

## Johanna and cats – Queer encounters of a human care

### The autobiographical subject

To celebrate Johanna Laakso's scholarly achievements, I'd like to talk about values (marked for plural intentionally) in relation to gender(ing) and cats. They may seem like odd associates at first sight. Indeed, both have their own set of values to tell them apart, but in my reading, once seen as of equal appreciation, they may challenge the multiple hegemonic ideologies that compete with one another in their shared aim to devalue womanhood.

That Johanna is a natural lover of cats, or rather, that she cares in the queer sense of the term for their equally unique subjectivity, I could learn when teaching in the English and American Studies and Finno-Ugric Studies Departments as the Käthe Leichter Visiting Professor at the University of Vienna in 2013. She generously rushed to my rescue and offered to act as 'foster parent' for my Russian Blue, Juci, whom I was forbidden to cohabit with under the same roof in my university apartment. So, I situate the article in my autobiographical trajectory that makes Johanna and Juci's friendship of equal value with that of my and Juci's co-existence for nearly eighteen years. We could argue from a queer post-humanism perspective that Johanna's decision to invite Juci to live with her was an act challenging the university housing administration's anthropocentric law which clearly saw Juci as expendable because in their judgement she was of no or not sufficient use for my 'human entertainment' and so she was at best some inevitable collateral damage that was worth inflicting upon me for sustaining their 'no pets' regulation. In agreement with Valerie Walkerdine, for whom research and the questions one asks are inevitably positioned, centring on the question of "how [one's] subjectivity is lived, both in relation to historicity and materiality" (Walkerdine 1995, 285), I am writing an autobiographical piece now. The acknowledgement of locatedness allows me to conceptualize a non-

unitary, non-rationalist ahuman subjectivity held together through multiple dimensions of social life, at the intersection of diverse life forms – this time at the intersection of cats and human beings, within a queer post-humanist framework. It is our shared love and care for cats that inspired my thoughts below. In line with Walkerdine's observation, dear Johanna, please accept this article as my imaginary academic salute for old times' sake.

## Relationality beyond anthropomorphism

The common sense understanding that sees cats 'selfish' and so of lesser intellect than dogs 'devoted' to their 'human owner' in our Euro-American culture is informed by the same logic that routinely tries to put woman back 'in her place of self-sacrifice' for the 'career' of their male partners. How do women and cats, two apparently very distinct categories, come to be linked with one another? Their mediated link emerges in a hierarchical taxonomy of beings as the effect of the workings of a fractal logic of binary distinctions. According to Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000, 41), the nested patterns are rendered into a matrix of immediate constituency in a system made up of hierarchical levels as long as the actual principle of categorization remains the same. As a result, the very principle begins to function as the common-sense value to be deployed in the process and will 'naturally' sustain the given social order. What is more, at any historical moment, these distinctions are multiple and are linked across multiple chains of nesting binaries. Cats come to be gendered as feminine by the prioritization of reason through several steps. Reason is coupled with 'the human species' over animals, however, at the same time, this reason is further deployed in the binary distinction within the category of human beings into man against and over woman through the association of reason with masculinity, associating femininity with its 'opposition', namely sensibility, affect, emotions; the names may vary from cultural model to cultural model, but the ultimate value of 'reason' is sustained. According to the rule of nesting, this value of the intellect is applied within the category of non-human and comes to be 'naturally' associated with the dog, the 'companion of man' at the expense of the cat, who is 'known' to be untrainable due to the alleged lack of this capacity.

Gendering the cat as ‘untrainable’ can link her with the ‘unruly woman’. The cat is made the nonhuman other in a twofold way. The nested divides of the fractal logic on one hand dehumanize the cat (and the dog) when perpetuating the ideology of anthropocentrism through the value of ‘intellect’ but only to apply, at the same time, the principle of gender as ‘untrainable, moody’, making the cat ‘feminine’ vis-à-vis the ‘intelligent’ dog through sustaining the ideology of heteropatriarchy. As a further twist to this logic, the sexing of the dog and cat, in turn, can be appealed to as an undeniable ‘truth’ of the ‘two sexes’ determined by nature in a relationship of complementarity. I take issue with this practice of binary categorization because it comes down to the naturalization of a systemically organized privilege of entitlement to reason in various institutions of social life. I hold up, instead, the model of relative distinctions when categorizing and say that relative differentiation will allow for imagining a world of inclusionary relations of diverse life forms and so they may be of equal value when effected by symmetrical relations of power.

Undermining the Anthropocene and so the gendering of the cat as feminine entails demoting the male masculine being off the peak of the pyramid kept in its place through the binaries of human/non-human and male/female (among multiple others). The very naming of the ideal form of manhood as ‘male masculine’ exposes the need for a relative distinction between sexuality and gender, first introduced by Jack Halberstam (1998). He in fact deconstructs the *myth of men’s entitlement to masculinity* that is anchored in the collapse of sex and gender in the social expectations of ‘sex appropriate’ gender subjectivities. He points out that the binary distinction – through the ‘cause and effect’ logic: if male then masculine – will routinely naturalize the privilege of owning masculinity by men, precluding or minoritizing more progressive forms of female masculinity such as the figure of the stone butch, the tomboy, the androgyne, or the transman. Halberstam in fact queers the dominant biologized boundaries of categorization and exposes the common-sense ideologies at play. He can challenge the concept of a homogenous and static ‘idem’ identity of being and conceptualize identity rendered meaningful at the intersection of multiple distinctions: that will allow for seeing similar features integral to the formation of people (women) and animals (cats).

The starting point for my reasoning when deconstructing the routine devaluing relationship between cats and women is that what they share is not the lack of intellect but their autonomy. Then we can make visible the awesome *integrity* that is enacted by strong women like Johanna and the legendary *independence* of cats. Once we expose that the common-sense understandings of the system of binaries making up the meaning of womanhood revolve around expecting various forms of ‘self-sacrifice’, to the point of sacrificing women’s entitlement to becoming Self at all, we can begin to deconstruct the ideologies at play. We may then turn around and expose hegemonic male masculinity at the intersection of the multiple ideologies that has a *gendered speciesism* in its constitutive centre. What is more, once we argue for the equal value of all forms of life – as argued in Patricia MacCormack’s *Ahuman Manifesto* – we do not need to opt to foreground a different principle of categorization, like autonomy, but may subvert and redefine what is hoped to be the result of the ‘feminine’ self-sacrifice, namely care for the others. Care beyond the binary logic of sacrifice entails that

all living systems have unique *capacities for expressivity and being affected* and exist unto and for themselves as singular manifestations of their own desire and will, consistently metamorphic both spatially and temporally. In this sense, all organisms and potentially organized environmental territories are biosentient. (MacCormack 2020, 52; italics added)

Paradoxically, making ‘care’ the measure of *equivalence between organisms* and demanding care for an equal subjective experience of all biosentients will allow us to see women and cats equally unique and discard the supremacy of the human and that of the male masculine.

## The equivalence of cats’ and women’s care

To demonstrate the gains of a queer post-humanist literary interpretation I turn to Doris Lessing’s *Particularly Cats*. I do not know for a fact but I imagine Johanna must love Doris Lessing, who debunked sexist stereotypes in her works. *Particularly Cats* is a book for pet lovers that is renowned for avoiding “those anthropomorphic touches that make you want to throw a can of tuna at people” – as quoted by Judith Keagan

Gardiner (1984, 120) from the blurb of the back jacket of the Simon and Schuster's 1978 publication of the book. I read this statement that highlights the particularity of the Lessing oeuvre: a redefinition of the vulnerability of cats and women intertwined through an ironical reflection narrated in Lessing's works. This irony that links Lessing's woman heroes and cats conjures up a world from within a non-anthropocentric logic that hinges on care in MacCormack's sense of "*capacities for expressivity and being affected*".

The queer turn to post-humanities, though emerging well after Lessing's novels, may allow me to reiterate the non-exclusionary relational model of identity (of woman or cat) without giving up the space for responsible action. The agency of queer post-humanism is not trapped in the logic of some individual(ized) liberty and will but opens up to collective solidarity, or 'collective assemblages' across boundaries of species that acknowledges autonomy (integrity and independence), while challenging the hierarchy of 'speaking on behalf of' the less privileged, the allegedly democratic act characteristic of a majoritarian political logic. The affective overlap of cat and woman could be seen as the site of a caring 'ahumanism', "the end of human exceptionalism", (MacCormack 2020, 16) "a future beyond human privilege" (ibid.; 17):

In order for *collective assemblages* and relations to be ethical, we must cease privileging our own situation before and above all others, which can sometimes seem to be the very essence of identity politics – *my* identity. The ahuman *does* seek dehumanization because at its heart it seeks to dismantle human exceptionalism and make activism for the other – without necessarily seeking to know or apprehend or even be in proximity with the other – its primary technique in coalition with a general politics of differentiation rather than an endless taxonomy of difference. (ibid., 40)

The contradictory and difficult relationship of Lessing's mother to their cats around Lessing's childhood household in Zimbabwe is evoked in the collection of essays entitled *Particularly Cats*: the mother loves the cats and taking care of them entails killing the "excess" kittens as well. Please note that I did not use the logical connector 'but' setting up an absolute difference that should implicate privileging life over death. The mother's care for cats lends itself to a metaphoric reading of Lessing's own ambig-

uous disposition towards motherhood that is represented in her novels. As Gardiner observes, in Lessing's eyes "maternity both *defines* a female's identity and *separates one from one's true nature*" (Gardiner 1984, 121; italics added). I do not read the idea of "true nature/identity" literally, though. I'd rather read it as a slippage in the argument, indirectly challenging the need for an absolute value, such as 'caring at one's own expense for family' in order to qualify as 'mother', and one level above in the chain of immediate constituency, to privilege motherhood over anything else to see oneself as 'woman'; i.e., not to see that anthropomorphic care demands not to have a self that could be taken care of. I would rather argue that the ambiguity questions the common-sense status of the ideology of sacrificial logic governing female existence; the ambiguity is bracketing the power of the expectation and the promise of respect the embodiment of sacrificial care holds out to 'really loving mothers.' On a broader horizon, I appreciate the acknowledgment of the inherent ontological ambiguity, or rather, multiplicity integral to the formation of anything, making any category intelligible, making the identity of any category unique. Consequently, identity is structured by multiple partially differentiated constituent elements, and that is not the individualized homogenized concept that MacCormack attributes to contemporary movements of identity politics. The very assumption that we could outline a definitive border around 'my identity', privileging its concerns, ceases to be a universal ontological condition for 'identity' in terms of the Self/Other absolute difference, or to figure as a meaningful category at all. I agree, we must cease privileging our own situation before and above all others, which can sometimes seem to be the very essence of identity politics – *my* identity. However, once we conceptualize categorization as a matter of differentiation and not essential(ized) difference, 'identity' is not a necessarily exclusionary category, nor is it one that should be always already a stigma. Paradoxically, it is MacCormack's conceptualization of a human care that goes beyond 'identity' that operates through the production and maintenance of normative conceptions of belonging and the possessive Self and allows for its partial inclusivity – hence the importance of introducing differentiation, which is always partial in my

reading, over difference essentialized and as such static through a universal same/different being (Barát 2016).<sup>1</sup> Partial distinctions will still allow for the recognition of (autobiographical) positionality that is oriented to differentiations and not a taxonomy of absolute difference.

The intertextual chains of equivalence between Lessing's essays on cats and the evaluation of the woman characters in her novels may be evocative of two important things and lead us to the celebration of multiple life forms, instead of lamenting the loss of human entitlement to (male masculine) reason at the peak of the hierarchy of signification. Firstly, it undermines the apparently celebratory foundationalist discourse about the indispensable function of 'motherhood' that has re-emerged so forcefully in contemporary right-wing populist discourses on the family and the 'female principle' – painfully loudly by the Hungarian Government's twelve-year-long propaganda (Barát 2021). Secondly, it exposes the possibility of celebrating the death of the kittens instead of mourning the loss of their lives, which should echo an anthropomorphic fear of human extinction. Ironically, the discourse of unconditioned appreciation of the 'innate female principle' is to undermine the very value of 'birthing human life' as if some female goddess of nature through its sacrificial logic necessarily confines the value of a woman's life to procreation alone: there is no equally valuable choice for women to decide against procreation altogether – in the name of their concern for global human overpopulation that should exhaust and destruct the planet. That is very similar to a humanism's endorsement of the affirmative benefits of human death (MacCormack 2020, 143). It is that confinement to sexual productivity that Lessing's strong woman characters are to contest when they are ready to kill the excess kittens.

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<sup>1</sup> Should anyone have doubts about the relevance of reflecting on Lessing's stance on cats, I could only refer the sceptical reader to Johanna's own brilliant blog *Sentrooppa-Santra* and her contributions published by *Hungarian Spectrum*, the most reliable English-language news site featuring daily analyses of news from Hungary. Johanna's critique of the expressions of the radical right wing populist discourse whenever various key political figures should blissfully give voice to their ignorance of matters of language in the past twelve years have become an integral part of her research in Hungarian Studies (see, for instance, Laakso 2018), functioning as a testimony to the importance of acting as a public intellectual for her, embracing the politics of solidarity.

In the face of the ecological crisis, McCormack offers more than timely ethics that disavows lamenting the loss of the human and humanism. The lamenting is highly problematic, I think, in that the ultimate value of this 'humanism' should be measured in the attainability of an agency that is routinely imagined (even in progressive activism and political science) to grant human transcendence over all forms of social hierarchy (with an appeal to universal human rights) and over all other elements of our universe, providing a sense of exceptionalism. Ironically, this logic of human exceptionalism seems justified both on the political left and right through an implied appeal to the fight against various forms of danger or social ills disturbing the presumption of 'individual human sovereignty' as the (only) obvious political ideal. I agree with McCormack's proposal to expose this ideal of individualism for enacting "human exceptionalism [that is] perpetuating destructive impulses" (ibid., ix) with the cis male masculine white upper-class urbanite figure looking down upon the steep slope of the hierarchy, certain of his entitlement to his power.

In the context of my interest in reimagining the attraction of empowerment and agency in feminist scholarship, I have been developing a relational model of identity ever since my PhD research (Barát 2000) that is to challenge the cultivation of late capitalism's 'exclusionary possessive Self', which is happily taken over in political activism whenever this individuality is seen as the prerequisite for liberty and sovereignty. My ultimate interest has been in conceptualizing multiplicity that cuts across the essentialist binary of same/different, integrating critical studies of discourse and feminist approaches to intersectionality. I see this objective concerned with the formation of the 'identity' of any category (including identity itself) beyond the necessarily exclusionary either/or binary logic of distinction. I contend that the meaning of any category is organized by multiplicity. In other words, for a category to be meaningful it needs to be rendered into a relatively coherent pattern from the perspective of one of its constituents, articulated out of many different constituent elements (Barát 2015). My objective was and still is today to reclaim the category of identity for a political struggle of inclusivity that goes beyond an identitarian approach and allows for non-hierarchical distinctions. The latter calls for the importance of considering the *social life* of a given category:



What comes to be politically possible for these categories to perform on particular imaginary horizons of intelligibility is an effect of the actual social conditions of their re/articulations. I believe it is this relative distinction between the logical (epistemological) and political (deontic) modalities of possibility [that the analysis of the social life of a category entails [precluding the collapse of contingency into arbitrariness]. (Barát 2015, 152)

The understanding of multiplicity integral to the formation of potentially multiple categories entails a positionality, a location somewhere particular and a historically contingent perspective. That reads very similar to Donna Haraway's (1988) epistemic dilemma. In modernist (feminist) knowledge production, argues Haraway, one is either to assume one and the same, omnipotent position (of God, that should correspond to the political position of the autocrat) versus embracing infinite numbers of dispersed positions, albeit unevenly but being everywhere yet never anywhere specific. Whichever element of the epistemological binary we valorize, it will equally make accountability and, I would add, queer care unattainable. Haraway's dilemma can be translated into the question of the non-exclusionary idea(l) of identity, entailing the possibility of conceptualizing taxonomies of difference beyond the Self/Other essentialist binary of othering. The question can be reformulated as a matter of differentiation as in "What has relationality got to do with self-transformation?" – and my answer to that is inclusionary relationality of post-humanist queer care.

Since this reformulation is most directly speaking to and beyond 'identity politics', the conditions of political (deontic) possibility of its formation requires the reconceptualization of power. Regarding the epistemological either/or binaries foregrounded by Haraway, the arbitrariness of 'micro power' unevenly dispersed everywhere is a Foucauldian position. Yet, it is possible to rethink it in terms of historical locatedness, i.e., allowing for being somewhere particular without necessarily being caught in the hierarchy of the Anthropocene. I have proposed to start that reiteration from within the 'productivity' of Foucault's power so that intelligibility of a category could be imaginable so that naming is not an act of exclusionary stigmatization. Power can yield not only hierarchies, but an inclusive system of life forms inflected with the equal values of *capaci-*

*ties for expressivity and being affected, resulting in a decentred dynamic system of symmetrical relations to power:*

In terms of meaning production, the Foucaultian notion of productive power is only to deal in the possibility of subversion from within the so-called constitutive outside of counter-discourses. The appeal to counter-discourse makes the vexed question of how to name, how to categorize without ideological stigmatizing, an illegitimate concern. To make the question intelligible, we have to go beyond the logical assumption of unlimited contingency that, ironically, is the result of the reversal of the Same (located [in the privileged value of] power) versus Multiple ([values of] completely contingent power) binary. The re/presentation of future ideals therefore demands not only resistance and subversion that the concept of purely contingent productive power entails but transformative action. The latter is more than yet another *counter-discourse*. It is a discourse of *dis-identification* informed by some logic of non-binary differentiation [introducing the categorization of multiple and relative distinctions beyond binaries]. That discourse would allow, for instance, us to articulate the meaning of foreignness in association with curiosity and desire that goes beyond the ideological investments” (Barát 2013, 223; italics added)

In the face of the excessive human exceptionalism that hinges on the hegemony of male masculinity I propose the formation of an inclusive queer solidarity based on the intimation of trust, in fact an “act of solidarity grounded in MacCormack’s “*care*” coupled with “trust” – resulting in a new mode of belonging and attachment. The concept of trust is inspired by Lauren Berlant’s (1998) concept of intimacy that is defined as “mobile processes of attachment” (ibid., 286), where attachment will be negotiated through a *chain of disassociations* from the hegemonic logic that contends “only one plot counts as ‘life’” (286) as long as I can trust to disagree, as the condition for MacCormack’s consistent metamorphism. Similarly, the ground for solidarity could be for us to disassociate from the idea that only one meaning of woman should count as “properly human female” and unite against the hegemonic ideal of manhood as the ultimate value on the anthropomorphic scale of speciesism, caring for women and cats as equal beings of integrity.

## Coda

In my contribution I have argued for the possibility of imagining practices of being made a subject without being caught in a hierarchy: neither in relation to other human beings nor in relation to other nonhuman beings in the name of a polyvocal solidarity and care that can help us resist the majoritarian reign of either/or binaries lying at the core of vulnerability and precarity of contemporary life. I have turned to queer post-human theory to navigate the contradictory demand of validating the demands of those underrepresented for representation and the criticism of identity politics that sees identity as a matter of mere symbolic representation. To cut across the multiple systems of binary categorization, I integrated my own earlier works that rethink empowerment beyond its majoritarian binary understanding of ahistorical universal hierarchy versus infinite symbolic formations of arbitrariness with Patricia MacCormack's critique of identity politics "that seeks not so much to change the signifying system – a project inherent to the ahuman manifesto – but to change the suffix signifiers and attempt to resignify the value and qualities of the signified, [...] in order to produce collectives who can fight as one" (MacCormack 2020, 35–36). I have argued, drawing on Wendy Brown's (2010) concept that in order to understand the possibility of changing the signifying system, i.e., what I call the discursive articulation of a non-binary logic of categorization, it was my love of cats, which I certainly share with Johanna, that invited me to rethink my non-exclusionary model of identity through embracing the joy of all lives, challenging human exceptionalism, inviting the reader to see that we are simply part of the ecosystem. And finally, I'd like to reiterate that, in the name of the autobiographical locatedness of research, I selected several publications in the academic trajectory of my life that were stimulated by events I could enjoy due to the kind invitations from colleagues in Austrian academia.

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