

On the politics of lapdogs, Jim's dog, and crittercams

**Gail Davies Department of Geography, University College London and Alex Loftus,
Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London**

When Species Meet is a deeply political book. It is also a book consisting of lengthy discussions about dog-agility training. These two claims will not sit comfortably with some. So, in this review, we reflect explicitly on the demonstration of politics emerging through the book, above all in Donna Haraway's approach to researching, writing and engaging with the world. From the first page, Haraway makes the scope and location of her political project clear. She is concerned with "nurturing a more just and peaceful other-globalization" that begins from "grappling with, rather than generalizing from, the ordinary" (p.3). Both a critique of the existing world and a sense of the political possibilities emerging from "becoming with as a process of becoming worldly" are implied in her approach. In subsequent experiments with ways of connecting the two, the book both illustrates a situated, feminist form of inquiry and is a radical transformation of a philosophy of praxis. We suggest the book can productively be understood as a methodological demonstration, addressing questions of where we look, what we look at and the kinds of perspectives we adopt in both our research and our hopes for a better world. Throughout, Haraway's responses to these questions are lively and evocative. We also acknowledge they are,

at times, frustrating. What, for example, are we meant to do with a 20-page collage of e-mails in Chapter 7? Quite how do these intimate encounters between dogs relate to the practices of doing politics? But, perhaps this is Haraway's point: these serve as invitations to think about why we engage in this way. As we conclude, wondering why one would dismiss these forms of relating can be a political provocation in itself.

In moving towards this point, we borrow a trope from Haraway herself: the potential of thinking with narrative figures. The central figure in this book is the dog as companion species. Yet it appears here in forms more varied than in the *Companion Species Manifesto*. We pick up encounters with lap dogs, Jim's dog and crittercams before returning to review the political task Haraway seeks alongside her more familiar companions. We suggest these figures illustrate how to move arguments about dogs into other forms of relating. This was a central challenge in the *Companion Species Manifesto*. Heidi Nast, in her review, both quotes and questions Haraway on the wider implications of remaking subjectivities through dog agility training: "both dog and handler have to be able to take the initiative and to respond obediently to the other. The task, is to become coherent enough in an incoherent world to engage in a joint dance of being that breeds respect and response in the flesh, in the run, on the course. *And then to remember how to live like that at every scale, with all the partners*" (in Nast, 2005, p. 120, original emphasis). While appreciating the encounter, Nast holds back on the recuperative politics of companion species, especially given the way pets are enmeshed in post-industrial commodity circuits. The range of figures animating *When Species Meet* offers some response to Nast's questioning, through their multiplicity, mobility and sometimes their indeterminacy. These less literally doggy figures provide more diverse ways of tracing how other-globalisations might be possible through this joint dance of being.

First, we consider Haraway's lapdog/laptop analogy. It is a simple point, and like many of her analogies it is deliberately folksy, but it also marks the beginnings of a conversation between the fleshy being of dogs and the cyborg potential of the laptop, between nature and technology. As Haraway suggests, the pun "opens a world of enquiry" (p.9), embodied in the interactive and networked qualities of the book. There are opportunities to drill down through the narratives of becoming worldly with dogs, following links to theoretical arguments and communities of scholars in the footnotes. We are invited into breeding chat rooms, and get to eavesdrop on e-mail conversations between trainers. The codifications and exclusions through which all knowledge production proceeds are traceable in the book, both in reflections on the physical process of compiling a text and through the complex activities involved in weaving together a more worldly achievement, like responsibly maintaining a dog breed. It is a book which is generous to its sources, whilst also reflexive about its own potential use as source for all manner of knowledge practices – whether academic writing, or dog training. This attention to the connective, as opposed to the fixed, spaces of knowledge production means the book can be considered an addition to a small, but vital body of work on knowledge cultures which are virtual, social and material (See also Hine, 2006).

These connective spaces are also a crucial source of Haraway's optimism. Through working with a vast and differentiated community of others, one gains a clearer sense of the political possibilities of working together. In a different political moment, Marx writes enthusiastically of the formation of new political associations in Paris of

the 1840s. Formed to achieve a political end, these created a sense of a new need, the need for society. What appeared to be simply a means of achieving an end (associating) becomes an end in itself. This also happens when species meet and it is crucial to the emergent politics within the book and the tensions that began the review. Marx's Parisian socialist community is no longer one of predominantly male artisans: it is a rich entanglement of humans and non-humans, all becoming with one another. Haraway makes this move clear in the second chapter, reflecting on her complicated debt to Marx. For her, he "understood relational sensuousness, and he thought deeply about the metabolism between human beings and the rest of the world enacted in living labour" (p. 46). Still, he never managed to escape a human exceptionalism. His philosophy of praxis, rooted in the practical resolution of philosophical conundrums through everyday interactions is present throughout *When Species Meet*. Here, it is transformed through a wider sense of who or what is involved in these interactions. The tentative beginnings to Haraway's *Biocapital: Volume One* are both tantalising and provocative.

Potential participants in these interactions can be traced further in the figure of Jim's dog. This dog, whose shape is formed from the logs, mosses and ferns of the canyons of Santa Cruz, is the only colour illustration in the book, a vivid and living example of the contact zones between many species, digital technologies and friendship. Jim's dog works as the canine equivalent of Darwin's tangled bank, as an updated, situated and embodied metaphor of the lively entangled and personal networks of contemporary biology. Its relation to arguments about how units are defined in biology – whether individuals, communities or assemblages – resonates with Hird's review. Here, we add, it is a reminder of the potential for conversations with biological research practices, which are earthy, enquiring but also critical. As Haraway writes 'Jim's dog is a provocation to curiosity' (p.7). The transformation of research practices flowing from this are most clearly articulated in the footnotes. Haraway notes the development of her relationships with scientists to those of mutually generous suspicion: 'one of the most important epistemological virtues of companion species' (p. 213). In this figure, we find an invitation to engage with biology, in ways which are not reductive, historic and dependent on the closed narratives of science, but hopeful, engaged and forward looking, even if, in seeking such entanglements in practice "requires responses one cannot know in advance" (p.313).

A third, and not entirely unproblematic figure, is that of the Crittercam (chapter 9). Again, acknowledging in an inspiring and humble way the rich debt to her graduate students, Haraway reflects on the forms of situated knowledges possible through this view from below. Although bound up in the filmic magic of romanticising nature, Haraway links the spectacularisation of wildlife to the radical political potential within situated knowledges. Here, as in other works, Haraway demonstrates how situated knowledges are more than recognitions of positionality or calls to or from the oppressed: they are a political tool for more adequate knowledge, rooted in the messiness of the everyday. Perhaps this politics is clearest in her admiration for the work of dog-breeder CA Sharp. As a producer of more adequate knowledge of epilepsy in dogs, Sharp confronts the prejudices of both a scientific community, protecting its claims to knowledge production, and a hierarchically organised breeding community, who feel threatened by revelations of a genetic link to epilepsy in their own dogs. Sharp learns through doing and produces new knowledges for

making a more just world in which different species might flourish. These knowledges, in turn, are changed through the act of achieving this. Sharp embodies a radical and world-changing philosophy of praxis, based on these complexly situated knowledges.

So, we return to the central figure of the dog as companion species. This remains a grounding truth within the book as sensuous interacting bodies come to define new truths. Haraway is, of course, not the only scholar to use domestic animals in the search for new ethical or political realities. Derrida confronts his cat, Levinas encounters the dog, but these are philosophical exploration of otherness, which say less about the difficult everyday messiness of accommodating difference. Julie Ann Smith (2003) writes memorably of the day-to-day experience of living with house rabbits, as a demonstration of post-human ethics. However, without the saintly patience of Smith or the abstractions of philosophical discourse, such as those around rights, these practices may struggle to travel, relegated to personal domestic experiments. These questions remain in *When Species Meet*, yet they are questioned and refigured here as well. Figures like the lapdog, critter cam and Jim's dog, hint at the potential for spiralling entanglements of emancipatory politics. The book takes bodily ground 'truths' out of domestic contexts, into other spaces, into the laboratory, on the internet, into the texts of academic writing. Here they may be received with some discomfort or embarrassment. Such reactions remind us that boundaries between private and public spaces are actively negotiated and often gendered; that the politics of research is about not only where we look and what we look at, but also in how we write in the world. Thus, whilst this book may not have all the answers, it poses important political questions, moving companion species into considerations of philosophies of praxis and feminist methodologies. Derrida, despite standing naked in front of his cat, never took such a political risk.

References

- Hine, C. (2006) *New Infrastructures for Knowledge Production: Understanding E-Science*, Idea Group Inc. 286.
- Nast, H. (2005) Book Review: The companion species manifesto: dogs, people, and significant otherness *Cultural Geographies* 12: 118-120
- Smith J.A. (2003) Beyond Dominance and Affection: Living with Rabbits in Post-Humanist Households *Society and Animals*, Volume 11, Number 2, 2003: 181-197