

Xilogravura do livro *Les songes drolatiques de Pantagruel* (1565), de autoria presumida de François Desprez. Obra em domínio público. Composição visual remixada.

DOSSIÊ ESPECIAL

ON THE SPECIFIC EXISTENCE OF ANIMAL CULTURE: *LIFE* TORN ASUNDER

SOBRE LA EXISTENCIA ESPECÍFICA DE LA CULTURA ANIMAL: VIDA DESGARRADA

SOBRE A EXISTÊNCIA ESPECÍFICA DA CULTURA ANIMAL: VIDA DESPEDAÇADA

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Abstract
While the thought of animal culture is readily accepted in the environmental humanities and in posthumanist critiques of human exceptionalism, this paper seeks to re-examine this acceptance in view of the ambivalence of that concept's institutional and intellectual origins. For the critical affirmation of animal culture presents as a curious historical object when viewed from the perspective of the late twentieth-century literary-theoretical interrogation of Enlightenment concepts of culture. Approaching the "animal culture" concept as itself a problem, then, this paper considers the potential limits and possibilities of that concept by assessing it from a decidedly poststructuralist perspective. The discussion begins with a genealogical review of "animal culture" in terms of its status as a discourse steeped in an anthropological intellectual heritage, highlighting the potential for characterisations of animal culture to reactivate anthropocentric values or presuppositions. This problematisation is followed by a speculation on what the critical and poststructuralist interrogation of "culture" might still have to offer to (environmental) humanities reflections on animal culture and ecological life more generally. To this end, the discussion reconceives animal culture as constituted and dispersed within a field of eco-institutional forces, pointing towards an institutionality of ecological life before the effects of anthropogenic environmental transformation.

Keywords
Animal culture; power; institutionality; cultural theory; eco-deconstruction.

Resumen
Si bien la idea de la cultura animal es fácilmente aceptada en las humanidades ambientales y en las críticas posthumanistas del excepcionalismo humano, este artículo busca reexaminar esta aceptación en vista de la ambivalencia de los orígenes institucionales e intelectuales de ese concepto. Porque la afirmación crítica de la cultura animal se presenta como un curioso objeto histórico cuando se ve desde la perspectiva de la interrogación teórico-literaria de finales del siglo XX de los conceptos de cultura de la Ilustración. Al abordar el concepto de "cultura animal" como un problema en sí mismo, este artículo considera los límites y posibilidades potenciales de ese concepto al evaluarlo desde una perspectiva decididamente postestructuralista. La discusión comienza con una revisión genealógica de la "cultura animal" en términos de su estatus como un discurso impregnado de una herencia intelectual antropológica, destacando el potencial de las caracterizaciones de la cultura animal para reactivar valores o presuposiciones antropocéntricas. Esta problematización da paso a una especulación sobre lo que la interrogación crítica y postestructuralista de la «cultura» podría aún aportar a las reflexiones de las humanidades (ambientales) sobre la cultura animal y la vida ecológica en general. Para este fin, la discusión repensa la cultura animal como constituida y dispersa dentro de un campo de fuerzas ecoinstitucionales, apuntando hacia una institucionalidad de la vida ecológica antes de los efectos de la transformación ambiental antropogénica.

Palavras clave
Cultura animal; poder; institucionalidad; teoría cultural; ecodeconstrucción.

Resumo
Embora o pensamento de cultura animal seja prontamente aceito nas humanidades ambientais e nas críticas pós-humanistas ao excepcionalismo humano, este artigo busca reexaminar essa aceitação em vista da ambivalência das origens institucionais e intelectuais desse conceito. Pois a afirmação crítica da cultura animal se apresenta como um curioso objeto histórico quando vista da perspectiva da interrogação teórico-literária dos conceitos iluministas de cultura no final do século XX. Abordando o conceito de "cultura animal" como um problema em si mesmo, este artigo considera os potenciais limites e possibilidades desse conceito, avaliando-o de uma perspectiva decididamente pós-estruturalista. A discussão começa com uma revisão genealógica da "cultura animal" em termos de seu status como um discurso impregnado de uma herança intelectual antropológica, destacando o potencial das caracterizações da cultura animal para reativar valores ou pressupostos antropocêntricos. Essa problematização é seguida por uma especulação sobre o que a interrogação crítica e pós-estruturalista da "cultura" ainda pode ter a oferecer às reflexões das humanidades (ambientais) sobre a cultura animal e a vida ecológica em geral. Para tanto, a discussão repensa a cultura animal como constituída e dispersa num campo de forças eco-institucionais, apontando para uma institucionalidade da vida ecológica anterior aos efeitos da transformação ambiental antropogénica.

Palavras-chave
Cultura animal; poder, institucionalidade; teoria cultural; ecodesconstrução.

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> *The analysis of the discursive field is orientated in a quite different way [relative to the analysis of the history of thought]; we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes. We do not seek below what is manifest the half silent murmur of another discourse; we must show why it could not be other than it was, in what respect it is exclusive of any other, how it assumes, in the midst of others and in relation to them, a place that no other could occupy. The question proper to such an analysis might be formulated in this way: what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else?*
>
> — *Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge*[1]

Introduction

What specific reality is captured, expressed or put into operation by the term "animal culture"? On the one hand, "animal culture" presents as a hybrid or interdisciplinary object, in that the very term suggests the intersection of two domains and objects of research that, until recently at least, have been largely assumed to be found at different ends of the university campus: the scientific study of animals and the humanistic study of culture. On the other hand, accounts of the emergence of the *idea* of animal culture are routinely positivist: informal observations of animal behavior initially guided the development of a hypothesis of "culture in animals," which has since been investigated empirically to the point of establishing a legitimate field of scientific inquiry, even if scientific consensus remains elusive.[2] Tool-use among dolphins and chimpanzees, transmission of songs amongst birds or whales, social learning within colonies of bees and schools of fish — whatever official doubts remain about the conclusiveness of the evidence, the case for culture in animals continues to grow.[3] Beyond the spaces of peer-reviewed science, moreover, "unofficial" acknowledgement of animal culture abounds in a range of science-adjacent sites, from popular science publications through wildlife conservation programs to university departments outside the sciences, where the idea of animal culture meshes with a program of posthumanism, for example, and plays its part in driving what has come to be known as the environmental humanities.

Yet there is something arguably odd about the humanities, the historical home for the study of culture, arriving so late to the party, effectively taking its cue from the animal sciences on the possibility of animal culture. This order of response is one which in turn casts doubt on the fundamental hybridity or interdisciplinarity

[1] Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge*, p. 28.
[2] For example, Laland and Bennett, *Introduction*.
[3] See Krützen *et al.*, *Cultural transmission of tool use in bottlenose dolphins*; Sugiyama *et al.*, *Hand preference and tool use in wild chimpanzees*; Bluff *et al.*, *Vocal culture in New Caledonian crows Corvus moneduloides*; Garland *et al.*, *Dynamic horizontal cultural transmission of humpback whale song at the ocean basin scale*; Worden and Papaj, *Flower choice copying in bumblebees*; Laland, *Darwin's unfinished symphony*, pp. 77–93. See also Sapolsky, *Culture in animals*.

initially suggested by the term itself. The curiosity takes on greater significance when considered alongside the fact that, at the moment that "culture" was starting to gain currency in the life sciences as an explanatory framework, the very idea of culture was being treated with some suspicion in several sections of the humanities.[4] Indeed, across the last two or three decades of the twentieth-century, a disciplinary formation or impulse that we can recognize under the banner of "the theoretical humanities" was subjecting conventional thinking about culture to a relentless, radical questioning, which left the effectivity, if not also the validity, of the concept in serious doubt. What is going on, such that the critical thrusts of this mode of questioning could make way or, indeed, come to have paved the way for the ready, perhaps even widespread, affirmation of "culture in animals" inside the humanities as much as elsewhere?

To characterize the return (as it were) of the idea of culture — as animal culture — to the humanities in this way no doubt risks inflaming an old disciplinary politics, one which insists on characterizing either the sciences or the humanities as ultimately answerable to the authority of its counterpart. In coming at the question of animal culture from this direction, however, I do not seek to comment any further on this disciplinary relation, and I certainly have no intention of reigniting a science wars that never made much sense to me — even if that discursive event arguably played a central role in facilitating the emergence of an environmental humanities that was able to bolster its credentials with reference to the scientific recognition of animal culture. Rather, I am interested simply in following the spirit of questioning exemplified by the "theoretical moment" to the point of identifying its implications for thinking about animal culture and ecological life more generally — again, notwithstanding the fact that this theoretical work might be said to be already well underway, with the affirmation of "animal culture" informing a posthumanist interrogation of the metaphysical opposition of human and animal. To that end, and as an attempt to address these opening questions, the following discussion takes up two tasks. First, I seek to identify some of the salient features of animal culture, not with reference to the rigor or coherence of its concept, but rather in terms of its status as a discourse characterized by certain regularities of use and by a specific dispersal of strategic possibilities within and across a range of discursive spaces. Drawing more or less on the terms Michel Foucault uses to characterize the archaeology of knowledge, the question is one of analysing the thought of animal culture in terms of its operation and effectivity: how various statements about animal culture "grasp other forms of [discursive] regularity"[5] and connect with social, political, technical events in ways that betray a strategic, if nevertheless inconscient, choice. Secondly, I seek to replicate the late twentieth-century's theoretical challenge to the study of culture by speculating on what animal culture might look like from a critical or, indeed, deconstructive perspective. Here I follow among other touchstones of critical inquiry Jacques Derrida's dispersed interrogations not only of the human-animal distinction[6] but also of the functioning of the classical "opposition of nature and institution, of *physis* and *nomos*,"[7] mobilizing these

[4] Viciana, *Animal culture*, p. 208.
[5] Foucault, *Archaeology of knowledge*, p. 29.
[6] Most prominently in Derrida, *The animal that therefore I am*.
[7] Derrida, *Of grammatology*, p. 44; Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 134.

resources in the service of an eco-deconstructive speculation on what I come to refer to as ecological institutionality, or the institutionality of life "as such."[8]

1. The specific existence of animal culture

In part, what interests me about the recent recognition of animal culture is its relation to a certain critique of anthropocentrism. On the one hand, this critique could readily be traced to several moves initiated by the humanities' theoretical moment, but seems more frequently to be associated with an "after theory," an ostensibly more "realist," "materialist" or "object-oriented" form of (post)humanities inquiry that leaves behind the putatively "constructivist" and "idealist" commitments characterizing the theoretical moment.[9] On the other hand, with "culture" having until relatively recently been treated as an exclusively human prerogative, one of the main attributes evidencing a vast divide between human and nonhuman animals, the scientific investigation of "culture in animals" appears to launch its own assault on this presumption of human exceptionalism. And on this basis the critique of anthropocentrism serves simultaneously as the rationale for and the putative consequence of investigations of animal culture, with "animal culture" thereby functioning not as the name for an immediately observable object but rather as a *possibility* generated by a "concept" that is itself owed to a complex, ambivalent history of philosophical and political thought.

For example, there remains some debate in the sciences over what counts as culture in animals, but the "definition" that is most frequently deployed in ethology and behavioral biology sees animal culture as taking the form of a behavior that is not genetically or environmentally conditioned, but which is rather reproduced socially. On this basis, Kevin Laland and Bennett Galef locate the origins of the "animal culture debate" in the question of whether field researchers had sufficiently substantiated the claim that diffusions of behavioral innovations were "the product of social (as opposed to asocial) learning."[10] Culture is thus a form of transmission — "by behavioral rather than genetic means"[11] — between members of a community, where the thing transmitted — a form of vocalization, a foraging technique, a greeting ritual — is *arbitrary* to the extent that it is relatively autonomous from all natural — which is to say, genetic and ecological — determinants. As Richard Sapolsky explains:

> [A] prerequisite of animal culture is that the behavior persists past its originators; transmission can be intra- or inter-generational and spreads as a function of kinship or proximity.... [E]vidence often takes the form of observing a distinctive behavior in a group or

[8] I develop this latter notion in an indirect fashion in *The animal-to-come* as a means both of capturing the most sophisticated work coming out of "the animal turn" in critical inquiry and of developing this work in new directions. In doing so, I engage with several attempts to think through a notion of "culture in animals," including work in ethology and cultural primatology. My discussion here rehearses part of the argument presented there and serves in that respect as a companion piece to that investigation.

[9] Basille, *Life/force*, p. 3.

[10] Laland; Galef, *Introduction*, p. 3.

[11] Bonner, *The evolution of culture in animals*, p. 4.

> population, detecting signs of its spread to new individuals, and a plausible argument about why this pattern does not reflect genetic or ecological factors.[12]

In other words, "culture in animals" tends to be identified with a set of socially learned behaviors — behaviors which accordingly 1) have the status of construction or artifice, hence arbitrariness, by virtue of not being determined by natural forces, and 2) are more or less identifiable with a community or population, defined in terms of conspecific kinship or proximity. In these terms, moreover, animal culture would appear to differ only by degree of sophistication from what is thought to be designated by a concept of culture inherited from the disciplines of cultural anthropology, such as in Edward Burnett Tylor's famous definition of culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[13] Well-founded skepticism abounds, no doubt, with regard to the extent to which some of these forms of culture — the putatively higher order forms of art, morals, law, knowledge, belief — are evidenced by any let alone a significant range of nonhuman species. But the inclusion within this by now utterly pervasive notion of "culture" of such phenomena as "custom, and any other capacities and habits acquired" by virtue of being "a member of society," provides the search for culture in animals with an enabling conceptual foundation.

Of course, this *anthropological* concept of culture (as I shall often call it from here on out) has emerged on the back of the more complex history of social and epistemological transformation characterizing the European Age of Enlightenment and modernization. Accordingly, while the use of "culture" to refer to something like the complex whole of human artifice was not common before the mid-nineteenth century,[14] the anthropological concept is recognizable in nascent form, as Alec McHoul has argued, in "the very beginnings of political investigations of human practices *as* specifically human practices (that is, where those practices are accounted for in terms of collective human volition rather than divine or extrahuman forces)."[15] Central to this moment was the increasing doubt over the role or extent of God's will in the unfolding of human affairs — notwithstanding a continuing faith in the divine as such — and the corresponding sense of collective autonomy that this heavenly retreat granted. Consequently, while Thomas Hobbes's at-the-time revolutionary political philosophy uses the term "culture" infrequently and largely in a pre-modern sense, as it were, his famous depiction from 1651 of the great Leviathan gives effective expression to this rudimentary sense of culture as a product of collective human volition.[16]

The specific combination of arbitrariness (or non-givenness, hence constructedness) and sociality is announced in the opening paragraph of *Leviathan* when Hobbes proposes to consider the commonwealth in terms of its status as an "artificial animal," made by the "Art" of "man." But the place of this formulation in a discourse of human exceptionalism is best evidenced by Hobbes' specific comparison of "mankind's" sociability with that of "certain living creatures, [such] as

[12] Sapolsky, *Culture in Animals*, p. 218.
[13] Tylor, *Primitive culture*, p. 1.
[14] Williams, *Keywords*, p. 88.
[15] McHoul, *Semiotic investigations*, p. 45.
[16] Hobbes, *Leviathan*.

Bees, and Ants."[17] After listing several points of distinction between "man" and "these creatures," he notes that "the agreement of these creatures is Naturall; that of men, is by Covenant only, which is Artificiall."[18] This idea of the social construction of the human institutions had, roughly 75 years later, become sufficiently established for Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico to be able to declare that "the artificer of the world of nations is human will regulated by vulgar wisdom" and to count this truth as an enabling principle in his new science meditating on the "origins of the humanity of nations."[19] In Vico's case, moreover, if not already in Hobbes', the manifest diversity "in language and custom" among societies across the world and over the ages becomes recognizable as a significant component of the *problem* to be resolved by this new science, which would for that reason aspire to produce both "a philosophy and a history of human customs."[20] The situation to which Vico was responding, in other words, was both the fact of what we would today call cultural diversity and the challenge of accounting for such in view of a shared humanity or human condition. In this way, his appeal to a "vulgar wisdom" regulating the diverse development of nations functions to explain the "naturalness" of this diversity of cultural forms, their consistency with a divine Providence, whilst continuing to recognize an undeniable "freedom of the will" that enables "men" to "choose to live in justice."[21] While Vico advanced his argument effectively as a direct counter to Hobbes, moreover, the latter likewise grounded culture (as social construction) in nature, by way of his depiction of the construction of the commonwealth as "imitating that Rationall and most excellent worke of Nature, *Man*" (7), through the exercise of a God-given capacity for reason.[22]

Through these metaphysical appeals to a "Nature" by virtue of which the products of "man's artifice" appear as autonomous at the same time as they remain governed or directed by this silent co-author, Hobbes and Vico — notwithstanding the significant divergences of their philosophies — both sought to demonstrate the supremacy of those political achievements which just happened to be characteristic of the particular region of the world in which they lived. Vico, in particular, more or less took as given that the European civilization of his time constituted the pinnacle of an "ideal eternal history in accordance with which the histories of all nations proceed through time with certain origins and certain continuity."[23] By contrast, it was precisely this presumption that Johann Gottfried Herder, towards the end of the 18th century, sought to reject with his own *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*:

> Is there a people upon earth that does not have some civilization [*Kultur*]? and how contracted must the scheme of Providence be, if every individual of the species were to be formed by what *we* call Culture [*Kultur*], for which refined weakness would often be the more appropriate term? Nothing can be more vague than the term itself; nothing more apt to lead us astray than the application of it to whole nations and ages.[24]

[17] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 130.
[18] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 131.
[19] Vico, *The first new science*, p. 39, p. 11.
[20] Vico, *The first new science*, p. 27, p. 66.
[21] Vico, *The first new science*, p. 10.
[22] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 7.
[23] Vico, *The first new science*, p. 66.
[24] Herder, *Outlines of a philosophy of the history of mankind*, p. v, translation modified.

Herder's contribution to the philosophy of culture was thus to challenge the Euro- or ethnocentric logic underpinning conceptions of civilization as a single, universal process — Vico's "ideal eternal history" — in relation to which all the world's "cultures" would be organized and evaluated. Indeed, he goes on to propose that "justice be done to other ways of life," giving philosophical expression here not only to a principle of cultural relativism but also to a concept of culture as "a whole way of life."[25] In this regard, Herder's account of culture diverges significantly from Hobbes' and Vico's, pluralizing the possible forms that culture may take, and giving the clearest expression to what today has become a standard acknowledgement of "cultural difference":

> Every nation is one people, having its own national form, as well as its own language: the climate, it is true, stamps on each its mark, or spreads over it a slight veil, but not sufficient to destroy the original national character.... there are neither four or five races, nor exclusive varieties, on this Earth. Complexions run into each other: forms follow the genetic character: and upon the whole, all are at last but shades of the same great picture, extending through all ages, and over all parts of the Earth. They belong not, therefore, so properly to a systematic natural history, as to the physico-geographical history of man.[26]

Herder's reference to "climate" announces a key component of his "theory" of culture: its relation to the natural environment. On his account, "the constitution of [a people's] body, their way of life, the pleasures and occupations to which they have been accustomed from their infancy, and the whole circle of their ideas, are climatic," shaped by the climate and the geography of "their country."[27] As a theory of what "regulates" the construction of the world of nations, this quite materialist account thereby appears to stand in stark contrast to Vico's appeal to "natural law" in the form of an innate "vulgar wisdom." But it nevertheless shares with Vico's (as well as Hobbes') a certain gesture of tracing the artifacts of social construction to a co-authoring Nature, as Herder's reference to the scheme of Providence makes clear.

Even on the basis of this brief genealogy, it is easy to see how Herder's proposal for a study of the physico-geographical history of man anticipates the discipline of cultural anthropology, including its ethnographic ambitions. To be sure, there are many points of difference between these select attempts to account for the apparent diversity of human societies, and there are many inconsistencies and contradictions within this intellectual history that could be noted. But the point in briefly recapping this early history of cultural philosophy is not to paint a picture of the seamless and coherent development of the concept from its first philosophical acknowledgement, but rather to identify a certain *regularity* to its operation, notwithstanding the *dispersal* of its components — to identify, that is, a partial set of *strategic* possibilities that must be decided one way or the other in any attempt to mobilize the concept. In this regard, it is sufficient for the moment to identify in that intellectual heritage the specific formation of a now well understood "concept" of

[25] Cf. Williams, *Culture is ordinary*, p. 2.
[26] Herder, *Outlines of a philosophy of the history of mankind*, p. 166.
[27] Herder, *Outlines of a philosophy of the history of mankind*, p. 169.

culture as a suite of coherent practices, customs and knowledges properly belonging to a people and constituting for them a dimension of a "whole way of life."

It is this concept or structure that I am referring to whenever I speak of the anthropological concept of culture. The figure of "mankind" has obviously occupied a special position in this structure, but what warrants emphasizing is the potential for the discourse on animal culture, notwithstanding its ostensible challenging of the privilege granted to "the human," to leave the anthropological structure, in all other respects, intact. Indeed (and on the basis of what must remain merely a parenthetical reference to Foucault's analysis of "Man and his doubles"),[28] what I want to reiterate is the sense in which it is this structure that, as it were, exceptionalizes the human as a special kind of being, rather than anthropocentrism consisting simply in the arbitrary devaluation other forms of life relative to human existence. More to the point, the continued operation of this anthropological discourse produces strange effects within discourses on animal culture, such that certain anthropocentric values or presuppositions continue to be reaffirmed in them. This seems particularly true of field-based ethology and (as we shall see) many wildlife conservation programs, where this anthropological discourse gives us a conception of culture defined by its arbitrariness and constructedness — hence cultural difference and cultural transformation — but also by its *autochthony*.[29] On this understanding, inherited from Enlightenment philosophies and modern practices of anthropology, animal culture is an indigenous expression of a pregiven population of animals, a whole way of *life* — Herder's "one *people*, having its own national form, as well as its own language." But even in experimental contexts, where the cultural behaviors studied are often heterochthonous, introduced from without according to an experimental protocol, this discourse arguably operates through an apparently innocent reference to a population. Through this protocol, a network of literally *specific* sociality is established, such that conspecifics appear not as an element of environment, but as the *medium* of transmission, thereby ascribing to the population under study a special mode of being. On the one hand, conspecific sociality (Hobbes' "Naturall" "agreement") comes to function as the self-evident condition of culture rather than being identified, potentially, as the very product of culture (formed by "Artificiall" "covenant," that is, or perhaps some other authority); on the other, all that stands apart from this special existence continues to be framed as non-cultural, hence as unstructured, in its essence, by that potential arbitrariness that is hallmark of "culture."

Again, in making these observations, I am not at all intending to lay out a "critique" of ethological and behavioral science, to expose some fundamental blindspot in its thinking about animal culture, let alone suggest that the whole division of the life sciences has yet to properly question the authority of divine providence. Indeed, I would be tempted to suggest that what I have to say here has no bearing whatsoever on ethological research if it weren't for the fact that scientific curiosity and ingenuity has time and again proven capable of inventing astoundingly novel theories and research protocols in the scientific pursuit of understanding.[30] My aim, then, is simply to underscore the intellectual heritage that allows us to

[28] Foucault, *The order of things*, pp. 303–43.
[29] Briggs, *The animal-to-come*, pp. 46–7.
[30] See, for example, Leland, *Darwin's unfinished symphony*.

conduct these investigations into culture (animal or otherwise), and to identify the ways in which this work is done by way of following or activitating one set of strategic possibilities over another. To that end, it is worth noting that, while the "definition" of animal culture I cited earlier most regularly guides both experimental and fieldwork research, the qualifying criteria remain a point of significant debate within the field, with some researchers promoting more exacting criteria for inclusion, while others emphasize the "transfer of information" over the material dimensions of culture,[31] even to the point of potentially contradicting the criterion of arbitrariness. Much research into the language of bees, for example, is effectively (and understandably) conducted within the horizon of a transmission model of communication,[32] which — as model — construes communication in terms of instrumentality, determinacy and one-directional flow of information, arguably relegating arbitrariness to an absent (hence no longer significant or effective) past or to the status of incidental (hence superfluous) noise. This identification of culture with communication points, in any case, to a dispersal or differentiality within culturality "as such" to the extent that in (human) cultural studies an alternative, "ritual" model of communication has at times been favored over the transmission view, and precisely on the grounds that it underscores a *cultural* dimension that the transmission view of communication fails to acknowledge. In this alternative conception, communication is defined in terms not of "the extension of messages in space" but "the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information, but the representation of shared beliefs"[33] — a definition which perhaps better captures the function of community that is central to most discourse on animal culture, but which also ascribes to culture a normative force that is far less frequently taken as that specific reality which investigations into animal culture are tasked with evidencing. Meanwhile, a view of communication from the perspective of reception regularly complicates the ideal of transmission by identifying a divergence in the reception of "messages" among a collection of receivers. This diversity of interpretations is owed, moreover, neither to determining forces nor to free choice but rather to the fact of a differential cultural background that conditions — structurally, rather than incidentally — the very act of communication.[34] Against this background of the contested nature of culturality, we are therefore justified in returning to our opening question: what specific reality is captured, expressed or put into operation in discourse on "animal culture"?

2. The institutionality of ecological life

Already these competing models of communication highlight the potentially irreconcilable differentiality within the very concept of "culture" that perforce informs contemporary approaches to (animal) culture. More radically, around the same time that the study of animal culture was taking hold in the sciences, the

[31] Bonner, *The evolution of culture in animals*, p. 9.

[32] The bee's "dance is not a by-product of collecting activity, as has often been suspected, but has the function, within the framework of social organization, of bringing a message to the comrades." Karl von Frisch, *The dance language and orientation of bees*, p. 35. Cf. Grüter *et al.*, *Informational conflicts created by the waggle dance*.

[33] Carey, *Communication as culture*, p. 18.

[34] Hall, *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse*, pp. 386–398.

humanities, or more specifically, the *critical*, *theoretical* humanities of the late-twentieth century, was subjecting the anthropological concept of culture to sustained interrogation, deploying a suspicious and unsentimental gaze that, via two gestures, served to call into question the coherence and autonomy of culture understood as a way of life. In the first gesture, a critical perspective born of the throupling of Frankfurt School, feminist and postcolonial critique comes to see in "culture" not the life or spirit of a people, but something far less salutary: a system of alienation, quasi-mechanical in its reproduction and unaccountable in its violent subjectivization of those whom we would otherwise call its members or users. Far from being one's property, the forms by which a subject or a community authentically expresses itself, culture from this perspective is precisely *not* one's own. Individuals or "subjects" are rather caught up in the mechanisms of a *dominating* culture, which, as alien and alienating, denies the autonomy of such individuals. Culture — as in, for example, patriarchal culture, the culture industry, or the culture of the colonizer — thus serves as a conduit of *power*, is in fact inseparable from the operations of power, with the specific practices or institutions of culture serving to oppress or disfigure those on or over whom it operates.

Here, the critique of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism appears as an obvious analogy for this perspective, with the lives and communities of so many animal species being visibly displaced, disrupted or destroyed by an all-powerful human chauvinism, while other animal lives are even enslaved by various forms of human industry. Yet the very legibility of that analogy only highlights the indebtedness of this critical perspective to the anthropological conception of culture as autochthonous, such that the *injustice* of capitalism, colonialism, etc., derives from the violence it inflicts not only upon individual lives but moreover upon the rightful autonomy of a "folk" culture that, by virtue of pre-existing the arrival of a dominant culture, earns the epithet of authenticity (Herder's "let justice be done to other ways of life"). Without wanting to appear in any way to legitimate, defend or downplay the violence or injustice of these forms of domination and appropriation, what the tracing of the anthropological concept of culture underscores, nevertheless, is the potential for critiques of human exceptionalism to unknowingly subscribe to certain anthropocentric values by virtue of their indebtedness to an anthropological discourse. And in this way the ongoing reproduction of these values may yet undermine efforts at reducing the forms of violence that can be attributed to human exceptionalism — for instance, by engaging in a (colonialist, anthropocentric) politics of representation that renders "the other" silent precisely by claiming to speak on its behalf.[35]

It is for this reason, then, that a second gesture in the theoretical humanities' challenge to the anthropological concept of culture warrants recollection. In this moment, a body of work that we might rather loosely call "poststructuralism" interrogates the critical perspective's presumption of the uniformity and homogeneity of power, and therefore of the workings of culture. By way of this questioning, cultural practices, institutions and power come to be recognized, in a nutshell, as effective and forceful, to be sure, but also as potentially fragmentary and unstable; as enabling as well as constraining; as inherently appropriable for

[35] Haraway, *The promises of monsters*, p. 309.

unexpected purposes and mutating for no predictable reason; and as ultimately contradictory or incoherent, notwithstanding their continued authority. Culture's workings are thus taken to be not so mechanistic, uniform, totalizing or unidirectional as the critical perspective has often assumed. Yet this challenge to the critical concept of culture as alienation lends no support to the anthropological concept of culture as a whole way of life. For the thought of culture that remains (and here I simplify things egregiously, for the sake of moving quickly) is one which views cultural practices, techniques, rituals, customs — *conventional*, hence *instituted* ways of being and doing more generally — as ultimately unfounded, unjustified and arbitrary, as fragile and discontinuous, subject to interventions, mutations and unauthorized appropriations, hence as always transformable. From this perspective, in other words, the institutions and conventions of "a" culture are deconstructible in principle: always open to "the process of being dislocated, disjointed, disadjoined."[36]

In view of the discourse of (animal) culture, the key insight to be taken from the poststructuralist reinterpretation of culture is that any given cultural practice or technique — in and of itself, and regardless of what rules or valuations we might establish or affirm in order to grant ownership — is, in principle, "ownerless," unfixed, and open to appropriation and displacement by acts of force that are themselves situational, discontinuous, fragile, reversible and "impersonal," in the sense that they do not necessarily align or operate in a coherent fashion, or uniformly serve any one people's interests. And in this way, what the poststructuralist framework provides is the possibility of analysing "culture" as a field of forces — of invention, regulation, and transformation — which I prefer to think of in terms of institutionality, in order to emphasize the qualities of arbitrariness, impersonality, subjection that the critical tradition has ascribed to what it sometimes calls "dominant culture." By the same token, force or power in this poststructuralist perspective would not always feature only as the means of intervention or oppression, but would also be always already open to diversion (even diversion from itself), such that the "institutionality of culture" designates a field of competing, conflicting, disruptible and divertible forces, flows and relationships. Rather than assuming the congeniality of a shared existence or purpose, that is, the language of institutionality projects a field of "culture" characterized by divisions and displacements: a field of distributed potentialities, relays of power, and differential access to conventions, practices and techniques that are inherited and inheritable, hence able to be (mis)appropriated in the service of "logics" or "purposes" that are irreducible to those imagined to align with a presupposed collective life.

A key reference point in constructing this idea of institutionality is, of course, Foucault's formulation of a "micro-physics of power,"[37] but I am also drawing on Derrida's speculations on the structures of "textuality," "iterability," "writing"[38] and what he refers to as the "nonpower at the heart of power."[39] While Derrida's work in particular has often been read as a kind of idealism, relevant only to the question of "representation" and "signification," a growing body of literature now recognizes that

[36] Derrida and Ferraris, *A taste for the secret*, p. 80.
[37] Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, pp. 26-28.
[38] Derrida, *Of grammatology*; Derrida, *Limited Inc.*
[39] Derrida, *The animal that therefore I am*, p. 28.

the concepts or structures of writing (and so on) that Derrida names have always born upon the materiality of existence.[40] And it is in that respect that the thematics of institutionality broaches the question of a very different interpretation of animal culture than those interpretations which continue to operate, however unwittingly, within the horizon of the anthropological concept. In one sense, this reinterpretation potentially follows the critical and speculative efforts of recent work in "eco-deconstruction" — particularly the construal of ecology or environmentality in terms of textuality,[41] and the phenomenological construal of animal existence in terms of "worlds" of meaning and significance[42] — but my hope is that the reference to institutionality serves to highlight a (deconstructive) problematics of power or force that, as a history of questionable interpretations of Derrida's work suggests, the language of writing and textuality does not always foreground. To be sure, the ways in which human institutions, the practices and activities of human agents, have come to intervene upon and suffuse the natural world (through mining, farming, forest management, climate change, and so on) perhaps provide some impetus for acknowledging the openness of ecological life to modes of institutional violence that arrive from outside, so to speak. Hence the appeal to the epithet "post-natural" within posthumanism, the environmental humanities, and now more widely to register the many ways in which organisms and ecosystems can no longer be taken as untouched by human activity.[43] Hence too the possibility of analysing what might otherwise be thought of as a captive animal's *Umwelt* in terms rather of institutional subjection.[44] But beyond acknowledging the anthropogenic transformation and supplementation of natural environments, I have in mind an approach to life of all kinds as caught up in *non-human* institutional networks too — or an approach which ascribes such institutionality to nonhuman life *at least* to the extent and in the way that it is possible today to accept the existence of forms of animal culture.[45] What would this attribution mean for thinking about animal culture, or indeed for the broader concerns and approaches characterizing the environmental humanities?

To consider an example: the orange-bellied parrot (*Neophema chrysogaster*) is a critically endangered species of migratory bird endemic to south-eastern Australia. A captive breeding program based in Tasmania and working with a national recovery team has been attempting to recover the wild population — estimated to be as low as 16 individuals in 2017 — by selectively releasing captive-

[40] For example, Fritsch *et al.*, *Eco-deconstruction*.
[41] Morton, *Ecology as text, text as ecology*; Fritsch *et al.*, *Introduction*.
[42] For example, see many of the chapters in Rose et al., *Extinction studies*, especially, Wolfe's Foreword.
[43] Purdy, *After nature*.
[44] Chrulew, *Abnormal animals*; Wadiwel, *Restriction, norm*, Umwelt.
[45] This thought of the institutionality of nonhuman life thus goes well beyond what Irus Braverman calls "the institution of nature" (Braverman, *Wild life*). With this phrase, Braverman means to capture the sense in which zoos and conservation practices "depend on an idealization of nature" (p. 63), which underpins the (human) work of constructing and managing a conception of wilderness. Her work in this area thus speaks to a sense of the social "construction of a nature 'out there'" (p. 64), a principle that more or less repeats arguments that were already in play in theoretical work from the late 1980s (see, for example, Greenblatt, *Towards a poetics of culture*, pp. 8–10; Birch, *The incarceration of wilderness*). By characterizing nature — both conceptually and topologically — as thus constructed by (human) meaning-making, political and administrative practices, Braverman continues to identify the force and processes of institutionalization with human agency alone, rather than reinterpreting the thought of animal culture, as I am here, in order to speculate on the possibility of nonhuman forms of institutionality.

bred birds to boost open breeding and fledgling success.[46] Until recently, mortalities associated with migration have frustrated these efforts, but a change in release protocol has seen a significant increase in the number of birds surviving migration. The critical difference relates to the decision to release more juveniles just prior to migration, rather than releasing only adults, the hypothesis being that the young are less habituated to life in captivity, hence more adaptable and better able to learn wild behaviors from their undomesticated conspecifics. Here we see the thought of animal culture playing a transformative role in species rehabilitation programs, as conservationists come to recognize the need for counter-extinction practices to account not only for the genetic but also for the "learned and cultural" dimensions of intergenerational inheritance.[47] The lesson for conservation efforts points towards minimizing "acculturation" of the birds to captivity, even though captive breeding remains essential to increasing the species population. But beyond this insight, what stands out to me is the extent to which migration presents as a ritual for which the *captive-bred* adult parrot is demonstrably *not fit*. Indeed, I am struck by the thought of a recently released bird being "compelled" or feeling "obliged," as it were, to participate in this migration event, this annual institution, swept up in the customs of a culture that is not its own. It's a ritual, moreover, that far from furthering life, leads this alienated bird to its death, to a specific death that it might otherwise have avoided, had it been able to remain in its cage.

I should stress here that nothing in my discussion of this example is meant to comdemn this effort at reintroduction, or to stipulate what should be done in future. Before or beyond the objectives of conservation, thinking about the institutionality of animal or ecological existence raises, I would argue, fundamental questions about how we understand and relate to the nonhuman world, but also about the (variable, invertible, contradictory) relations that different institutional forms or practices have with the production and prevention of life, death, and possibility in general. The enlistment of the captive-bred adult birds in a dangerous cultural practice for which they are ill-equipped is no doubt a moment of what Thom van Dooren calls "killing for conservation" (or, arguably in this instance, "letting die" for conservation), whereby individual organisms are sacrificed in the name of rehabilitating populations.[48] Such practices pit the lives and interests of individuals against the survival of a species, highlighting the normative power of species categories, their status as institutional forms or identities. But by this I mean neither that species classifications are nothing but social constructs with no empirical

[46] The Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania, *The OBP Tasmanian Program*; Stojanovic *et al.*, *Further knowledge and urgent action required to save orange-bellied parrots from extinction*.

[47] Chrulew and De Vos, *Extinction*. In this respect, we may discern again the extent to which Braverman's work on "the institution of nature" falls short of capturing the institutionality of ecological life at stake in the reinterpretation of "animal culture" that I develop here. Indeed, the possibility of animal culture plays little to no part in Braverman's argument, with the forms of "wild life" playing a more or less passive role in the conservation efforts she recounts. It is perhaps for this reason that she relates the details of the Golden Lion Tamarin (GLT) counter-extinction efforts that began in the 1980s as a heroic story of conservation management and reintroduction (Braverman, *Wild life*, pp. 87-94), a story which thus constructs the GLTs as simple *objects* of scientific knowledge and power rather than as cultural subjects whose variable competencies, behaviours and inclinations, forms of adaptability and agency, hence capacities for survival, are developed and learned in variable cultural contexts, both "human" (zoos, conservation reserves) and "natural" (specific bioregions, multispecies communities). For a more nuanced and critical assessment of the GLT conservation program, one more sensitive to the role of social learning and cultural transmission to GLT survival, see Chrulew, *Saving the golden lion tamarin*.

[48] van Dooren, *Invasive species in penguin worlds*.

reality, nor that they are arbitrary or unjust human impositions, subjecting individual animals to anthropocentric imperatives. For the very participation of the uninitiated adult birds in the ritual that is not theirs — their apparent identification with a species identity that in a sense alienates them from themselves — raises the question of a "normativity" as it were beyond so-called human institutions. Crucially, to my mind, this normativity is one that, being deadly, cannot be said to operate unequivocally in the service of life merely on account of its being a biological or ecological "norm." And here I use the terms "norm" and "normative" to register first and foremost not the trace of value or responsibility or propriety but rather the element of force, of *making* "right." Akin to a moment of Althusserian interpellation,[49] that is, this case of species affiliation speaks to a certain kind of misrecognition, arguably to a certain kind of conscription — to an institutional scene of subjection, at any rate, which in turn suggests an empirical context for critically interrogating various accounts of the "motivation" of animal action, from the mechanistic (biological determinacy) through the vitalist (pure living spontaneity) to the phenomenological (intentional, deliberated act).

From this brief, ultimately insufficient example, we can see that pursuit of this idea of ecological institutionality has its most immediate consequences for the value of life itself, to the extent that ascribing impersonal institutionality to the so-called natural environment means refusing to presuppose of ecological practices that they operate implicitly in the service of *furthering life*. As a consequence, any number of images of natural life as, for instance, autopoietic, spontaneous, self-determining and self-sufficient necessarily come into question. Accordingly, and as we have already seen, recognition of ecological institutionality begins with the displacement of the anthropological concept of culture as expressive of or grounded in a "whole way of life." Indeed, to the extent that the discourse of (animal) culture continues to imply a substantive communality or organicity, insofar as it continues identify culture as an attribute of a (con)specific population or community whose qualities, membership, limits and coherence are thereby presupposed, to speak of "institutionality" is to speak of something *other than* culture. But with this shift in perspective comes a more substantive rethinking of life "as such." If, for example, the need for domestic orange-bellied parrots to learn so-called wild behaviors points to the extent to which bird life expresses itself in and as various institutional forms, habits and practices, it is the anterior potential for the regulatory power of such arrangements to be disrupted, rearranged — in ways that transform parrot existence — that highlights the way in which life is already distanced from itself, exteriorized, alienated. Life in this sense could never be captured by a principle or value of autopoiesis, by an affirmation of life's fundamental self-sufficiency. Rather, it would be the case that the life in question is already torn asunder, as it were, even in its "wild" form, "before" any human intervention.

In the context of arguments affirming the need for ethical response to the singularity of the animal other, this image of life no doubt appears bleak, even nihilistic. But what is at stake, here, is the scope to enact such ethical responsibility via something like an analytics in the mode of problematization and possibility, an analytics that takes the differential play of forces as a given, and indeed would

[49] Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, pp. 85-126.

contribute to that play through the force of an interpretive act. "Institutionality," in other words, would point towards something more akin to a politics, a performative eco-political analytics of institutionality, of inheritance and debt, of occupation and habit, of agency, normalization and control, but also of displacement, appropriation, failure and more. In that sense, and attending to the equivocality of the "norms" of life, the analysis of eco-institutionality (as it were) might trace the effects of reading the image of extinction according to a very different temporality and in relation to different kinds of events (social, technical) than those typically implied within general conceptions of evolutionary processes. In particular, agency, both "human" and "nonhuman," both "biological" and "cultural," would come to be identified in terms not of its "vitality," but rather of its status as a product, so to speak, of nonpower — the outcome of an anterior dispersion of manifold power relations.[50]

In this way, the problem of rebuilding and releasing populations of endangered species, for example, might be opened to perspectives that can revisit the field of strategic possibilities activated by a discourse on animal culture, perhaps identifying alternative, *productive* possibilities in the face of forces of extinction. Accordingly, attempts to rehabilitate the endangered Hawaiian crow, as Thom van Dooren argues, might be approached in terms of identifying the kinds of institutional arrangements that can support "the constitution of flourishing forms of crow-ness" — particularly those forms of "crow-ness" that matter to the critically endangered birds themselves.[51] Here, the thought of institutionality runs counter to many a captive-breeding strategy or conservation protocol, which often presume and aim to bolster a *static* "species identity," notwithstanding the rapid anthropogenic environmental *change* that necessitates such conservation efforts in the first place. Thus, a preference for "authentic crows" underpins training regimes in conservation programs in the region van Dooren has studied, regimes which are geared towards habituating captive-bred ʻalalā (as they are known locally) not to feed on organic waste from rubbish bins in built-up areas but to forage endemic forest fruits, despite conformity to such "traditional" behavior potentially being "at odds with survival."[52] By contrast, as van Dooren argues, crows around the world "conduct experiments in emergent forms of crow-ness": as they "move into cities and learn new ways of life," they engage in "multiple forms of becoming, all of them reiterative and ongoing, all of them co-constitutive and collaborative (even if unequal)."[53] Beyond an in-principle account of performativity and species becoming, on the one hand, and a principled critique of anthropocentric violence, on the other, the situation described by van Dooren thus involves a complex, multifaceted eco-politics. For the practical question of species "identity" (we might even say "cultural identity") in this instance (potentially in all instances) implicates a range of diverse and distributed agencies, including those forms of life that any reintroduced crows may go on to interact and build eco-institutional relationships with. Not only crow-ness, then, but also the relays and potentialities of many other situated and interconnected forms of life emerge as a product of struggles and negotiations between several competing visions: the forms of life that conservationists hope to (re)produce through their

[50] Briggs, *Derrida's nonpower*.
[51] van Dooren, *Authentic crows*, p. 41.
[52] van Dooren, *Authentic crows*, p. 34.
[53] van Dooren, *Authentic crows*, p. 38.

practice; the ecological functions that potentially re-wilded 'alalā may perform or fail to perform upon release; the kinds of crow-ness that the larger multispecies community will tolerate and respect, or (just as likely) harass and hunt; and not least of all the ways of being that the crows themselves may be interested in taking up, which may or may not coincide with any of the other visions.

Conclusion

In the context of today's posthumanist and environmental humanities, the thought of animal culture presents as a tempting resource for challenging the powerful logics of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism that not only have authorized immeasurable violence against animal life across the globe but also continue to shape our capacity to imagine responses to the crises of mass extinction and environmental collapse which those logics have engendered. Yet the intellectual and institutional context informing the development of that discourse — not least of all, the humanist tradition of Enlightenment philosophy and cultural anthropology that birthed the modern concept of culture — may be recognised as furthering the reproduction of such logics by way of the continued operation of an anthropological discourse. In that regard, a more radical rethinking of the institutionality of life calls into question the values of organicity and cultural autochthony that tacitly define life "as such" in terms of a biological stasis that the current ecological predicament exposes as impracticable if not, in fact, impossible. What the focus on ecological institutionality may help to highlight, then, is not only the forces that bear upon the survival of the endangered species in question but also those which may trouble the logic of a conservationist effort that would otherwise hope to reverse such forces of endangerment and extinction. Here, a certain discourse on animal culture, one which grants animal existence a degree of autonomy from genetic and environmental determination only to subject that autonomy to the norm of traditional, autochthonous behavior, arguably plays a part in directing these efforts towards ends that align with anthropocentric impulses rather than towards a more dispersed cultivation of eco-institutional arrangements. At stake in these efforts is not only the propensity for human institutions to subject ecological existence to anthropocentric interests and imperatives, routinely enacting colossal violence on the nonhuman world in the course of doing so. Beyond this reality — rightly targeted for relentless critique by a (posthumanist, environmental) humanities committed to eradicating the unjust effects of arbitrary power — what is at stake is the potential for a broader range of ecological interests to play an active part in determining what that multispecies coexistence might yet be. What a thought of ecological institutionality might further articulate, therefore, is the scope for nonhuman life more broadly to continue to invent forms of multispecies existence and sociality that may yet refuse to conform to conventional (ecological) norms of "animal culture."

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