but is only *posthumanist*, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself” (2010, xv). To see the human as a biological being is to acknowledge the continuity between human and nonhuman animal ways of being: all animal beings sense and respond to the world through material bodies, and these bodies determine what types of experiences and responses can be had. It follows, then, that rather than human consciousness being a phenomenon entirely separate from other animals’ phenomenal experience of the world, we can anticipate—to differing degrees—that these animal subjectivities arise from relatively similar material processes to that of the human.

Severe consequences also follow, however, from dissolving the coherent human self into an assemblage of impersonal material mechanisms, as Graham explains in her response to Metzinger’s comments:

I don’t think that the constructed voice of any poet...is naïve in the sense that it doesn’t know it’s a construction, but it is concerned with creating a system which will allow a person to feel empathy and to undergo accountability. You know, we might not be here, *really*, but we really are killing people.... You could probably prove to me that I’m a creature, a total creature of circumstance, but unfortunately I’m also a creature that has to cast a vote, I’m a person who has to be a mother, I’m a person who has to take care of someone in an emergency.... Maybe we have to have selves and be too simple and naïve because, if we give up on that, there is something horrifying about the degree to which we might slip out from under the mantle of accountability. (Graham 2003)

To believe in biological determinism—that our behaviour is exclusively dependent upon the interactions of our biological systems as “creatures” and our environment—is to potentially

remove a vast amount of responsibility and ownership for those behaviours from the human individual.

Shunning our moral responsibilities in this way can also exert a direct impact on others, including nonhuman animals—particularly if we fail to properly attend to, and imagine, the difference and value of their own subjective being. A commonly exploited consequence of a shared material basis between all animal beings is that we can look to other nonhuman animals to better understand our own sensory systems, brain, and therefore consciousness. For example, using animals as subjects in cognitive science studies in order to learn more about our human bodies (as Graham describes in “Dawn Day One”) is an instance of what Oliver calls “animal pedagogy”; or, “using animals, the animal, and animality to teach us about men, the human, and humanity” (2009, 8). Oliver outlines two alternative views of the human-animal relationship: “metaphysical separationism” and “biological continuism” (8–9). Metaphysical separationism is “the position that humans and animals are fundamentally different types of beings whose similarities are superficial at best or anthropomorphisms at worst” (9). Biological continuism, which better corroborates with the materialist belief at the heart of fields like cognitive sciences and comparative psychology, is “the position that humans and animals are fundamentally the same, that their differences are no more than degrees of the same kinds of things, whether it is consciousness, emotions, pain, or linguistic systems” (8–9). In either case, however, the *livingness* and unique *Umwelt* of the animal itself is secondary to whether it is distinct from (making the human “superior”), or continuous with, the human (and therefore able to be analysed to provide insight into our own biological, emotional, or communicative systems).

One of the ways scientific models mishandle or neglect animal lives is by attempting to create a static image or model of the animal that these scientists can use to analyse and develop new theories. Even if we agree that animal consciousness is dependent upon the material body, this does not mean that this consciousness is stationery and concrete. To take a single snapshot from the ongoing flow of impulses and responses that contribute to life and one’s experience of living is to represent a deadened object, not the living being itself. To live is a process in motion, not a finite, graspable *thing*, and any attempt to create a static representation of life (or the sensation of living) in a single, definite instant falls short of capturing the complex, shifting, and transitive relationality of the whole. What happens instead is that the living body’s actions are made falsely concrete in order to be described and understood. This desire to see objectively is the same desire that Graham describes in her

themselves are material, and the electrochemical processes that cause these cells to fire rely on material structures, but the representation of the cross is not constructed from the cells themselves. It is made of the *action* of those living cells abruptly stopped in what would normally have been the passing of an ephemeral moment within an ongoing stream of further actions. Graham uses scare quotes around the word “instant” to indicate that there are no such moments of absolute stillness in nature; that the truth of consciousness is not in a series of still images extracted through the sacrifice of a living being, but in the action and movement that *is* its living. In the search for an objective understanding of how the human sees the world (through the proxy of the monkey), the value of the animal’s subjectivity (as a monkey, and as that *particular* monkey) is overlooked and, ultimately, destroyed. That the scientists avoid responsibility for this death is indicated by their unsettling euphemism “stilled” that evades a deeper consideration of the reality that they have, in actual fact, killed this monkey.

Moving from this particular study to a wider view of scientific practices, Graham demonstrates how reasoning built upon these snapshot “instances”—the representations and models that provide the scaffolding of science—can become hollow and impotent when they fail to take into account those things which cannot be schematised or quantified due to their invisible or immaterial nature (for example, the subjective self-world of the human and nonhuman animals they study). The search for the material basis of immaterial things, such as life and “the self,” moves deeper and further, subdividing matter into ever more infinitesimal pieces in a process that Graham suggests is a form of maddening “sadness”:

“Therefore” is another way to walk,
 therefore the fast Achilles can never best the slow
 tortoise. Zeno inferred yet another way.
 And yes, now space and time can be subdivided
 infinitely many times. But isn’t this sad?
 By now hasn’t sadness crept in?
 (Graham 2004, 30)

Graham suggests that there is no end point to the probing of the human mind. We can subdivide “space and time...infinitely many times” but all this will lead to is a certain desperation. With this shift in tone from a material-objective reading of the world to an emotional one, Graham also reintroduces emotion as something that is fundamental to our experience of the world but which is typically left out of rational explanations of our consciousness and phenomenal experience of being. Each of our models can only provide an angle or a point of view on their object—an abstracted (and often greatly simplified)

which houses you. Now look at you.
 Are you an entire system of logic and truth?
 Are you a pathway with no body ever really on it?
 Are you shatterable if you took your fist now to
 this face that looks at you as you hold your stare?
 (Graham 2004, 30; ellipsis added)

Zeno's paradox of "The Stadium" posits that movement is impossible. It states that, in order to move from point A to point B, one must first pass through the midpoint between them; and, between the starting position A and this midpoint there will be yet another midpoint; and so on, ad infinitum. On the premise that "there is always another half way point that must be reached before reaching any given half way point," Zeno's paradox argues that, with an infinite number of midpoints to be passed through in a finite period of time, movement should be impossible (Palmer 2017). Graham likens this paradox to scientific methods to suggest that by studying objects at a more and more minute level, and always halving the distance, no movement or discovery can be made: "Zeno reasoned we would / never get there. Reason in fact never gets there" (Graham 2004, 30). She finds a particular equivalence between Zeno's paradox and the study of the mind where each push forward leads deeper into the brain, and to an even more exhaustive description than before—the "smaller and smaller steps"—but which nonetheless remain unable to move beyond "the room" of the brain/mind in which the investigation is taking place.

Graham then returns to the uncanniness of the mind studying itself as the roles of subject and object become blurred, turning again to the sense—vision—that her delighted and troubled engagement with the world is most predicated upon: "you can look *at* your eyes." The mirror provides a representation of the subject, which becomes an object of its own gaze. The "I" becomes an "it" (the eye itself): "you will be looking at *an other*." And this "it" will be "more exactly not-you than any one you've ever seen."

The other "you" mirrored back to the viewer in the context of the poem is multi-layered. At one level, the mirror self is the lyric subject, a composite of the "I" expressing and the "it" of this expression made concrete on the page. The lyric subject has had a long history in human attempts to understand and describe the sensation of being in the world. As such, the mirror of the text offers a poetic object, or "mirror," for contemplating what it is to be a person. This representation of selfhood, however, is not the actual self. On another level, the mirror self is the highly-detailed image of the human that science offers. This reflection tells us a great deal about what we are, but cannot feel, see, or experience anything itself.

Graham therefore cautions against taking this *representation* of life for life itself and against believing its imitation to be a true description of one's actual being and, in the process, mistakenly assuming that the living person is as two-dimensional and "shatterable" as their reflected image.

As Zeno demonstrates, one can build a "system of logic and truth" and still come to an errant conclusion. We can create a representation of self and being that follows established axioms and principles and which still misses the animal *livingness* or the distinct "self-world" of what we study—whether it be that of the monkey or of the human. We can even follow this logic to its "rational" end to find—like Thomas Metzinger, and others like him—that there is no real "self" at all.

All this is not to say that Graham disagrees with a materialist understanding of (human and nonhuman) animal being altogether. In fact, from her collections *Never* (2002b) and *Overlord* (2005; to which "Dawn Day One" would later be added) onward, Graham demonstrates a clear shift from writing the body as a limitation to be suffered towards an acknowledgement of the body as a place of contact with others and the world. In still later collections such as *Sea Change* (2009), *P L A C E* (2012a), and *Fast* (2017), Graham continues to recognise how the body's form necessarily imposes certain limitations on human perception and understanding. However, rather than solely focusing on these constraints, she instead focuses on the body's fundamental role in granting the individual access to the world in the first place.

A person's body—like the form of the lyric speaker's indexical symbol "I"—enables this unique body/"I" to exist, express thoughts, feelings, and ideas, and even change the conditions of their surroundings. Seen from this perspective, the human-animal body no longer *only* represents physical vulnerability and a certain biological determinism, but also allows "embodiment as world-openness" (Bartosch 2017, 46); that is, the realised possibility of being and expressing, of having agency, and being in contact with others. Importantly, the reality of a genuine selfhood is not eliminated by the reality of the body, even if this selfhood does emerge from biological processes. This realisation can also be extended to nonhuman animals—being a "creature" need not be synonymous with instinctual or reflexive behaviours, but can grow to include complex animal subjectivities.

Embracing embodiment and accepting materialism as the basis of sensory, expressive, and agential possibility also means acknowledging the continuity between self and other, and the world at large—what the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty calls "the flesh of the world" (1961). Using vision as an example, it becomes clear that if we are to see we must

also be able to be seen; there is no position external to the materiality of the world from which to objectively observe it.¹⁶ Through embodiment we come into contact and are continuous with that which is beyond us.

Graham gives an interview where she once again defends the reality of the self but, in contrast with her earlier work, also warns against forgetting the irreducible and fundamental role our bodies have in sustaining this self:

I could say I would like to find a way to stay out of the picture—but that is one of those theoretical positions which are interesting as hell but just academic. The truth is, you are the one speaking. You are the one accountable. You are the one making the choices. There is no one else there. You do have a self, your self, no other. You are free to call yourself a “site of intersections,” all you want. No one can deny it. It is also true, in its way. But is it deeply true? Is it morally the most demanding position? I do not think so, and, for me—and I really do not speak for others—it is not useful. You can call your subject position a construct all you want; it feels kind of right, but is it sufficiently demanding, are the pressures it generates enough for a wakeful life? For me, it feels like too much self-accountability is lifted. The problematic self is heavy, it is there in [sic] one’s shoulders, on one’s soul—it is no illusion. It is vertiginous, horrific. It is, as Yeats would have it, one’s dying animal. It always amazes me how suddenly mortal illness wakes people up. Should we wait for tragedy to strike to be suddenly aware of our bodies? And the words that remain (should some remain): they will be your words: they will go under your name. So, you better work hard to show up for your life—whatever work you do—and try to undertake, as Stevens says so beautifully, the act of mind in the process of finding “what will suffice.” (Graham 2010)

Graham no longer implies a separation between the mind of the subject and the form it takes—whether it be the physical body or the first-person pronoun. The problems of the existence of “the self” (and the limits of its animal body) that she grappled with in the earlier stages of her career are unresolved. These issues, she suggests, can never really *be* resolved,

¹⁶ This concept is explained in more depth in Merleau-Ponty’s essay, “Mind and Eye”: “The enigma [of vision] derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen.” (1961).

as the argument for there being no true, unitary self in body or text “is also true, in its way.” However, Graham does assert that this is really only an “academic” position, and that—for the sake of living, and living with others—it must be recognised as insufficient for a moral life. Graham’s point here is complex: we are still separated from a complete union with and knowledge of the wider world by the specific parameters of our human animal bodies (and, in this case, also by the form of the lyric subject position). But these forms are also what grants us our access to the world and our ability to act in it. Rather than despair and entirely reject the reality that these bodily forms give us, Graham argues that we must “show up” for the value and integrity of our lives and selves and take responsibility for our actions in the world. By extension, we must also take heed of the responsibilities and respect we owe to the lives and similarly bound self-worlds of others. As a lyric poet, this stance also requires Graham to acknowledge, and undergo responsibility for, her own subject position in her writing.

To counter cognitive materialism’s and post-structuralism’s dismantling of the self, then, Graham’s mid- to late-career poems “assert an increasingly politicised, coherent, autobiographical lyric subject with a strident, moral point of view” (Skillman 2016, 221). One way Graham creates this strengthened lyric subject is by creating moments of presence, or “wakeful life” for the reader, playing with poetry’s capacity to suspend the reader in a moment of time and place them in their feeling, animal body (Graham 2012b, 39). She describes this as her “act of attention, of showing up for sensation, perception”:

I make sure my body comes into play, that my senses are awake—when I am in the natural world ... The world is there to me because I am an incarnate piece of it. I do not feel I need to “reconnect,” I do not feel the divorce to be real ... There is much control to be gained if one has humans who are cut off from their wellspring: they are endlessly more manipulable ... There is much to be gained as well if one has rendered humans capable of an absence of empathy, and a willingness to look the other way. (Graham 2012b, 39–40)

Graham’s statement indicates a remarkable turnaround from the sense of separation her speaker describes when in the presence of other nonhuman animals in her early career, as when she laments the feeling of being “never wholly *in* creation” (1998, 78). Here, “showing up” for the human-animal body, and for the self, means accepting the self’s profound contingency upon their environment, and the taking up of the responsibility that comes from being an agent in the world who can be acted upon, and who can act upon others. For example, Graham encourages us to take up the responsibility of imagining the subjective experience of the monkey, as a unique living being, rather than simply as an animal subject in

a scientific experiment. Acknowledging one's foundation in materiality (and all the wonders of sensation, thought, emotion, and other experiences it brings to the human subject) means reciprocally respecting the *Umwelten* of other animals whose existence and experiences are also predicated upon access to the world through their bodies.

At the end of "Dawn Day One," the speaker directly addresses the reader:

Here. You are at the beginning of something. At the exact
beginning. OK. This is awakening
number two in here, this poem. Then there are
these: me: you: you *there*. I'm actually staring up at
you, you know, right there, right from the pool of this page.
Don't worry where else I am, I am here. Don't
worry if I'm still alive, you are.

(Graham 2004, 31)

The end of the poem mirrors the start with another awakening into the body, except this time she transfers the onus of this awakening onto the reader. The reader is invoked not only through the second-person pronoun ("you") sounding throughout, but also through the similarly repetitive and rhythmic deictic language that locates ("Here," "you *there*," "right there," "I am here") and which affirms the body and presence of writer and reader in their space and time.

Graham places the reader in themselves "at the beginning of something"; that is, at the beginning of all the actions that they will undertake from that point onward. She insists on her reality, too, at the time of writing. Even if she does not exist beyond that point, she was alive and real at that time, and continues to have agency through the body of her writing and its effect on the reader. In this, she confirms the power and reality of the embodied human animal self. The colons that fill the fourth line suggest some expectation of an answer, or a causal relationship between the components they link together—"Then there are / these: me: you: you *there*." These things—the "you and me" of text and reality—exist each other. These are things—selfhoods—that *are*, and thus can act, and act upon one another. In this line, Graham awakens us both to our ineluctable connection to others (both human and nonhuman) and to the reality of the self—perhaps the two most essential ingredients needed to act ethically in the world.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated Graham's shifting understanding of the role of the human's animal body as the site of experience. She revises her original emphasis on embodiment as a limitation that offers only an imperfect and circumscribed point of view to

instead celebrate the body as a form that enables world-openness and agentic possibility. Throughout this journey, Graham looks to other animal figures—whether they be the salmon, butterfly, or the monkey—to better sense and understand her own animal self. In the following chapter, I will show how Lispector, too, identifies and defines her animal being through animal figures external and internal to the self, and how she also finds a continuity between human and animal being, with entirely different results.

2. Lispector and How to Capture Life “Behind Thought”

Like Graham, Lispector is interested in how to “captar,” or “capture,” the flow and motion of life against the constraints of static human language.¹⁷ However, as Fernanda Negrete notes, this action of “capturing” reads differently in Lispector’s Portuguese texts. In addition to the sense of the English verb “to capture,” the Portuguese verb *captar* also means “to receive,” so that “the gesture in Lispector’s work emphasises receptivity and attunement. Lifewriting here is receiving, in the way a signal is received by antennae” (Negrete 2018, 14). The word suggests a type of language that better allows Lispector to write texts that attend to the reciprocal flow between life and language, or a type of language that might simultaneously capture and tune into the world external to the text.

Again, like Graham, another of Lispector’s key interests is how to represent the “impersonal life” of the human that precedes their sense of individual subjectivity. Two of Lispector’s novels—*The Passion According to G.H.* (2012; *A paixão segundo G.H.*, [1964] 2013) and *Água Viva* ([1973] 1998a; *The Stream of Life*, 1989)—approach the challenge of capturing or transmitting life by choosing to portray the human not as a product of culture, or the narratives we tell about ourselves, but as living animal beings. Lispector’s experiments are among the most striking attempts in literature to write “impersonal life,” crafting characters that seek to express their being from a place of pre-linguistic, pre-formal *livingness* common to all animals, and which exists “behind thought” and, therefore, typically outside of language (Negrete 2018, 7).

Animals are indispensable to how Lispector imagines this primary way of being. For Lispector, animals represent a state of direct contact with what she calls the “*it*”¹⁸ of life without the shaping of experience through language or the narration of human consciousness. In both *The Passion* and *Água Viva*, the central characters look to other animals and plumb their own animality to try to find new expressive possibilities in language. In this respect, Lispector’s work shares common ground with Julia Kristeva’s theory of signification and “the semiotic.”

¹⁷ Lispector’s preoccupation with the act of “captar” is evidenced by her extensive use of the verb throughout *Água Viva*, where it appears twice on the first page alone (1998a, 9).

¹⁸ Lispector uses the English word “*it*” in the original Brazilian Portuguese text as well, the reasons for which I will discuss in my reading of *Água Viva* later in the chapter.

Kristeva's theory of signification proposes a divide in language between a male-coded, rule-based modality called "the symbolic" and a female-coded one called "the semiotic" (Kristeva 1980). The semiotic refers to all the pre-logical, affective aspects of language (such as its rhythm, prosody, and sound) that are inherent to language, but which are "other" to its dominant use as a sense-making tool. Kristeva's ideas on signification are guided by her background in psychoanalysis and her interest in Lacanian concepts of language acquisition and psycho-sexual development in children (Schippers 2011, 26). In Lacan's model, the semiotic mode designates the pre-Oedipal period in a child's life where they are ruled by bodily drives and have yet to develop an identity separate from their mother. The child only enters into the structured symbolic mode—and, through this, the wider world of society and culture that relies on these structures—when they have established an identity separate from their mother, have acquired language, and have internalised a clear distinction between themselves as subjects and the world of external objects.

Lacan saw these developmental stages as chronological, with the symbolic ultimately replacing the semiotic mode. Kristeva, by contrast, theorises that they remain in a constant dialogue, with the semiotic persisting throughout one's life and language as a "subversive force" within the symbolic (Schippers 2011, 26). According to Kristeva, both language and the subject are constantly "in process," and continue to oscillate between the semiotic and symbolic modes. Both modes are critical to language and the construction of a stable subject, and neither can exist without the other: the symbolic allows ideas to be expressed in a communicable form, while the semiotic subverts and enriches this standardised form as it is forced to evolve by the challenge of capturing those extra-linguistic sensations that evade its grasp, preventing the symbolic mode from becoming ossified and inflexible.¹⁹

¹⁹ Judith Butler is a notable sceptic of Kristeva's theory of signification and subjectivisation, asserting that "the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic is hierarchical" and that the male-coded symbolic "assumes a hegemonic role in this relationship that makes it immune to challenge" by the female-coded semiotic (Schippers 2011, 33). Butler concludes that "the semiotic cannot serve as a subversive force, because it is embedded in a symbolic law which inherently tames any challenge to its prohibitions" (33). Another way to read this argument is that Kristeva believes the feminine mode of language to be that which is unformed and undifferentiated; a mode that threatens dissolution and which is unable to assert political or cultural force without taking the form and structure of the masculine

In my reading of Lispector's works, I wish to extend Kristeva's theory of signification so that the semiotic includes the "subversive force" that our own animal being exerts on the rule-bound structures of human expression. By associating the animal part of oneself with the pre-linguistic and so-called "pre-Oedipal" development of language and the self (a stage where bodily sensations and demands dominate one's experience of the world), Lispector draws animality into the realm of the semiotic. And, just as there is antagonism between the symbolic and semiotic modes, there also exists an antagonism between Lispector's desire to write an animal text that transmits a sense of completely unabstracted and directly felt experience of the world and its necessary realisation in human language. It is this tension in particular that I will examine in Lispector's two novels to ascertain how an author might achieve an animal mode of writing in human text. Further, keeping in mind Graham's lessons from the previous chapter about the possible risks of shunning the responsibilities that come from a unified sense of human selfhood, I will explore the moral implications of seeking to relinquish or loosen human structures in favour of "becoming-animal."

Lispector's most explicit writing on the conflict between a "human" symbolic mode and "animal" semiotic mode comes from the opening pages of *The Passion*. She describes a woman—formerly the sculptor G.H., and who may reassemble to be that woman again by the end of the novel—who struggles to account for an unexpected and potentially life-altering mystical experience triggered by an interaction with a cockroach. This highly intense but presently meaningless brush with the "it" of life threatens to dissolve her human persona:

I get so scared when I realise I lost my human form for several hours. I don't know if I'll have another to replace the one I lost....

... But I also don't know what form to give what happened to me. And without giving it a form, nothing can exist for me ... I can only understand what happens to me but things only happen that I understand—what do I know of the rest? the rest didn't exist. Maybe nothing ever existed! Maybe all that happened to me was a slow and great dissolution? And that this is my struggle against that disintegration: trying now to give it a form? A form shapes the chaos, a form gives construction to the amorphous substance—....

symbolic mode—as if male-coded language were the only means to create cogent and effective messages about feminine experience.

... But what do I do now? Should I cling to the whole vision, even if that means having an incomprehensible truth? or do I give a form to the nothing, and that would be my attempt to integrate within me my own disintegration? ...

... since I'll inevitably succumb to the need for form that comes from my terror of remaining undelimited—then I may at least have the courage to let this shape form by itself like a scab that hardens by itself, like the fiery nebula that cools into earth. And may I have the great courage to resist the temptation to invent a form....

... I'm afraid to "make" a meaning, with the same tame madness that till yesterday was my healthy way of fitting into a system. (Lispector 2012, 6–7)

Lispector associates this "amorphous substance" that resists form, but which nonetheless necessitates a form in order to be thought of and expressed, with life itself. This "substance" precedes and is behind or underneath conscious thought, and Lispector suggests it can only be glimpsed in moments of intense feeling when reason and language fail, such as when in a state of ecstasy, beatitude, horror, or disgust.

G.H. encounters this *livingness* through contact with the alien existence of the cockroach, a life form so old and persistent in its primitive appearance that it was "an embarrassment so painful and so frightened and so innocent" (Lispector 2012, 51). The cockroach is an "embarrassment" to G.H. because she is looking at "life looking back" at her in a way that no abstraction of language or reason can deny or disguise (51).

The cockroach, for G.H., represents a being that has only one possible feeling: "the awareness of living, inextricable from its body" (Lispector 2012, 43). Confronted with the cockroach's unconsidered and unmediated state of being, G.H. is placed in the impossible position of attempting to think what it is like to be without thought: to theorise what it is to exist in the world without shaping it through abstraction, expectation, or narrative.

Lispector uses the term *acréscimo* (accretion) throughout *The Passion* to describe the human behaviour of distancing one's self through abstractions from one's own vulnerable state of living. After her contact with the cockroach, G.H. instead seeks to "stop myself from giving a name to the thing," as naming is but "an accretion, and blocks contact with the thing. The name of the thing is an interval for the thing. The desire for the accretion is great—because the naked thing is so tedious" (145). Finding that her former life—one constructed from the superficial "accretions" of society and convention—has prevented her from sensing

her own imperceptible but irreducible *livingness*, G.H. desires to also exist in a cockroach-like state where she avoids attaching superfluous labels, values, or meanings to objects so that she can instead come to terms with her own innate and impersonal “living neutrality” that is colourless, odourless, mute, and insensible, but which predicates all being.

As with Graham’s relationships with her animal figures, G.H.’s relationship with the cockroach begins with looking:

I looked at its mouth: there was the real mouth.

I had never seen a roach’s mouth. I in fact—I had never actually seen a cockroach. I had just been repulsed by its ancient and ever-present existence—but had never actually come face-to-face with one, not even in thought.

(Lispector 2012, 48)

And, once more, as in Graham’s works, this looking is characterised by certain limitations. For example, Irving Goh compares how Lispector describes her human and animal characters’ ways of seeing in the novel to conclude that G.H.’s human sight is in fact a kind of blindness, preconditioned as it is by her expectations: “to live with preconceived ideas . . . is the conditioning of one’s perception of life, of oneself, of others, and of the world. As such, foresight for G.H. is but a simulacrum of vision, a vision that in fact sees nothing” (Goh 2012, 116). On an individual scale, this blindness has limited G.H.’s potential for connection with others—both human (like her maid, Janair) and animal (the cockroach). On a larger scale, this blindness causes insidious failures to witness those who are “other” to the broader, organisational structures of human societies:

In *The Passion*, the path toward living neutrality entails undoing everything that has formed some kind of framework that allowed one to present oneself as a subject of culture, civility, and reason. That framework, which is also the process of “humanisation” according to *The Passion*, has only veiled or blinded humanity from its quintessential condition of living freely:

humanisation has only smothered life with its plethora of moral or ethical codes, blinding one to the bare truth of living freely, while doing little for the progress of human civilisation. (Goh 2012, 115)

Sight and expectation are explicitly bound together in Portuguese. “*Previsão*” (literally “pre-vision”), the word that Goh translates as “foresight,” is translated by Idra Novey in the 2012 edition of *The Passion* as “expectation.” The Portuguese term—which can also be translated as “forecast,” “forethought,” “prediction,” and “outlook”—indicates an

intimate relationship between vision and thought: a type of seeing and thinking that does not singularly exist in the present, but which is always looking back to previous experience in order to make assumptions about what is, or will be, happening now, or in the future. In order to move from this “*previsão*” of “human subjective vision” to what Goh terms a neutral “animal optics” (2012, 129), G.H. must let go of expectation:

My expectations [*previsões*] preconditioned what I would see. They weren’t previsions of a vision: they were already the size of my concerns. My expectations [*previsões*] closed the world to me. (Lispector 2012, 8)

A perspective coloured by expectations, thoughts, and words is one removed from the “*thing*” or “*it*” of life’s objects. The objects become symbolic representations valued more for their human meaning or use—their “accretions”—than their being in the present, something that G.H. realises when she looks around her home of good taste and finds: “The witty elegance of my house comes from everything here being in quotes” (Lispector 2012, 22). “Imitating” a life with a light and enjoyable irony has given G.H. “assurance precisely because that life wasn’t my own: it wasn’t a responsibility of mine” (22). In the face of the living cockroach, however, she is stripped of the cushioning of her human “accretions” and exposed to the state of her bare life.

Goh argues that in order for G.H. to live and see freely she must first reach a state of “‘depersonalisation’ or ‘inexpressiveness’—in effect, the dissolution of subjectivity” (Goh 2012, 116). To achieve this, G.H. must relinquish the anthropomorphising narratives of the eye and mind. Or, to put it another way, she must defamiliarise herself from her automatic and default attitudes towards the things she witnesses in order to see them anew. G.H. seeks to perform this escape from the symbolic mode through an intense imagining of—and, at the climax of the novel, literal attempt to incorporate—the cockroach that she sees as the antithesis of her humanised being.

G.H.’s progress towards “becoming-cockroach” begins with G.H. acknowledging the shared livingness between herself and the insect:

Because I’d looked at the living roach and was discovering inside it the identity of my deepest life. In a difficult demolition, hard and narrow paths were opening within me....

... Because rising to my surface like pus was my truest matter—and with fright and loathing I was feeling that “I-being” was coming from a source far prior to the human source and, with horror, much greater than the human. (Lispector 2012, 51–52)

Moving beyond an acknowledgement of a shared basis in living matter, G.H.'s identification with the cockroach intensifies until she begins to describe herself in cockroach-like terms.

For example:

The cockroach is pure seduction. Cilia, blinking cilia that keep calling. I too, who was slowly reducing myself to whatever in me was irreducible, I too had thousands of blinking cilia, and with my cilia I move forward, I protozoan, pure protein. (Lispector 2012, 54)

And:

I, neutral cockroach body, I with a life that at last doesn't escape me because I finally see it outside of myself—I am the roach, I am my leg, I am my hair—I am every hellish piece of me. (Lispector 2012, 60)

When G.H. finally confesses to eating the paste spurting from the cockroach's split back, she has committed so completely to a fundamental sameness between herself and the creature that the taste of the cockroach becomes the "taste of myself—I was spitting out myself" (Lispector 2012, 175).

G.H.'s journey towards the cockroach has been read by a number of scholars as an example of what Deleuze and Guattari term "Becoming-Animal" (2007). "Becoming," in this case, describes the process of an individual entering into an alliance, often through a work of literature, with some other anomalous agent (real or imagined) that acts as the defining border for the multiplicity of its group or pack; in this particular case, the cockroach represents all cockroaches and G.H. is a representative of all humanity. Importantly, "becoming" does not describe a transition from one state to another, or from one subject (or subjectivity) to another:

Becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal ... the human being does not "really" become an animal any more than the animal "really" becomes something else. *Becoming produces nothing other than itself*. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which what becomes passes. (Deleuze and Guattari 2007, 38; emphasis added)

Deleuze and Guattari thus insist that "becoming" does not change the individual in essence, but only affects the subject to the degree that their own multiplicity is sensed; the human is already animal, already biological, already cellular, already without harsh and definite distinction between individual entity and wider world. Ideally, "becoming" describes a

process that “lacks a subject distinct from itself” (Deleuze and Guattari 2007, 38), and which happens within the space already occupied by the individual.

In the novel, G.H. progresses through her own series of “becomings” or awakenings to experiences beyond her self-contained and pre-conditioned identity. She first comes to apprehend the difference in experience between herself and that of her former maid, Janair, as a poor, black woman in Brazil—a person that G.H. realises she had only ever seen as “an invisible person” (Lispector 2012, 33).²⁰ Next, prompted by the look of the cockroach—“its eyes...looking at me monotonously, the two neutral and fertile ovaries” (90)—G.H. remembers “the saltlessness of the time I was pregnant (90),” filled with “the happy horror of the neutral life that lives and moves” (91), and walked through the streets to think on a decision she had already made—“knowing I’d have the abortion, doctor, I who about children only know and only would know that I was going to have an abortion” (90). She comes to another realisation about her former lover, a man with whom, at the time, she did not recognise as sharing a constant, if imperceptible, togetherness: “It’s that, when we loved, I didn’t know that love was happening much more exactly when the thing we were calling love wasn’t there. The neutral of love, that was what we were living and despising” (122). Finally, of course, there is her coming-to-awareness of the cockroach itself, and, through this, her entering into what she understands to be the invisible, immanent, and divine livingness that extends across all living beings.

It may seem in the above examples that G.H. finds a way to respectfully reach beyond the confines of her own embodiment and subjecthood through an apprehension of these others’ *livingness*. Indeed, in the case of the cockroach, most scholars who have read *The Passion* through the lens of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s “Becoming-Animal” see G.H.’s revelation as a largely positive step towards dismantling human exceptionalism through a post-humanist alignment with an animal other (Braidotti 1994; Ittner 2005, 106; Goh, 2012).²¹

²⁰ See also Levilson C. Reis’s “The Invisible, the Unclean, the Uncanny: The Feminine Black Other in Lispector’s *The Passion According to G.H.*” (2010).

²¹ One notable exception is Goh’s later reading of *The Passion* that worries about the violence perpetuated through G.H.’s act of touch that goes beyond an imaginary alliance with the cockroach to a literal breaching of its bodily limits (Goh 2016).

A key question to ask of G.H.'s "becomings," however, is whether they demonstrate an affective alliance with marginal others in a "fibre of becoming" that collects together "animals, plants, microorganisms, mad particles, a whole galaxy" (Deleuze and Guattari 2007, 47) in eclectic kinship and ethical response-ability, or whether they are instead appropriative identifications that neglect the very real differences between those beings—particularly in the conditions of their embodiment.

G.H.'s relationship with the cockroach marks the disintegration of her human selfhood, and with it the human morality that she associates with the false accretions of human law and the symbolic:

Ah, at least I had already entered the cockroach's nature to the point that I no longer wanted to do anything for it. I was freeing myself from my morality, and that was a catastrophe without crash and without tragedy. ... I no longer wanted to do anything for the roach. I was freeing myself from my morality—though that gave me fear, curiosity and fascination; and much fear. I'm not going to do anything for you, I too creep along the ground. (Lispector 2012, 84–85)

As we saw in the previous chapter, Graham refuses to dissolve the human subject into the material and biological continuum between human and animal for fear of the loss of personal responsibility and moral accountability that this collapsing of the human self would bring about. In the passages above, however, we can see that Lispector's character moves in the opposite direction. G.H. freely relinquishes her subjecthood into this continuum in a gesture of avowedly "neutral" amorality that seeks to level the differences between the categories of "human" and "animal" through an explicit emphasis on their shared existence in life and matter.

G.H.'s actions have made the cockroach's death inevitable, and yet she neither feels remorse nor does anything to help the creature. Her new-found belief in the immanent and interchangeable living neutrality that permeates throughout all beings leads her instead to see this murder as another way of "relating" to the cockroach, a way of "existing the other being" in a profound sense:

The deepest murder: the one that is a way of relating, a way of one being existing the other being, a way of seeing one other and being one other and having one other, murder where there is neither victim nor executioner, but a link of mutual ferocity. (Lispector 2012, 79)

G.H. claims that if the cockroach “were larger than I, with neutral busy pleasure it would kill me. Just as the violent neutral of its life was allowing me, because I was not imprisoned and was larger, to kill it” (84). But, of course, the fact remains that G.H. *is* much more powerful, and has more faculties than the cockroach who, apart from prompting revulsion, is essentially harmless. G.H. attempts to escape her humanity through debasing herself—by operating at an animal level where life kills life, and life eats life, in the cruelly “neutral” way of nature.

However, G.H. has not literally “become-cockroach,” and she can neither “exist” nor kill the cockroach as if she were another insect. G.H. is human, and she remains bound to symbolic thought and language. She tells a story of the cockroach that ultimately suits her needs (even if this “need” is paradoxically to try to overcome dependence on telling stories). The cockroach and its life are not at the centre of this story, which is instead about G.H.’s experience of a corrupted beatitude. The cockroach is entirely dropped from the final pages of the novel where its inexorable death goes unmentioned.

Lispector’s treatment of animality in general is more often attuned to animals’ metaphorical possibilities than their literal being. For example, she often uses the horse, “her favourite totemic figure” (Cixous 1990, 41), to represent an automatic mode of writing that is near-unconscious and free:

Yes, this is life seen by life itself. But suddenly I forget how to capture what happens, I don’t know how to capture what exists except by living here each thing that may come, no matter what it is: I’m almost free of my mistakes. I let the freed horse run wildly. (Lispector 1989, 12)

In *Água Viva*, from which this quotation is taken, there are no animal figures external to the protagonist’s stream of consciousness but numerous animals appear in amongst the flow of her thinking and writing, sometimes identified by species, sometimes not, and often tinged with a certain nostalgia:

I need to feel the *it* of the animals again. It’s been a long time since I’ve come into contact with primitive animal life. ... I tremble all over when I enter into physical contact with animals or with the mere sight of them. Animals fascinate me. They’re the time that one can’t count as it passes by ... An animal never substitutes one thing for another. (Lispector 1989, 38)

Her idyllic view even leads to envy:

I’m the one who is ill from the human condition. I rebel: I don’t want to be a person anymore. Who? who has pity on us who know about life and death,

when an animal I profoundly envy—is unconscious of its condition?

(Lispector 1989, 77)

This is the crucial role that animality plays in these two Lispector novels: animals provide a useful point of comparison through which to understand her characters' human condition. As G.H. states, "inhuman beings, like the cockroach, carry out their own complete cycle without ever erring because they do not choose," whereas it depends on the human individual "to carry out our inevitable destiny"—the destiny of having "the freedom to carry out or not" any of the overwhelming number of ways a person could choose to live her life (Lispector 2012, 129).

Lispector's representation of animality, then, while elucidating a particular view of what it is to be human, flattens all the multiple ways of being animal into a single mode: an automatic, reflexive, and unmediated contact with the "it" of life. Unsurprisingly, this limited definition becomes insupportable if tested against reality. Very little debate continues, for example, about the ability of some animals to "know about life and death" (Lispector 1989, 77) that Lispector's character suggests is solely the curse of the human. Elephants grieve the loss of family members, often staying with the body for days, and will clearly react to, and stop to investigate, the skeletal remains of their own species while ignoring those of others. Other animals, too, including orcas and chimpanzees, show signs of mourning (Safina 2015). To take another of Lispector's statements, there are numerous cases—with research finding new examples all the time—of animals who demonstrate the ability to "substitute one thing for another" (Lispector 1989, 38). For instance, the New Caledonian crow (like some primate, dolphin, and possibly octopus species) is able to use tools to access difficult-to-reach foods. It recognises the potential for a stick or malleable wire to be used for this purpose, thereby "substituting" that stick or wire for a useful implement (Main 2019; McCall 2015). Lispector's representation of animals as having no sense of the passage of time is also undermined by recent research that suggests that the jumping spider *Portia Africana* (despite being from a class of animals that are typically assumed to have few complex mental skills) "possess an abstract working memory," are able to model the future, "plan out intricate detours," and learn from past experiences (Greshko 2016). Even Lispector's example of life at its most primitive and basic, the cockroach, is itself far from simple. The majority of cockroach species are able to recognise members of their own family group and have complex social structures and behaviours—including shared parental care for their young (Costa 2006, 147). Social aggregates of cockroaches appear to make collective decisions about food sources and can even communicate information to one another through chemical

signals (Pennisi 2015). These listed examples of course represent an extremely small sample of the countless and diverse ways of animal being, and one that is still skewed by what is considered valuable from a human perspective.

I do not list these instances of complexity in animal behaviour to suggest that Lispector was ignorant of the difference between the reality of animal lives and the animal lives she represents, or that her statements are to be taken literally; nor do I wish to diminish the important role that animality has, as Lispector uses it, for investigating alternative ways of operating within the subjective, linguistic, and social structures that her characters struggle against. I do think it is worthwhile, however, to consider the implications of flattening animal experience to a single definition, as doing so evidently reinforces a narrative of human exceptionalism—in this case, in an inverted form where “human” traits are seen as a uniquely burdensome limitation rather than an especially good thing. In the case of *The Passion*, in particular, where the novel depicts physical violence against an animal, it is important to consider the consequences of limiting the scope of animal experience.

G.H. explicitly acknowledges a shared quality of *livingness* that exists between herself and the animal in front of her. And yet, while she is able to locate animality within herself, there is no corresponding recognition of the complex way of being in the world that she might consider “intelligent” or “human-like” in the animal. In this sense, despite asserting a continuity between herself and the cockroach, G.H. maintains a strong distinction between what she considers to be “human” and “animal” characteristics. The result of this distinction is that she does not view her own “human” subjectivity and rational thinking as another iteration of being animal, nor that being an animal might allow one to be more than a living object. To achieve a “depersonalised” and “dehumanised” state—and rid herself of the acculturation and ways of thinking that have shaped her life thus far—G.H. seeks to escape through “becoming” a form of life on the abject margins of her society’s concern.

When G.H. eats the cockroach, she performs a break from symbolic law (in addition to her break from structured human sight and language) as she touches and incorporates what Kristeva terms “the abject.” Kristeva’s theory of abjection builds upon the work of Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), which explores the cultural treatment of marginal materials that are either considered dangerous and polluting (and therefore expelled) or, conversely, re-incorporated into society through their transposition into a sacred object. Kristeva (1982) defines “the abject” as that which is neither subject nor object—for example, those things which come from the body but which are no longer attached to it, such as hair, or blood, spit, and other excrement. These marginal

materials occupy a liminal space and therefore, Kristeva argues, fill a person with horror and disgust for their transgression of a clean division between self and other. When G.H. eats the cockroach, she also enters into this liminal and disorganised space, and, in doing so, vehemently violates to which she belongs, both religious:

—the law commands us to keep only what is disguisedly alive. And the law commands that, whoever eats of the unclean, must do so unawares. Since whoever eats of the unclean knowing that it is unclean—will also know that the unclean is not unclean. Is that it?

“And everything that crawls and has wings shall be impure and not be eaten.” (Lispector 2012, 70)

And cultural:

All that time I hadn't wanted to think what I had already thought: that the roach is edible as a lobster, the roach is a crustacean. (Lispector 2012, 116)

G.H.'s passion, a gruesome parody of the Eucharist, represents a desire to overcome the structures of her humanity by overcoming the imperative of her revulsion. Lispector defamiliarises and recontextualises an act of devotion—the socialised rite of eating and drinking of the body and blood of Jesus Christ—to expose its abject nature, and to invert it, so that a reviled creature comes to embody the divine; in this case, divine because it symbolises a direct embodiment of and contact with the “*it*” of life.

To become-animal/abject may facilitate “the possibility to create an adjacent space where life is free(d) from the capture of striating State politics” (Goh 2009, 55) and other laws—whether they be the structures of thought and language, or the “foresight”/“expectations” that frame one’s interactions with the world. Wilfully occupying a subterranean and abject space may also offer a certain attraction as an alternative to dominant (and sometimes inflexible and prejudiced) modes of thinking and being. Choosing to occupy this abject space, however, risks curtailing one’s ability to be a cogent political subject. In this, I see a parallel between the impotency of the semiotic mode (in which individuals are unable to form language or a subjectivity, and are therefore barred from participating in culture and advocating for their rights) and the impotency of an individual who “becomes-animal”—strictly in those cases where the individual thinks of animal being as an existence ruled by innate drives, and one without the ability for abstract thought or empathy.

“Becoming-animal” in this exaggerated case—where an individual risks their sense of self in order to express their inherent “animality”—can become a project which is not only “inhuman” but also “*inhumane*” (Malay 2018, 136; original emphasis). As Graham warns,

shirking one's selfhood invokes the collateral loss of one's ability to reason, apprehend differences, and respond ethically—attributes that are positive, and which can also (in addition to the more repressive strictures that Lispector's characters rail against) be incorporated into the concrete structures of moral codes and law over time. Further, to believe that this “animal mode” reflects a true state of animality denies complex animal individuals their own moral subjecthood as beings that are capable of a sense of fairness, and who can feel distress at others' suffering and seek to alleviate this suffering in ways that do not directly benefit the self, for just a couple of examples.²²

Again, I do not intend to argue against Lispector's attempts to find some way to represent animal *livingness* in text, or even against the possibility of using the animality inherent in one's human self as a possible avenue for exploring new ways to write within, or edit, symbolic structures. What is important to acknowledge, however, is that while this play is happening one remains a human animal throughout. Literary events of “becoming-animal” always happen within the context of a human body—a human body that has a certain experience of the world and certain means to express this experience. Lispector does tacitly acknowledge this context of the human body and its modes of expression by writing her great work of “unpronounceable” meanings and animal being in human symbolic language. In doing so, she recognises the unavoidable need for abstract forms and structures if we are to express anything at all. If, however, a person does disregard their humanity, which persists—as Deleuze and Guattari stress—through any “becoming,” and truly believes that they are able to embody or claim the experience of another, this play can have very real, very destructive consequences. It must be an imagining that recognises the grounds and embodiment of its own condition, and respects the differences of others.

At the end of *The Passion*, G.H. comes to the same realisation:

No. I did not need to have had the courage to eat the paste of the roach. Since I lacked the humility of the saints: I had given to the act of eating it a meaning of “maximum.” But life is divided into qualities and kinds, and the law is that the roach shall only be loved and eaten by another roach; and that a woman, in the hour of love for a man, that woman is living her own kind. I understood

²² See “Animal Morality: What It Means and Why It Matters” (2018) by Susana Monsó, Judith Benz-Schwarzburg, and Annika Bremhorst for a broader exploration of the harm caused by denying animal subjects the opportunity to express their moral capabilities.

that I had already done the equivalent of living the paste of the roach—for the law is that I must live with the matter of a person and not of a roach.

(Lispector 2012, 178)

In this passage, G.H. accepts that she does not have to fully comprehend or occupy the space of an other in order to apprehend and respect their difference. She acknowledges, too, that it was she who assigned the cockroach a meaning, and that the cockroach itself did not act in any particular way to trigger her defamiliarising experience. Finally, there is the distinctly human frame that Lispector places over the entire text to demonstrate that the novel represents only one individual human's point of view—this is, after all, the passion “*according to*” (*segundo*) G.H, and it is thus informed and limited by the same understandings and biases as its principal character.

Like *The Passion*, Lispector's later novel *Água Viva* also seeks to unsettle and energise a human symbolic mode through the subversive presence of an animal semiotic. While there are no explicit animal characters in *Água Viva* for the protagonist to define her identity through and against, the novel is inhabited by a number of animal figures that represent an animal *livingness* inherent in the self. In this novel, Lispector also focuses on the sensory aspects of being a human animal—a focus that is reflected by the work's deeper consideration of, and play with, the material and sensory aspects of language. By moving through animal figures as a first step towards an unabstracted animal semiotic mode, Lispector pushes her writing to even bolder attempts at creating a language to capture/receive (*captar*) the sense of one's own living. Paradoxically, this writing that seeks to occupy and transmit an immediate and felt animal mode is perhaps her most conceptual piece.

Animals and animality are central to how Lispector's author-character imagines a semiotic mode that occurs “behind thought” and in the “now-instant.”²³ And, as we have already seen in *The Passion*, Lispector's texts tend to represent a somewhat limited view of animals (as those beings that embody the “*it*” of life) in ways that often have more to do with her specific aims in writing than a desire to portray the diverse self-worlds of animals. This remains true for *Água Viva*. In the novel, the animal figures act as objects through which to imagine or suggest an alternative mode of living to contrast human structures of subjecthood, thought, and language. Drawing on the metaphorical possibilities that the difference of the animal offers—and which language cannot fully grasp—Lispector creates a text energised by

²³ *Água Viva* is written from the first-person perspective of a narrating character, figured as the author, who describes her intentions and the act of writing the novel within the text itself.

the potential of an animal semiotic mode that intimates to readers, without having to seize it in certain terms, the “unpronounceable” presence of life itself.

We can see this function of animals in Lispector’s novel by starting with its title. *Água Viva* carries a number of meanings. It literally translates as “living water,” but can also mean “jelly fish” (Negrete 2018, 65). The jelly fish becomes an emblem of what Lispector attempts to achieve in this novel: she seeks to create in language a transparent, ungraspable being that represents a unabstracted embodiment of the “it” of life, nearly indivisible from the greater body of water—or “*água vivas*” (which can also mean “high ocean tides”)—that surrounds it (Negrete 2018, 65). In the body of the text, this role is played by the similarly slippery and aqueous oyster: “The transcendent in me is the living, soft ‘it,’ and it has the thoughts an oyster has” (1989, 22) (“*A transcendência dentro de mim é o ‘it’ vivo e mole e tem o pensament que uma ostra tem*”; Lispector 1998a, 30). Here, and throughout the original text, Lispector chooses to use the English word “it” when referring to the transcendent *livingness* that encompasses and extends to all species. Using the English enables Lispector to defamiliarise her Portuguese-speaking readers, to cause them pause, and to draw their attention to the word. Further, using English here enables Lispector to avoid the gendered pronouns for “it” (*ele/ela*) of her native Portuguese, and to suggest that the “impersonal life” that her protagonist seeks to capture/transmit here precedes the individualised, gendered subject. This choice perhaps suggests another failure by Lispector (or her character) to fully realise the subjecthood of animals. While her narrator may conflate animal being with a mode of undifferentiated and “impersonal life,” animals are typically not neuter but have sexually defined bodies that can affect their subjective experiences and engagement with the world and its others.

Lispector is particularly interested in “primitive” life forms that embody to her the most unmediated state of present-tense *livingness* that she feels as an echo within herself. We can see this, for example, when her character describes a cave scene that she has painted:

I see black, hairy spiders. Rats and mice run frightened on the ground and along the walls. Among the stones the scorpion. Crabs, unchanged since prehistoric times, through countless births and deaths, would seem threatening beasts if they were human-sized. Ancient cockroaches drag themselves along in the half light. And all this am I. (Lispector 1989, 9)

Aside from becoming representations for that which is living in the self, animals also become symbols of Lispector’s writing, including her aforementioned favourite totem of the horse, or

when her character describes her work as that of “the diligent spider,” who does her best “when I know nothing and manufacture I don’t know what” (1989, 55).

The relationship Lispector’s narrator creates between her writing and the animal body is even more evident in the passages where she refers to her work as the labour of birth, or of being born. In these instances, the mother cat becomes the figure for her process. Throughout the novel there are references to giving birth, the eating of the placenta, and the giving of milk as a parallel to the process of giving and sustaining life through her writing practice:

I’m not objectifying anything: I’m in true birth-labour with the *it*. I feel dizzy like someone who’s going to be born.

To be born: I’ve seen a cat giving birth. The kitten comes out enclosed in a water sac and all shrivelled inside. The mother licks the water sac so many times that it finally breaks and then, behold, an almost-free cat, held only by the umbilical cord. Then the cat-mother-creator breaks the cord with her teeth and one more fact appears in the world. This process is *it*. I’m not joking. I’m serious. Because I’m free. I’m so simple.

I’m giving you freedom. First, I break the water sac. Then, I cut your umbilical cord. And you are alive, on your own.

And when I’m born I’m free. That’s the root of my tragedy.

No. It isn’t easy. But *it is*. I ate my own placenta so I wouldn’t have to eat for four days. To have milk to give you. The milk is a *this*. (Lispector 1989, 26)

Lispector’s text emulates a life-producing and nourishing “living water” that is created in order to give presence to another fact in the world, another “*it*.” And this “*it*” is given to the reader as a bringing to awareness of their own fact of being, their own livingness. The text encloses everyone (eliding the differences between the body of the watcher, the performer, the giver, and the receiver) and everything in its “watery sac” (“*saco de água*”; Lispector 1998a, 35), suggesting a profound connection between all beings that is the “*ê*” (“*is*”), or “*it*,” or “*isto*” (“*this*”) of life. However, against this interconnectedness there is the discrete fact of the individual’s being—the “tragedy”—that marks each person as a separate agent who must rely on the tools of thought and representation in order to create/understand their world and their place in it. The animal figures in *Água Viva* are thus not intended as close portraits of animal life *per se*. They are, instead, an indispensable index through which we can apprehend the imperceptible “*it*” of life that is “other” to conscious human thought and symbolic language.

Moving beyond explicit animal figures as an index of the “*it*” of life, Lispector is able to make further, more daring attempts to channel the “behind thought” and present tense “now-instant” of life that they help her to conceptualise. One of the ways she tries to draw readers’ attention to their own state of living is by focusing on the pre-logical, *felt* experience of being a human animal. In the context of language and writing, this means attending specifically to the sound, shape, rhythm, and materiality of language. The protagonist often describes the intent of her writing practice in this way:

And so I realise that I want for myself the vibrant substratum of the word repeated in a Gregorian chant. I’m aware that everything I know I cannot say, I know only by painting or pronouncing syllables blind of meaning. And if I here have to use words for you, they must create an almost exclusively bodily meaning. I’m battling with the ultimate vibration. To tell you my substratum I make a sentence of words composed only of the now-instants. (Lispector 1989, 5)

Lispector’s character here describes her writing as a work created by and for the sensing human animal body. It is intended to stimulate or evoke an emotional or sensory meaning without declarative sense. She explains this as “a way of expressing silence,” but with words, so that one becomes aware of their livingness through a mindfulness of one’s present being in response to the text (1989, 37). Ultimately, what Lispector’s protagonist desires is a form of writing that is “not a message of ideas but rather an instinctive voluptuousness of what is hidden in nature and that I sense”; a “feast of words” that she writes “in signs that are more gesture than voice” (16). Of course, the narrator’s statements about her writing—where signs are intended more as shapes and gestures than meaningful symbols—contradict themselves. In explaining to her reader how she would like them to approach her text, she is giving explicit instructions that rely on language’s ability to signify meaning in the symbolic mode.

By declaring her ambitions in writing *Água Viva* so clearly, Lispector’s character presents a difficult challenge for the critical reader of her work. If we are to take the protagonist’s description of her writing as an instruction on how to read the text, it becomes obvious that to perform a close reading of the novel would be inappropriate:

The text that I’m giving you is not to be looked at up close: it takes on its secret, previously invisible totality only when it is seen from a high-flying airplane. Then it’s possible to discern the interplay of islands, see canals and lakes. Understand me: I’m writing you an onomatopoeia, a convulsion of

language. I'm transmitting to you not a story but only words which live off sound. (Lispector 1989, 19)

If we take heed of this passage, it is apparent that placing any one section of *Água Viva* under detailed analysis would be to disregard the stated ethos of the text. How, then, do we read this book which states that its words are nothing more than a “gesture” (16), a “simile” (13), or “bait” to “hook” their elusive sentiments, after which they can be discarded (14)? Perhaps what is required for such a text that privileges a sensory and embodied animal semiotic mode is a similarly semiotic mode of reading. This provides at least a partial solution to the conundrum of how to read *Água Viva*, and, in a sense, a mirror of it, for such a reading likewise falls short of finding a way to communicate details about the novel's semiotic expression without itself relying on symbolic language.

A semiotic mode of reading would, like the semiotic mode of signification, attend to the non-denotative aspects of language, and the reciprocal nature of the affecting/affectedness relationship between reader and text. It would expect heterogeneity, or a diversity of readings across different embodied, temporal, and cultural contexts.²⁴ And it would also pay heed to those “shimmers” of thought, emotion, or sensation that occur adjacent to our experience of language, without neglecting the necessary role of material text in creating the space for these indefinite sensations.²⁵

²⁴ Kristeva's theory of signification draws extensively on Russian formalism, especially the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, which she uses to argue against “structuralist formalism and rationalist, disembodied linguistics” (Schippers 2011, 24). She chooses to focus instead on a “poetic language” that favours a mode of reading that attends to “the materiality and sound of language,” its rhythm and musicality, and its “heterogeneity” as a language that is “in the margins of the symbolic” (27).

²⁵ Refer also to Lisa Samuels's “soft text” for another term for those more- or less-defined stirrings and sensations that arise alongside thought, speech, and text, but which are not actually signified in the hard text itself: “Soft text is potential text arising within language users in our interactions with ourselves, permeant surfaces, other persons, and object-events of living. It's the text that silently formulates or never quite materialises in invisible relation to speaking, publishing, or other hard text form. Soft text is the invisible textuality of potential language: language that stays within the mind. You imagine an utterance but you don't say it, or soft text is what is left out of what you do say” (2018). The term “shimmers”

A semiotic mode of reading therefore recognises, as G.H. asserts in *The Passion*, that the “inexpressible” is perhaps best apprehended through an appreciation for the materiality (rather than its received or abstracted meaning) of a medium, which suggests its presence and gives it form:

When art is good it is because it has touched upon the inexpressive, the worst art is expressive, that art which transgresses the piece of iron and the piece of glass, and the smile, and the scream. (Lispector 2012, 149)

We can begin our animal semiotic reading of Lispector’s text by attending to its rhythm. One of the most immediate ways that she suggests the processual and transitory happenings of living is by making the ceaselessly repeating pulse of *Água Viva* not a phrase or concrete noun, but a verb: “*é*” (“*is*”). As her protagonist explains: “But the most important word in the Portuguese language has but a single letter, ‘*é*,’ ‘*is*’” (1989, 19) (“*Mas a palavra mais importante da língua tem uma única letra: é. É*” [1998a, 28]). On nearly every page in Lispector’s short novel there is a sentence in which the emphasis is placed, not upon the content words that carry the meaning of its statement, but instead upon the italicised “*is*” that asserts those objects’ being in the ephemeral now-instant in which the woman describes them. Her character states:

Let me tell you . . . I’m trying to capture the fourth dimension of the now-instant, which is so fleeting it no longer is because it has already become a new now-instant, which also is no longer. Each thing has an instant in which it is. I want to take possession of the thing’s *is*.

(Lispector 1989, 3)

A semiotic reading focusses on the *is*-ness of the language—its being, which, like the verb “*é*” itself, does not convey any information more than its existence, as a form with a sound, a shape, and a moment in time. This, the narrator imagines, is similar to an animal mode that does not replace objects with their abstract labels or universal meanings, and instead relies on its immediate, felt, embodied, and sensory experience.

for those things “beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious thought” comes from Melissa Gregg’s and Gregry J. Seigworth’s introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010, 1).

We are encouraged to read the writing as an absent-minded “onomatopoeia” of language that luxuriates in its own sound and the ricocheting associations these sounds stimulate. For example:

I’m transmitting to you not a story but only words which live off sound. Thus,

I say to you:

“Exuberant trunk.”

And I bath in it. (Lispector 1989a, 19)

Or:

But now I feel like saying things that comfort me and that are somewhat free.

For example: Thursday is a day as transparent as the wings of an insect in the light. Just as Monday is a compact day. Deep down, well behind thought, I live off these ideas, if they are ideas. They’re sensations that transform themselves into ideas because I have to use words. (Lispector 1989, 76)

Lispector also makes a point of using the material aspects of language that do not refer to explicit objects but which still guide our sensation of reading: punctuation. Colons represent her most conspicuous use of unorthodox punctuation in *Água Viva*.²⁶ As Cixous notes:

The text is strewn with colons. There are also dashes. What is the use of the colon? What is a colon? Generally, it opens onto an explanation, but it is always done with the help of an interruption. The colon is not a period; it is the period of the period, what cancels the period, *a moment both mute and marked*; it is the most delicate tattoo of the text. (1990, 20-21; emphasis added)

The colon creates anticipation in the reader for a resolution of suspended meaning. As we encounter the colon, we pass through a temporary state of pause—“a moment mute and marked”—where we are delayed for an instant by a sign that indicates the postponement/promise of meaning. The novel as a whole creates a sense of suspended

²⁶ As we saw at the end of the last chapter, Jorie Graham also uses colons in unusual ways, particularly in her later volumes. In these poems, the colons are used to string text together—for example, “night air: look: it is a law: the air” (“Philosopher’s Stone” 2002b, 8)—so that multiple viewpoints are able to be represented at once, and also to create a sense of causal relationships or interdependencies between the objects and actions in the poem.

meaning as a novel that implies that it has no start or finish, and has no discernible plot. This state, the narrator suggests, is the state of being alive in one's own animal body—with all that preceded birth being the clause before the colon, and death as the resolution that awaits one ahead:

To such an extent is death only a future event that there are those who can't stand it and commit suicide. It's as if life said the following: and there simply wasn't any following. Only the colon, waiting. We keep this secret in muteness to hide the fact that every instant is fatal. (Lispector 1989, 70)

The colon's "state of pause" is repeated over and over again with every passing "now-instant" that Lispector marks with its "delicate tattoo." Lispector's colon both places emphasis on, and holds language in, a state of semiotic potentiality until the rest of the sentence passes into a logical, symbolic rendering on the other side of its pause (in those cases where it does). And this state of pause is also a state of "is," in the sense that A:B (i.e. A "is," or is "equal/related to," B). As such, Lispector uses this state of pause to describe her protagonist's passing moments of awareness of her own embodied, animal livingness (her "is") that is the fragile and simple predicate of her being in the world. Thus, she suggests that the reality of human-animal living is a series of unfolding moments of fluid potentiality that represent a constant state of present-tense "is."

Another important feature in an animal semiotic reading of *Água Viva* is Lispector's repetition of certain key phrases throughout the text, such that the novel's structure mimics a pulsing, cyclical, and organic form. This repetition enacts one of the main motifs of the novel, the pulsing vein, to create a "living text": "I may not have a sense, but it's the very lack of sense that a pulsing vein has" (Lispector 1989, 8). The protagonist's desire for a "living text" here aligns again with what she perceives in the animal: a state of "it" or "is" that does not rely on abstractions that signify anything beyond its being and presence.

In addition to the main heartbeat of the novel—the repeated verb "is"—other phrases throb throughout *Água Viva* in constantly permutating iterations, but which appear more than once with the following wording: "*esta é a vida vista pela vida*" (1998a, 14; 19) ("this is life seen by life"; 1989, 8; 12), "*dos instantes-jà*" (1998a, 9; 11; 16; 17; 43; 69; 74; 93) ("the now-instant; 1989, 3; 5; 9; 10; 33; 56; 61; 74), and "*atrás do pensamento*" (1998a, 29; 33; 42; 47; 65; 68; 71; 92) ("behind thought"; 1989, 21; 32; 34; 37; 53; 58; 71; 76). Through repeating these phrases a great number of times, Lispector again draws focus away from the denotative meanings of the words and directs it instead to the sound and shape of the language—particularly in the case of the lilting and near palindromic "*esta é a vida vista pela*

vida” (“this is life seen by life”)—to create a sense of an incantation or chant. The meaning of these phrases that beat throughout the body of the text is also important, however, as they emphasise a key theme in her writing. Lispector strives to capture the “*it*” of life, as a living animal herself, in the instant of its passing, and in a way that attempts to limit its abstraction into symbolic language—something that she sees as a regrettable humanising of what would otherwise be an immediate and unmitigated animal mode of contact with reality.

Finally in our semiotic reading of the text, and in a very similar practice to Graham’s acts of adynaton, Lispector emphasises the materiality of her text over its declarative meaning by using indefinite pronouns and, in *Água Viva*, the algebraic substitution of the letter “X” for those things that elude her character’s symbolic rendering. We have already looked at how Lispector uses the third-person singular pronoun “*it*” to describe impersonal animal life in a way that avoids referring to the given individual’s perspective and selfhood. Lispector uses “*it*” to designate the other side of the narrating subject’s encounter with something within themselves, something which is the very condition of their being, but which they cannot consciously access—their animal livingness. In Lispector’s earlier novel, *The Passion*, this interaction between the conscious self and the “*it*” that exists “behind thought” takes place between two distinct entities—one human and one animal—but the encounter leads G.H. to the same meditation on the difference between being conscious and being alive that we find in *Água Viva*:

Until now I had called life my sensitivity to life. But being alive is something else.

Being alive is a coarse radiating indifference. Being alive is unattainable by the finest sensitivity. Being alive is inhuman—the deepest meditation is so empty that a smile exhales as from a matter. (Lispector 2012, 181)

This amorphous and “unpronounceable” condition of being (designated elsewhere by “*it*” or “*this*”) at the core of *Água Viva* is also represented by the letter “X”:

“X” is what exists within me. “X”—I bathe myself in that this. It’s unpronounceable. Everything I know is in “X.” Death? death is “X.” But a lot of life, too, for life is unpronounceable. ... The unpronounceable instant. It would take a different sensibility to comprehend “X.” (Lispector 1989, 65)

What “X” refers to may be “unpronounceable,” but it relies on the material body, and can only be gestured to through material text. As such, “X” is the neutral *livingness* which is an

invisible presence within, behind, or alongside the body and text, but which cannot exist without it:

“X” is neither good nor bad. It always depends. But it only happens for what has a body. Although immaterial, it needs our body and the body of the thing. (Lispector 1989, 65)

In *Água Viva*, the narrator suggests that while we might be able to see the living body and pronounce the symbolic word, this is not the same thing as seeing the life of that body or speaking the reality that the word refers to:

Is “X” a word? The word only refers to a thing and that is something I can never reach. Each one of us is a symbol dealing with symbols—everything is a point of mere reference to the real. We seek desperately to find a proper identity and the identity of the real. And if we understand each other through the symbol it’s because we have the same symbols and experience of the thing itself: but reality has no synonyms. (Lispector 1989, 66)

These statements have an echo of von Uexküll’s theory of *Umwelten*: what we perceive of reality (and the visible bodies of those we interact with) is only what is made available to us through our own body and its attendant perceptual cues, and we can only deduce a shared reality between individuals (both human and nonhuman) where those perceptual cues overlap. Lispector’s protagonist goes further in her statements, however, to claim that our human subjective experience is twice removed from reality because we cover it with symbolic meanings that can provide only a secondary “point of mere reference to the real.” Lispector tries, then, inasmuch as it is possible, to use language in what is for her an animal semiotic mode: to gesture towards something that is *felt* rather than understood. In doing so, she aims to create a text that might help us become aware of our own embodied animality, which precedes, and continues to act upon, the human symbolic.

In both *The Passion* and *Água Viva*, Lispector uses animality as a subversive semiotic force that challenges the human symbolic mode as it attempts to capture/transmit the inexpressive “*it*” of life itself. However, while Lispector suggests that all beings, animal and human, are connected through this transcendent “*it*” of life, her attention is mostly focused on how this *livingness* presents as something “animal” and “impersonal” within the human. She gives very little thought to how to reciprocally recognise the diverse subjectivities of animal others. As such, Lispector’s novels that interrogate what it is to be a human animal—without considering the many ways of being a nonhuman animal—are unable to make any meaningful steps towards overcoming the human-animal binary. Through using animal

figures as an index of “impersonal life,” Lispector does, however, find a highly inventive way to imagine an alternative to “human” modes of selfhood, thinking, and expression, and, in doing so, demonstrates an exceptional ability to find flexibility within the structures of symbolic language.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined, through examples of work by Clarice Lispector and Jorie Graham, how writers can expose, complicate, and elaborate on the human-animal divide to explore its effect on our relations with nonhuman animal others, and, indeed, on how we view the human. Each of the texts I have analysed has offered a slightly different, always partial answer to how writers can modulate this divide through writing. Whether the binary is approached through attempts to describe the phenomenal worlds of animals in human language, or through attempts to re-conceive of one's own human self as an animal being, Lispector's and Graham's investigations demonstrate that any attempt to overcome or define the division between human and animal ways of being is ultimately frustrated by the diffuse and many-layered abyss that separates the two.

For authors, like Lispector and Graham, who choose to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of deeply considering the unknowable lives of animal others, and, who, in turn, investigate their own animal being, the results of their labour are often highly innovative texts that can stimulate new ways of thinking about both human and nonhuman animals.

In the first movement of this thesis, I demonstrated how Lispector and Graham reveal, through their self-reflexive and philosophical texts, some of the difficulties that writers encounter when attempting to describe animals, as well as the pressure these difficulties have exerted on their works. Often animal representation seems to present an ultimatum: the author must choose between representing their animal figures as completely “other” to human thought and language that fails to contain them, or choose to elide the differences between human and animal experiences through domesticating anthropomorphism. In reading Lispector and Graham, I argued that, while both authors have produced work that could be placed at either of these poles, they developed new ways to temper this uncompromising situation through a sophisticated and critical use of the textual strategies of adynaton, defamiliarisation, and anthropomorphism.

In the second movement of this thesis, I demonstrated how both authors again use defamiliarisation to not only imagine the alterity of nonhuman animal experiences, but also to draw attention to, and thoroughly reconsider, the human as contingent on animal being. This exploration revealed a tension between Graham's perceived moral necessity to retain a sense of a unified human self that is responsible for their actions in the world and Lispector's project to dissolve human subjectivity in order to find new avenues for expressing one's own living animality against the structures of human symbolic order.

The question of how we can better apprehend or represent animal lives and their relation to our human selves is one that will likely extend as far into our future as it does into our past (that is, of course, only if we make drastic improvements in our efforts at this critical time to protect and share our planet with its manifold animal species). It is entirely possible that we may never do any better than imagine the lives of animals beyond the human. But this work of the imagination is both necessary and productive. Imagining animal lives in text offers an opportunity to better attend to, and perhaps foster feelings of responsibility towards, animal beings and subjectivities. It also offers a space to better consider our own human being as intimately dependent upon our own (and other) animal lives and bodies. There has never been a period of time where this work was more necessary both to protect the diverse self-worlds of fast disappearing animal species, and to realise the reliance of our human cultures and ways of being on the material world and on those other animal beings who live in it. Animal-centric texts help us to do both of these things. And, while we may not be able to dissolve, remove, or dismantle the human-animal divide and reach into the self-worlds of animal others, literature can enrich and diversify our ideas of the categories that lie on either side of it and help us towards a more mindful consideration of our interactions with other creatures, human and animal.

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