

Crossings: Swarthmore Undergraduate Feminist Research Journal

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Special Issue: Explorations of the
"Human"/"Non-Human"*

Article 3

2023

Multispecies Kinship in Fabrizio Terranova's *Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*

Nicole Daly
Swarthmore College, ndaly1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/crossings>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Daly, Nicole (2023) "Multispecies Kinship in Fabrizio Terranova's *Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*," *Crossings: Swarthmore Undergraduate Feminist Research Journal*: 1 (2), 27-32.
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/crossings/vol1/iss2/3>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Crossings: Swarthmore Undergraduate Feminist Research Journal* by an authorized editor of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Multispecies Kinship in Fabrizio Terranova’s *Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*

Nicole Daly

Swarthmore College

Fabrizio Terranova’s 2016 documentary *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* provides a non-traditional portrait of Donna Haraway’s life and contributions to feminist scholarship.⁵⁶ Terranova avoids a conventional, biographical style of documentary and incorporates a variety of eccentric audiovisual techniques. The techniques range from the use of a green screen to place Haraway underwater with jellyfish to cyborgian art superimposed atop the natural landscape of the Los Padres Forest surrounding her home, creating a work that in both style and content reflects many of the ideas Haraway is known for — dissolving binary distinctions between human/non-human animal, organism/machine, and physical/nonphysical, questioning essentialist logic, and multispecies kinship. The presentation of various contact zones between humans and non-human animals in the film is particularly notable, ultimately destabilizing a human/ non-human animal hierarchy and urging viewers to pay attention to the inevitability of non-human animal involvement in the process of becoming(-with). The inclusion of bird-song, fragments of Donna’s relationship with her dog across time, and tentacular invertebrates through various rhetorical strategies reflect Haraway’s view of the often taken-for-granted, reciprocal relationship between humans and companion species, pushing us to embrace multispecies kinships with companion species to work toward “earthly survival.”

Haraway borrows the concept of contact zones from postcolonial scholar Mary Pratt and extends it to conceptualize the spaces and practices in which humans interact with the non-human others she deems “companion species.”⁵⁷ In contact zones, “subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other (...) often within radically asymmetrical relations of power,” and companion species are “ordinary beings-in-encounter in the house, lab, field, zoo, park, truck, office, prison, ranch, arena, village, human hospital, forest, slaughterhouse, estuary, vet clinic, lake, stadium, barn, wildlife preserve, farm, ocean canyon, city streets, factory, and more.”⁵⁸ The first shot of the film is a wide view of the redwoods

⁵⁶ *Donna Haraway*, dir. Fabrizio Terranova.

⁵⁷ Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone.”

⁵⁸ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 216 & 5.

surrounding Haraway's home which includes the diegetic song of the birds that live amongst them, subtly alerting the viewer of the birds' presence and situating Donna's home as a contact zone in which both Haraway and the birds are affected by each other's presence, albeit asymmetrically. Bird-song continues anywhere the redwoods are present, including for the close-shots of Haraway sharing her musings directly, for example, when she springs into a story about the origin of orthodontics and her impetus for learning about the subject. In an interview in 2019, she shared, "I have a habitat zone for song – the migration routes of the songbirds – the songbirds have me."⁵⁹ The choice to leave purely diegetic sound throughout Haraway's dialogue bolsters the idea that for Haraway, the process of knowledge production and inquiry is inseparable from the environment in which the process occurs, which includes the specific non-human critters who are either present or whose livelihoods are at stake in the knowledge-making process.

Sitting in the bed of my dorm room, my miniature projector spread the film across the blank wall in front of me. Seconds after the film began, my emotional support cat and companion, Orlando, woke from his slumber and jumped up beside me in bed. His eyes were glued to the projection, his ears wiggled, and he made a noise distinct from his usual "meows" in response to the bird song. Feminist film scholar Teresa de Lauretis argues in her seminal (ovular) work "Rethinking Women's Cinema" that the effect of a film is constituted at least in part through the way it interacts with its viewer(s)/ audience/ "spectators" and that the subject positions of a film's spectators can never be fully imagined or predicted.⁶⁰ De Lauretis' perspective urges paying attention to the question of "who and what is the film for?" in analyzing its effects, and it wouldn't be possible to determine the film's impact without acknowledging the fact that it drew the attention of my cat, thus shaping the way I viewed and interpreted the film. Given my conditioning into an ocular and anthropocentric mindset, I likely wouldn't have noticed the birdsong in the audio if it weren't for Orlando's response. Terranova's work not only reflects the imperative of multispecies kinship through its style and content but elicits a response from non-human critters not typically prioritized in targets for viewership and therefore invokes their participation in the knowledge-making process that comes from engagement with the film.

According to Haraway, multispecies kinship requires learning to notice and respond to non-human others, which Orlando's response aided me in doing. She writes, "Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. That is the play of companion species learning to pay attention."⁶¹ Bird-song is present throughout the majority of the film, but only in the background until it was explicitly pointed out 28 minutes into the film through a clip of Rusten, Donna's partner's radio show *California Bird*

⁵⁹ "Donna Haraway and the 'Chthulu' Way of Life," interview by *Le Monde*.

⁶⁰ de Lauretis, "RETHINKING WOMEN'S CINEMA."

⁶¹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

Talk, demanding the viewers’ attention. The clip of Rusten’s show features two different bird songs, indistinguishable until they are slowed down and heard from the perspective of the way birds’ ears receive sound. Privileging the bird’s method of hearing by slowing down the sound deprives human sensory modalities and humans’ role in knowledge production. Language is used as evidence under the Western humanist tradition to promote human exceptionalism but as Haraway writes in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, “language, tool use, social behavior, mental events—nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal.”⁶² By intentionally drawing attention to the language, or the “talk” of the birds, Rusten, and Terranova by way of including Rusten’s show in the film, reject a binary and hierarchical distinction between humans and birds and demand the “response” required for multispecies kinship.

A more overt example of multispecies kinship in Terranova’s work is evidenced through his choice to highlight Haraway’s relationship with Cayenne Pepper, her Australian Shepherd dog, who has played a central role in Haraway’s theorizing during their 10 years together. Terranova includes footage of Cayenne at various stages of her life, including a photo of her as a puppy, found footage of her and Haraway together at an agility competition, and unstaged shots of her and Haraway interacting in the present day. Footage of the agility competition takes up a hefty three minutes and features Cayenne navigating three different courses with Haraway, with varying levels of success.⁶³ For the third course, the footage is slowed down to provide a closer look at the inter/ “intra-actions” occurring in the contact zone between the two.⁶⁴ The relationship between Haraway and Cayenne reflected in the footage aligns with feminist and decolonial scholar Julietta Singh’s notion of humanimal bonds, which she defines as a bond between human and non-human animal in which neither party can simply stand as conceptual unities, rather, they are specific beings that share a relationality founded on individual and collective needs, and what they each can and are willing to sacrifice.⁶⁵ In the footage, we see that both parties rely on each other to navigate the course; they simultaneously act in unison but as distinct agential entities. The photograph of Cayenne as a puppy comes later among a montage of photographs of Donna Haraway’s loved ones, including her mother, father, and Rusten, all “kin” to Haraway, which she defines as “those sorts of beings that have claims to each other.”⁶⁶ The montage style of photo presentation puts Cayenne’s history and role in Haraway’s life at the same level of significance as Haraway’s human family.

Cayenne and Haraway’s relationship, characterized as humananimality and kinship, is also presented through unstaged inter/intra-actions at the time of

⁶² Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 10.

⁶³ *Donna Haraway*, dir. Terranova, 15:39–18:45

⁶⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

⁶⁵ Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*.

⁶⁶ “Donna Haraway and the ‘Chthulu’ Way of Life.”

filming. As Haraway explains the significance of the Navajo woven basket on her desk, Cayenne barks demanding Haraway's attention, ultimately leading Haraway to reflect on the "intimacy of inheritance" and the productivity of "interruption." Haraway comments that she and Cayenne are both white, "not as a color but as an apparatus."⁶⁷ Considering Haraway is a descendant of colonizers of Turtle Island and Cayenne is a descendant of sheep herders on conquest ranches, their histories are intimately connected to Haraway's current, wrongful possession of the Navajo basket. This comment relates to a view expressed in her *Companion Species Manifesto* that to consider non-human animals companion species requires recognizing their historicity and their impurity. Non-human animals are not innocent, docile, or "blank" beings for us to project our feelings and desires. Like humans, they are rooted in a web of histories and technologies that are worth paying attention to. As an example of non-human animals' historical impurity, Haraway writes, "Before cyborg warfare, trained dogs were among the best intelligent weapons systems."⁶⁸ The unstaged intra-action between Haraway and Cayenne also leads to insight into the process of aging and the obligation of kin to one another, as Haraway feels obligated to accompany Cayenne through a process of aging that although on a different timeline, is not unlike Haraway's own. Leaving in clips of Haraway tending to her provides a real-time example of what it means to tend to and accompany companion species as kin.

Another key aspect of Haraway's theorizing relevant to cultivating multispecies kinship is the breakdown between physical and non-physical; the non-physical is still material and not all contact zones are physical places. Terranova incorporates tentacular invertebrates through the use of a stuffed animal prop, a green screen, and underwater footage to allude to Haraway's notion of the chthulucene and indicate our interdependence with, and the necessity of being in kin, with even the non-human animals not among our physical presence. The chthulucene, as opposed to Anthropocene, is "made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake." Additionally, the chthulucene "does not round off; its contact zones are ubiquitous and continuously spin out loopy tendrils (...) tentacularity is symchthonic."⁶⁹ The octopus stuffed animal prop is present throughout most of Haraway's direct musings and is presumably entangled with the other artifacts on her desk selected to be showcased. Toward the end of the film, as Haraway talks about her Catholic upbringing, and the stakes of living and dying on a damaged planet, a jellyfish suddenly appears behind her with mystical audio, slowly swimming out of frame but leaving behind many long tentacles. Soon, the film transitions to almost 3 minutes of underwater footage of the jellyfish.⁷⁰ The inclusion of invertebrates

⁶⁷ Donna Haraway, dir. Terranova.

⁶⁸ Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*, 105.

⁶⁹ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 33.

⁷⁰ Donna Haraway, dir. Terranova, 46:00–48:44.

provides a visual representation of the structure of the chthulucene while also highlighting a non-human animal Haraway sees herself as kin with and responsible to, given the “loopy” and “symchtonic” nature of its contact zones. It is rare to come into contact with tentacular invertebrates physically, but their presence is still impactful, and their consideration is important given how human action or inaction might affect their livelihood.

Through various kinds of contact with non-human animals throughout the film, namely bird-song, fragments of Donna’s relationship with her dog across time, and sea invertebrates vis-a-vis eccentric stylistic strategies, Terranova asserts Haraway’s view that a multispecies kinship with companion species is key to earthly survival and that humans are not a superior species. Non-human animals shape human practices as much as humans have shaped non-human animals and learning to pay attention and respond to companion species is a part of our obligation as human beings on a shared planet. The boundary between humans and non-human animals is not as distinct as a culture of human exceptionalism leads us to believe. Terranova’s work ultimately serves as a call to viewers to recognize the critical role of companion species, which include but are not limited to the companion animals we come into contact with the most like dogs and cats, in shaping who we are and what we might become.

References

Barad, Karen Michelle. *Meeting the Universe Halfway Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

De Lauretis, Teresa. "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory." In *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, 127–148. United States: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Haraway, Donna. "The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness." In *Manifestly Haraway*, 91–198. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Manifestly Haraway*, 3–90. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Haraway, Donna. "Donna Haraway and the 'Chthulu' Way of Life." Interview by *Le Monde*. *Le Monde*, 1 February 2019. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/02/01/donna-haraway-and-the-chthulu-way-of-life_5417974_3232.html.

Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet*. 1st ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* (1991): 33–40.

Singh, Julietta. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Terranova, Fabrizio. *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*. Brooklyn, New York: Icarus Films, 2018.