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Issue Introduction:

Amber E. George

When it comes to the ecological and social and needs of nonhuman animals, humans can very much be allies by considering the interests of all sentient beings. Whether this allyship comes from generating moral concern through ethical analogies or actual physical interaction, humans must engage with issues related to nonhuman animal oppression. As will be apparent in the articles of this issue, humans engaging in moral advocacy must demand that animals be perceived as legitimate subjects for social justice. We already have the tools needed to eliminate these injustices, we just need to act on them.

The first essay in this issue, “Fighting Seals: Reflections on Daniel D’Amico’s Defense of Factory Farming,” written by Thomas Raskin, asks how animal liberationists ought to handle lifeboat scenarios in which both human and animal lives are at stake. In this piece, Raskin highlights multiple ways of showing that D’Amico’s lifeboat arguments for factory farming fail.

The second essay written by Cynthia Rosenfeld, “Oh! They’re Not Slimy!: An Ethnographic Exploration of Human-Snake Encounters” explores some impactful actions humans can take toward preserving wild snake habitats and transforming human-snake relationships. Rosenfeld’s analysis explores her work within serpent education using an insightful vantage point of “snake insider” to demonstrate the myriad ways humans and snakes can interact. Rosenfeld offers us an interesting glimpse in the cultural imperialism that has led to a devaluation of the serpent species.

Fighting Seals: Reflections on Daniel D’Amico’s Defense of Factory Farming

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Abstract

In a written defense of factory farming, Daniel D’Amico argues that our instinct to prioritize human life over animal life in certain lifeboat scenarios reveals that human interests are so much more important than animal interests that the bloody system of factory farming can be justified by its (alleged) benefits for humanity. Through an exploration of Rawlsian reasoning, the reflections in this lecture show—contra D’Amico’s claims—that our instinct to favor humans in lifeboat scenarios can and ought to be justified in a way that does not also commit us to defending the cruel system of factory farming. In service of this rebuttal, the lecture proceeds to demonstrate, via an appeal to intuition, that certain violent acts (e.g., killing animals) that may be permissible in lifeboat scenarios are totally unacceptable when committed in the course of ordinary life. In pursuit of some agreement, the lecture finishes by noting that D’Amico’s apparent commitment to human flourishing may provide an opportunity for collaboration with animal liberationists who also take an interest in universal human uplift.

Keywords: least well off, animal liberation, lifeboats, utilitarianism

In a written debate on factory farming, Daniel D’Amico outlines a thought experiment that invites readers to weigh the importance of human interests against the importance of animal interests (D’Amico & Huemer, 2018). Although D’Amico leaves some of the details unclear, his description suggests that this thought experiment could take one or both of two general forms. In the *Sadistic Gunman* scenario, a sadistic gunman has forced you onto a beach where, before leaving, you must kill 1,000 baby seals or one human baby. If you refuse to choose, the sadistic gunman will keep you on the beach and kill all of you. *Seal Attack* describes a situation where you are walking home from baseball practice one day when you find 1,000 baby seals moving towards a human infant. The seals will overwhelm and kill the infant if you continue walking, but the infant will survive if you stop to pummel the seals to death.

D’Amico appears to argue that our strong intuition to save the human infant in both scenarios reveals that human welfare matters more than animal welfare (D’Amico & Huemer, 2018). In fact, human interests are so “vastly more important” than animal interests that factory farming—which provides our species with tasty food—is morally permissible, even though it imposes tremendous costs on animals bred for hellish lives of servitude (D’Amico & Huemer, 2018).

The forthcoming reflections offer one of many conceivable liberationist rebuttals to D’Amico. If successful, I will prove in this lecture that it is logically possible both to advocate saving the hypothetical human baby *and* to condemn factory farming as a moral crime against real-world animals. Then, in the spirit of concord, I will explore a potential implication of D’Amico’s appraisal of *Seal Attack* that shows that D’Amico’s moral commitments might not be too different from the universalist commitments of many animal liberationists. It is in this harmonious spirit that my reflections will end.

Rawlsian Objections

Animal liberationists hotly debate the utilitarian method of evaluating public policy, whereby analysts weigh the *sum* of a proposed policy’s good consequences against the sum of its bad consequences (Regan & Singer, 1985). Whereas some liberationists—Peter Singer, most notably—fiercely defend this utilitarian method of moral calculation, liberationists like Tom Regan feel that this utilitarian approach perilously discounts what John

Rawls called “the distinction between persons” (Rawls, 1971, p. 27). Cognizant that pain is experienced on an individual basis, Regan and other Rawls-inspired liberationists claim that the *aggregate* harm that a policy promises is less important than the policy’s probable impact on the affected *individual* who, once the policy is enacted, will be least well off (Regan & Singer, 1985). It is most moral, these liberationists claim, for us to pursue the greatest well-being possible for whatever hapless individual will end up occupying this bottom position, even if this pursuit requires us to sacrifice some utility overall.

Regan’s liberationist doctrine is itself liable to powerful challenges. For example, it may be true, as utilitarians insist, that forcing a psychologically neutral individual into a negative psychological state actually *would* make moral sense, assuming that this move would somehow allow many (say, one thousand) other individuals to transition from a neutral psychological state to a positive psychological state. However, an exhaustive defense of Regan’s position against such challenges is unnecessary to show that his view, whatever its potential deficiencies, is at least plausible and may very well pose a potent challenge to D’Amico’s position. Although D’Amico seems to think that no set of pro-liberation ideas could yield arguments in favor of saving the human baby in *Sadistic Gunman* and *Seal Attack*, Regan’s pro-liberation Rawlsian ideas do exactly that.

Unlike utilitarians, who would begin their moral calculations by weighing the potential suffering of the human baby against the potential suffering of all 1,000 seals in either hypothetical, Rawlsians would begin by weighing the human baby’s potential suffering against the potential suffering of only *one* of the 1,000 seals. Of course, the linguistic limitations of seals and human infants would make it difficult for ethicists to measure these beings’ potential for suffering and for Rawlsians, therefore, to compare their potential suffering reliably. Even so, Rawlsians could note that human babies and seals both have nociceptors and central nervous systems and that, despite their unmistakable aversions to noxious stimuli, individuals in both groups have only a rudimentary understanding of the pains they experience (Costa & Crocker, 2009, pp. 873-878).

Perhaps Rawlsians would feel, at first glance, that the psychological and physiological similarities between seals and human babies mean that saving the human baby, in either *Sadistic Gunman* or *Seal Attack*, is not morally required. But thoroughgoing Rawlsians would know that the threats

facing the human child and baby seals in our posited hypotheticals are not the only harms for which ethicists must ultimately account. Surely it matters morally that any human baby’s death is overwhelmingly likely to break the hearts of the child’s adult relatives, subjecting *them* to a tragedy that, according to some bereaved parents, can feel like a nightmare from which one never really awakes (Mendoza, 2016).

If it is true, as it seems to be, that a human baby’s death would generally haunt that child’s adult family more than a seal’s death would harm the seal itself or any of the seal’s loved ones, then Rawlsians’ choice would be clear. If they opted to save the human baby by bringing about the seals’ deaths, they would be creating a situation in which the least well-off individual is a pained seal being beaten to death. In contrast, if they opted to save the seals by bringing about the human’s death, they would be creating a situation in which the least well-off individual is an inconsolable human adult whose psychological suffering is deeper than that of which any seal is capable. Because the former option would involve less suffering for the least well-off individual, this is the option that consistent Rawlsians would choose.

We should note that the preceding account would fail if the endangered human infant somehow had no loved ones. But maybe Rawlsians would then have other reasons to save an orphaned human baby at the expense of seals. To wit, if it is true that the human baby’s living future—unlike that of the seal—would involve finding a loving home environment that would allow this human to create art, tell stories, fall deeply in love, and pursue other long-term professional and personal projects, then the joys of the human’s life might outweigh the joys of the seal’s life. Consider:

World 1: Seal Survives and Human Dies	World 2: Seal Dies and Human Survives
Seal: +5 hedons Human: -2 hedons	Seal: -2 hedons Human: +20 hedons

The least well-off individual in World 1 is the human baby who experiences -2 hedons as a result of being shot or trampled to death, and the least well-off individual in World 2 is the seal that is killed in an equally painful way. Upon first glance, we might feel that this is a Rawlsian “tie” and that Rawlsians would, therefore, be obligated to flip a coin (or something like

that) in order to choose between the two worlds. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes hard to believe that this is the correct Rawlsian approach. Indeed, if it *were* the correct Rawlsian approach, then a Rawlsian would also have to flip a coin between Worlds Y and Z, each with 100 people, where (1) World Y has 1 person at -10 hedons and 99 people suffering nearly as much at -9 hedons and (2) World Z has 1 person at -10 hedons but 99 people living positively ecstatic lives at 1,000 hedons. It is reasonable to suppose that the correct Rawlsian approach to such “ties” is instead to compare the *second* least well-off individual in the first possible world to the second least well off individual in the second possible world. Because the second least well-off individual in World 2 (i.e., the surviving human at approximately +20 hedons) is better off than the second least well-off individual in World 1 (i.e., the surviving seal at +5 hedons), World 2 is the one that Rawlsians ought to prefer.

If we accept the preceding analysis, then we may be asked to concede, as an aside, that human fetuses resemble human babies in their capacity to be made better or worse off based on whether they live or die (Marquis, 1989). Of course, many anti-abortion Rawlsians would probably view any such “concession” as a simple truism, the validity of which one would be silly to deny. But it is possible that even abortion-condoning Rawlsians can make this concession without abandoning their defense of abortion. Consider:

World A: Fetus is Aborted	World B: Fetus Lives
Baby: 0 hedons Mother: -3 hedons	Baby: +20 hedons Mother: -8 hedons

The first column reminds us that a fetus, if aborted before the onset of fetal consciousness, experiences no joy *but also* no pain. Thus, the claim that this fetus is “harmed” by abortion makes sense only by reference to the counterfactual: had the fetus entered conscious existence, this fetus would have experienced joy. In that latter world, the baby might experience +20 or even +100 hedons, but what matters to Rawlsians—searching for the social arrangement whose *least* well-off member experiences the greatest level of happiness—is that the abortion-desiring mother experiences -8 hedons (or some other amount of pain) when enduring the hardships of a pregnancy and

mother-child relationship that she does not want. Rawlsians compare this lowest number in World B to the lowest number in World A (i.e., -3, reflecting the emotional distress sometimes associated with getting an abortion) and find that the least well-off individual in World A (i.e., the mother getting the abortion) is better off than the worst-off individual in World B (i.e., the mother prevented from getting the abortion). Thus, Rawlsians—even while granting that fetuses can have interests—have good reason to prefer World A and to condone abortion at least before the onset of fetal consciousness (at which point the abortion of the baby might cause the baby in World A to experience suffering).

In any event, it is now clear that Rawlsians, whatever their positions on abortion, can make a logical, non-prejudiced case for saving one human newborn at the expense of 1,000 seals. However, nothing in this case requires Rawlsians to support factory farming. A brief survey of the conditions under which billions of farm animals live and die every year can prove it so.

As a result of genetic manipulation, chickens have overly large bodies and place such great weight on their legs that they sometimes lose their ability to walk (Rachels, 2011, p. 3). So that they do not injure each other through anxiety-induced pecking in cramped spaces, billions endure the gruesome process of debeaking (Rachels, 2011, p. 3). After a little more than a month of living, these mutilated creatures are shipped to slaughterhouses to be killed for human consumption (Huemer, 2019, p. 118).

The industry's pigs and cows fare no better. Workers painfully detach piglets' tails and press searing irons into cows' hides (Huemer, 2019, p. 24). Dairy cows are routinely overmilked, and their offspring are hauled away shortly after birth (Rachels, 2011, p. 2). Though many are sent straight to abattoirs, some of the females are kept behind to live painful lives as dairy cows themselves (Rachels, 2011, p. 2). Hundreds of millions of turkeys suffer similar horrors in order to sate Americans' appetites every year (Rachels, 2011, p. 4).

So grim are the realities of factory farming that most of this system's victims—who account for the vast majority of the animals consumed in the United States—probably experience more suffering than joy (Huemer, 2019, p. 64). Thus, billions of potential farm animals, who will enter lives of misery if and only if humans incentivize animal production by consuming animal products, seem to fare much better in a vegan system than in a non-vegan system. Consider:

Human A Eats Pork	Human A Does Not Eat Pork
Human A: 2 hedons Pig A: -20 hedons	Human A: -2 hedons Pig A: 0 hedons

Much like factory farmed animals generally, the pig (1) suffers immensely if Human A consumes meat and (2) suffers nothing if Human A does *not* consume meat and the pig, because of that non-consumption, is never brought into existence. Of course, this consideration alone is not dispositive; if Human A’s giving up pork would cause Human A greater pain than Human A’s *not* giving up pork would cause Pig A, then Rawlsians would have to support Human A’s pork consumption. But not only can most Americans (even if they love the taste of meat) go vegan without experiencing diet-induced suffering, they can downright *flourish* without animal products (Huemer, 2019, p. 59). Therefore, Rawlsians—who notice that the least well-off individual (i.e., a person annoyed by having to go vegan) whose well-being is affected by a vegan system fares better than the least well-off individual (perhaps a tortured animal) affected by the current food system—must favor Americans’ transition to veganism.

The Deceptiveness of Lifeboat Scenarios

D’Amico seems to assume that any plausible premises that would lead us to share his ideas about Sadistic Gunman and Seal Attack would also lead us to share his ideas about factory farming. Our exploration of Rawlsian reasoning has shown that this assumption is unfounded. But perhaps we do not even need to delve into a complex system of moral thought (such as Rawlsianism) in order to demonstrate that D’Amico is misguided. It may be self-evident, whether we are Rawlsians, utilitarians, or something different, that the moral “rules of engagement” in grim scenarios like Sadistic Gunman and Seal Attack ought to differ from the rules of engagement in less dire circumstances.

We intuitively grasp this point when our moral calculations involve humans alone. If a sadist stuck a gun to your head and forced you to choose between killing one thousand strangers and killing your own child, perhaps it would be defensible for you, as a loving parent, to kill the strangers. For

there is an undeniable, if uncomfortable, wisdom to the adage about necessity's knowing no law; when nothing less than our child's life is at stake, otherwise operative moral prohibitions lose their force. But in the course of regular affairs, where the stakes are much lower, those moral prohibitions remain firmly in place. Even if you could be excused for killing one thousand people to save your child's life, you could not be excused for killing one thousand bright children just to secure your child's admission to a selective university. Favoring our loved ones is not categorically wrong, but killing innocent others in order to secure such *minor* benefits for our loved ones undoubtedly falls outside the realm of legitimate favoritism.

If we consider all humans our "loved ones"—as we should—and would thus feel inclined to save one human infant at the expense of hundreds of animals, then maybe D'Amico is right to think that it would be proper for our universalist commitments (to ensuring the well-being of all sentient beings) to give way temporarily, just as it would make sense for our universalist commitments to vanish if we were forced to choose between our own child's life and hundreds of strangers' lives. But even if it is possible to justify killing 1,000 animals in order to save one human's *life* (just as it is possible to justify killing 1,000 human strangers in order to save our own child's life), surely humans are not so much more valuable than animals that we can justify killing hundreds of animals on factory farms for one human's trivial *enjoyment*. Generally speaking, extremely aggressive acts that might make sense in life-or-death scenarios do not make sense when, in the course of mundane affairs, the promised benefits of extreme aggression are much less significant.

The Preciousness of Human Life

Until this point, we have not considered the important differences between the scenarios described in *Sadistic Gunman* and *Seal Attack*. Although an exhaustive exploration is neither possible nor necessary here, it may be worthwhile—for the reputation of the animal liberation movement, and in the interest of closing on a resonant note—to point out a particular one of these differences and to consider what D'Amico's treatment of this difference says about his ethical doctrine.

Remember that the gunman in *Sadistic Gunman* will kill us if and only if we refuse to choose between the human baby and the baby seals. Thus, it is in our own narrow self-interest to act in this scenario. In *Seal Attack*, it

is *not* in our narrow self-interest to take action, seeing as killing seals is a physically and psychologically draining act that nobody will punish us for refusing to commit. Therefore, it seems that the moral obligation to save the human in *Sadistic Gunman*, if such an obligation exists, is less demanding than any moral obligation to save the human in *Seal Attack*.

D'Amico seems to think (though I may be wrong) that a readiness to kill the seals in a situation like *Sadistic Gunman* is not enough. As he would have it, human life is so valuable that, if necessary, we should be prepared to kill one thousand baby seals for the sake of a human baby even when, in a situation like *Seal Attack*, our personal interests are *not* at stake. Surely this view, if it is indeed his view, attests to the depth of D'Amico's affinity for all humankind. His concern for his fellow man runs so deep that he is prepared, on behalf of any unknown human infant, to participate in—and to urge others to participate in—what he calls the “deeply unpleasant” process of beating hundreds of sentient animals to death (D'Amico & Huemer, 2018).

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of D'Amico's professed philanthropy. But if his commitment to every human child is indeed as strong as his apparent response to *Seal Attack* suggests, then it seems fair to wonder whether rich humans, under D'Amico's moral code, also have a moral obligation to save human babies from threats *other than* belligerent seals. That is, if every human life is really so precious, then perhaps lethal phenomena beyond improbable seal attacks ought to spur us to action on behalf of vulnerable humans. Specifically, the preventable ailments plaguing impoverished human babies overseas may demand a response from Westerners who are well-equipped to donate money to highly effective social action organizations (Singer, 1972). After all, if it would be wrong to let these infants die in seal attacks, then is it not also wrong to let them die of starvation and illness?

Of course, in most conversations about humans' obligations to *animals*, one would be content to table this sort of consideration about humans' intra-species obligations. However, D'Amico's repetition of a common anti-liberationist allegation—that liberationists “prioritize the well-being of animals over people”—may make this consideration relevant (D'Amico & Huemer, 2018). The least charitable reading of his statement is that, however unimportant human well-being is, surely animal well-being is even less important. The charitable and more plausible interpretation is that, in D'Amico's eyes, the furtherance of human well-being is a vital project to

which animal liberationists are insufficiently committed. But if D'Amico is suggesting that proponents of animal rights—many of whom have unimpeachable track records of working to alleviate human suffering—should be doing even *more* for humans, then D'Amico must be something of a humanistic superman, a person so committed to human well-being that he can put Tom Regan, Coretta Scott King, Dick Gregory, Henry Spira, and other humanistic champions of animal liberation to shame. If D'Amico is such a superman, then perhaps, in spite of our (present) differences on the question of animal liberation, he and philanthropic champions of animal liberation can at least find common ground in the struggle for universal human uplift.

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“Oh! They’re Not Slimy!”: An Ethnographic Exploration of Human-Snake Encounters

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Abstract

How can humans find kinship with snakes—species that do not fall into the category of charismatic megafauna? The goal of this critical ethnographic investigation of human-snake encounters was to illuminate the affordances and limitations of different human-snake stagings and show how it is possible for humans to engage in (co)constitutive entanglement with snake bodies. Over eight months, I engaged in participant observation and conducted in-depth interviews in multiple sites that stage encounters with snakes. The three primary stagings I explored were online social media groups, people observing snakes through glass enclosures, and body-to-body contact. I present each staging separately with three tableaux, interweaving theoretical insights gained from a grounded-theory approach. The staging of human-snake encounters needs to consider the role of media (e.g., social media, glass barriers, human mediators) in the production of human experiences of snakes. Although all stagings have affordances and limitations, an enthusiastic human mediator who (re)directed attention to the embodied snake and their agencies was a central feature in many positive experiences, regardless of whether the experience was digital, through glass, or body-to-body. Also, the experiences of seeing the snake entangled with an educator and making skin-on-scale contact contributed to a sense of human and snake bodies *becoming with* one another.

Keywords: posthumanism, snakes, animal studies, ethnographic methods

Her name was Goldie. When she was placed in my arms, I let out an audible, sharp gasp as my body dipped beneath her. “How much does she weigh?” “She’s only about 35 pounds or so,” her guardian replied. “Nooo,” I said, my eyebrows furrowed. Taking care of a small rescue farm, I was accustomed to lifting 50-pound bags of feed that felt lighter than Goldie. “Her weight is poorly distributed,” he continued, “think of it more like carrying milk jugs than lifting a barbell.”

She seemed un-rattled by my early struggle to get a good hold on her. She used her own muscle to cling to me, supporting herself as I adjusted to accommodate her. I had settled, and she began to move in my arms a bit more. As I continued talking with her caregiver, she brought her head up to my left shoulder, her face almost against my neck. I flinched, and I immediately felt betrayed by my body. Goldie was giving me no signs that she was distressed. Her body was relaxed, her movements slow and gentle. I had no reason to *think* she was going to hurt me. “So why did you flinch?” I asked myself, as I engaged in an act of Cartesian mind-body separation. “Because,” I mused, “I’ve never held a Burmese python before.”

You May Find Yourself Encountering a Snake

This article presents a critical ethnographic investigation of human-snake encounters, specifically, staged human-snake encounters, as opposed to the random meeting that might occur when walking a dog along a trail. Encounters—defined and reflected-on events—also are distinguishable from “mere experience,” or a passively accepted flow of events (Turner, 1986, p. 35). The difference between an encounter and “mere experience” is qualitative, not quantitative. It is not the length of time two bodies come into contact that allow an exposure to become an encounter; rather, it is a becoming-together (Shepherd, 2006) or becoming with each other in “a subject- and object-shaping dance” (Haraway, 2013, p. 4). “When a body ‘encounters’ another body . . . it happens that the two relations sometimes combine to form a more powerful whole” (Deleuze, 1970/1988, p. 19). The statement “you may find yourself” encountering a snake attempts to take experience into account (Morton, 2018) and acknowledge that there are no intrinsic elements (or nodes) in a composition (or an entanglement) that guarantee an experience becomes an encounter.

My aim in this ethnographic study of human-snake encounters is to provide empirical observations that illuminate the theoretical insights of

posthumanist scholars like Calarco (2008, 2015), Haraway (2003, 2013, 2016), and Wolfe (2003, 2009, 2012). “Posthumanism in my sense isn’t posthuman at all—in the sense of being ‘after’ our embodiment has been transcended—but is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself” (Wolfe, 2009, p. xv). Posthumanist scholarship in this tradition seeks to de-center the human in an effort to dispel the myth of human supremacy (Jensen, 2016) and allow us to move past the damage of the Anthropocene and into an age of making kin (Haraway, 2016) with the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996/2017, 2010, 2014).

Snakes are particularly provocative creatures to think with, to de-center the human with, because their bodies are so different from ours. No limbs, no eyelids, no eardrums—it is hard for human bodies to relate to a snake. Further, from oral traditions (McNamme, 2000) to the Bible to CGI-filled entertainment (e.g., 2006’s *Snakes on a Plane*), snakes are often understood as *anti*-human, constructed as villains “out to get” humans. Snakes seem to entail “bad relations,” as though any meeting of snakes and human bodies is bound to be detrimental, to the human or snake. In the broad categories of nonhuman animals, there are ones we love, ones we hate, and ones we eat, and snakes often fall into the middle category in Western cultures (Herzog, 2010). Yet, there are people (e.g., docents, rehabilitators, curators, naturalists) who spend their days in “good” composition with snakes. That is, in Spinozan terms, the relations between their bodies are compatible and increases their own power for living (Deleuze, 1970/1988).

The exploration of what is possible when snake and human bodies meet and how snakes can become seen as agents, in the age of the Anthropocene no less, are the focusing questions of this investigation. Although human and snake bodies may take center stage, this is also a study of nonbiotic agents, like museum glass and computer screens. I take an agential realist perspective—an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that observes the “entangled state of agencies” (Barad, 2007, p. 23) of human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors—to studying these phenomena (Barad, 1998, 2001, 2007, 2008; Hekman, 2008).

A snake encounter can be a disruptive experience to an anthropocentric form of ethics as it provides an opportunity to recognize our own animality and the prospect to generate compassion for the more-than-

human world. Snakes can make us profoundly aware of the entanglement of stories and the body of the Other in the generation of agencies. When one young woman told a snake insider I interviewed that she ran over an unidentified snake because she was afraid the snake could get into her car, she was reacting to both the mythic, and often monstrous, narratives of snakes as well as the mysterious movements of their bodies. To come to have a positive encounter with a snake—that is, to share space with a creature whose agency and life-world is unreconcilable with one’s own—is an enactment of *multispecies ethics* (van Dooren, 2019). In this paper, I explore different mediations of human-snake encounters, from viewing snakes on a computer screen to skin to scale contact, and discuss how snake encounters can contribute to multispecies ethics.

Mapping the Terrain: Ethnographic Method of Investigation

During the 2016-2017 academic year, I served as a snake insider for primarily school-age children, kindergarten through fifth grade, and their chaperones at a large natural science museum. I became a snake insider through on-the-job training, having not handled a snake before becoming an educator who co-taught with live animals. This experience is important to acknowledge because it is akin to the stories of many of the snake insiders I observed and interviewed as part of this critical ethnographic investigation. Further, I have actively been involved in a number of animal rights campaigns. These two experiences allowed me to consider discourses surrounding education and captivity in my analysis with an appreciation for multiple perspectives.

Over nine months in 2018, after obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, I engaged in a multi-sited, connective ethnographic (Hine, 2007) study of the field of staged snake encounters (i.e., events in which visitors encounter, through various methods, snakes alongside snake insiders). During this time, I engaged in participant observation (Gold, 1997; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) not only because it recognizes the “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988) resonant with a posthumanist ontological perspective, but also because it affords a richer data collection through engagement in sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015).

Participant observation took place in multiple sites and included activities such as listening to educational presentations in classroom-type settings; walking garden grounds looking for snakes; holding a large

constrictor in one site and doing a two-finger touch of a small constrictor in another (because what constitutes ethical engagement varies site to site); reading and responding to message boards of snake education groups on social media; trying, with a group of children, to imagine my body as a snake's by attempting (unsuccessfully) to move my body without aid of legs, arms, or chin to gain purchase; and spending hours in front of terrariums, watching the snakes and their glass-mediated interactions with human passers-by. Additionally, to facilitate an iterative process of theory building—through *in situ* participant observations and analysis—with theory testing through checking my insights with informants (Charmaz, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019), I staggered interviews with 16 snake insiders. Snake insiders (assigned pseudonyms in this manuscript) come from a variety of educational (e.g., Bachelor of Science in Biology to Master of Science in Environmental Sciences to high school diploma) and occupational (e.g., rescue and rehabilitation to animal control officer to curators and naturalists) backgrounds. Some of the snake insiders also shared stories of their own experiences of going from fearful or unconcerned about snakes to admiring, liking, and respecting them.

A grounded theory approach was taken to build and test theory, including member checking following a preliminary analysis of results (Charmaz, 2003, 2008; Tracy, 2013). Data analysis in the early stages consisted of line-by-line initial coding to generate first-level, descriptive codes describing “what” is present in the data (e.g., “touching the snake,” “looking at the snake,” “describing the snake”). A constant comparative method—comparing data associated with each code and modifying or creating codes to accommodate new data—was employed to create codes in an iterative, reflexive process. I continued proliferating codes until saturation was met. Next, open codes were categorized. Focused coding, which followed categorization and reduced and refined codes, produced second-level, analytic codes that explained and synthesized the data (e.g., “The Effects of Touch” and “Affordances of Different Compositions”). This process yielded my preliminary analysis, which was then sent to participants via email for a final member check. Finally, to explore relationships between categories and subcategories, axial coding (using multiple techniques, such as diagramming) and dimensionalization concluded the coding process and produced the analytic framework of the three tableaus presented in this manuscript (Charmaz, 2014). Tableaus were selected instead of, for instance,

a site-by-site analysis because I found that themes I generated had less to do with site-specificity than with types of mediation. The tableaus were selected to weave together my interviews, observations, and experiences with animal education literature to explore what is possible in different human-snake encounters.

Situating a Snake: The Socio-Historical Context of Human-Snake Relationships

Hundreds of millions of years ago, long before any such creature or concept of *human* emerged, there existed a tetrapod that was the common ancestor to both snakes and humans (Lecointre & Le Guyader, 2006). The descendants of this tetrapod would take many forms, from the easily-understood four-limbed creatures like a salamander and a dog, to the less obvious upright form of humans and bonobos, to the aquatic cetaceans, and the (eventually) limbless snakes and glass lizards (Lecointre & Le Guyader, 2006). We are morphologically distinct from snakes. Often, we are also spatially distinct from them. Greater urbanization not only threatens wildlife habitats and ecosystems (Greene, 1997) but also invites us to background animals in our conscious awareness (Diamond, 2008; Stibbe, 2012), increasing both their physical and psychological distance from us. As we spend increasing amounts of time in anthropogenic and anthropocentric spaces, some come to experience what Richard Louv (2008) calls “nature-deficit disorder,” and alienation from our more-than-human relations. Seeing nature and its inhabitants as something “out there” (Cronon, 1996), snakes become constituted as “others” (Morton, 2018)—creatures we know only through assumptions and only as different—rather than as “ecological associates” (Greene, 1997). Currently, approximately 51% of Americans live with a fear of snakes, some to the extent that a photograph of a snake can induce panic (Brewer, 2001).

Present circumstances may exacerbate the distance(s) between human and snake, but it has long been a difficult meeting of species. There is even evidence that our fear—aversion—to snakes may be innate and the reason we have remarkably good binocular vision (Isbell, 2009; Van Le et al., 2013; Van Strien et al., 2014). Each year, approximately 20,000 people are killed worldwide by the toxins of a venomous snake bite (Kasturiratne et al., 2008). Further, our stories, from the Greek myth of the monstrous Medusa to the origin story of humanity in the Judaic-Christian *Bible* to the

contemporary cultural phenomenon of *Harry Potter*, feature snakes in central and often villainous roles (Rosenfeld, 2019). Thus, a fear and/or feeling of disgust of snakes gets (re)produced through both material (e.g., human fatalities) and discursive practices.

Snake bodies are distressing, and in some cases life-threatening, for many people. However, human bodies are often life-threatening for snakes. “They are perhaps the most maligned group of vertebrates—misunderstood by far too many humans who carry out death sentences at every opportunity” (Lillywhite, 2014, p. xi). Habitat destruction and fragmentation, rattlesnake roundups, and the snake leather trade (Greene, 1997) have led to over 200 species of snake being classified as threatened or endangered (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2017). However, endangerment and extinction are not the determined fates of snake species. The critically endangered Antigua racer has been saved from local extinction and reintroduced into native habitats through conservation efforts aimed at restoring habitat and educating peoples who come into contact with the snakes about their ecological roles (Daltry et al., 2001; Daltry et al., 2017).

There are multiple reasons to care about the success of the Antigua racer and to wish for similar successes for other snake species. From a utilitarian perspective (Corbett, 2006; note: this should not be confused with Singer’s 1975/2009 utilitarian ethics)—that is, considering practical roles snakes have in supporting human life—snakes help human populations by being a primary predator of rodents and snails, who eat both native vegetation and human-planted crops (Greene, 1997). Further, some species have medical significance for humans: the venom of copperheads is being explored as an anticancer agent (Jain & KIumar, 2012).

However, to avoid (re)inscribing anthropocentric value systems that construct snakes and other animals into categories of “resources” (or not) for humans, I focus our attention on two other perspectives that provide the attitudinal substrate for the posthumanist theoretical framework described in the next section. One attitudinal position that facilitates an ethic of care is a moralistic perspective (Corbett, 2006). Whether approaching animals as subjects-of-a-life (Regan, 1983/2004), as beings capable of suffering and thus deserving of equal consideration (Singer, 1975/2009), or from a position of indistinction (which deemphasizes human uniqueness and the human/animal distinction; Calarco, 2015), there are multiple moral arguments for the consideration of “good” and “bad” treatment of animals.

A second attitudinal position conducive to care is an ecological perspective (Corbett, 2006) that considers the role of snake as meso-level predators—both predator and prey in habitats as diverse as oceans and deserts (O’Shea, 2018)—and the interrelationships between snakes and other flora and fauna for the well-being of an ecosystem.

Human-snake relationships are complicated, and their complexities are both highlighted and differentiated in the variety of circumstances in which we encounter each other. Staged human-snake encounters—presented below in three tableaux—offer the opportunity to examine that complexity.

Encountering Snakes: A Field Guide

I present my main themes in a series of three tableaux with theoretical insights integrated into each section. The three tableaux form a metaphorical “field guide” to arrangements of snake encounters, showcasing three unique compositions and discussing the relationalities between the human and more-than-human bodies present in each. The first tableau, which depicts an exchange between people belonging to a snake-centered social media group, shows how images of snakes combined with messages affirming the intrinsic value of snakes can produce shifts in people’s affective experience of and physical reactions to snakes. The second, which portrays a typical day of people viewing snakes in glass enclosures in a museum or zoological setting, discusses the role glass plays in mediating the human-snake experience. The third tableau, which describes settings in which an educator, snake, and audience interact, brings to light what happens when human bodies share the same space as snake bodies and how the snakes can evoke a new human subject into being.

Tableau One: Digital Terrariums

In August 2018, an online discussion group dedicated to providing educational material and a space for discussion of wild snakes (e.g., sharing stories and photographs) featured a post from its administrator. The message stated that while the group strives to acknowledge and respect fears and prejudices with which people may enter the group, the group does not condone killing a snake one encountered because the person was afraid—for one’s self, for a child, or a pet. He stated that there are other solutions to human-snake encounters that do not include a snake’s death.

In response, one group member wrote that she joined the group to help get over her own fear of snakes. She shared a story about her husband: at 50 years old, he had spent his life “killing every snake he saw.” As she continued learning from the group and sharing the group experience and her changing views with her husband, his attitude, like hers, began to shift. Finally, on a camping trip, he “shoo”-ed a snake into a river, rather than kill it. The experience “touched [her] heart,” acknowledging the change of which both she and husband were capable.

The above story is far from a cherry-picked example from this and related online snake-based groups. One person explained that she had been terrified of the snakes at home but because of her experience in the social media group, she now considers them like “pets.” Although framing wild snakes as pets is problematic because it engages discourse and attitudes of human domination and possession of nature, this example still illustrates how the presence of the social media group mediated what had been a bad composition of human and snake bodies. The mediation not only shifted a bad composition to a good composition but transformed a generic, all-encompassing ideation of “snake” into an embodied encounter with a specific water snake.

The examples continue. “I came to this group with that deeply ingrained fear. . . . I am not to the point of putting up a welcome sign in my yard yet, but I would never hurt one,” another group member responded. And another group member put it bluntly:

Changing my lifelong fear and loathing of snakes has been one of the most difficult things I’ve done. I was a charter member of the “kill kill kill” club. But thanks to a beautiful cream and black California King snake, I’m now of the “live and let live” club. Of course, members of snake-based social media groups are self-selected, and while they may come to the groups with self-proclaimed “fear and loathing,” there is still something in them that compels them to join and intra-act with the group. Intra-action captures the idea of a “becoming-with” (Haraway, 2013) and “always-becoming” (Shepherd, 2006) exhibited by some members.

Intra-action signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies . . . in contrast to interaction, which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but

rather emerge through, their intra-action. (Barad, 2007, p. 33)

The infrastructure that supports these groups on digital media—“the screens, wires, servers, protocols, and software” (Bollmer, 2018, p. 6)—may seem “unnatural” (i.e., relegated to the “technology” side of an often-invoked technology/nature binary) and flat (i.e., lacking the depth and richness of a body-to-body encounter). It is tempting to fear that photographs of snakes on social media simply recommit snakes to a “virtual menagerie” (Berland, 2019), a digital collection of animal bodies (re)producing the paradigm of human domination over nature.

However, members of these online groups subvert the notion of technological determinism and a strict technology/nature binary by demonstrating how accessing social media groups is still an embodied activity. Just as one can become frightened by viewing a picture of a snake (Marcum, 2007), members of social media groups illustrate how coming to appreciate snakes through discussion and visual depiction (i.e., photographs and videos shared in the group) can change the way one encounters a snake, body-to-body. By viewing numerous posts by snake insiders that describe snakes as beautiful, their movement as fascinating, or their temperament as docile, visitors are able to encounter differently a creature they feared. One person shared a blog that described her journey from “hatred to appreciation” beginning with one person describing the beauty she found in snakes (Wildlife Center of Virginia, 2018). Further, because visitors are accessing and viewing the content on their devices, whenever and wherever they choose, they are seeing and thinking about snakes in a place where they spend time, as opposed to stagings where visitors go somewhere else to experience a snake body. The embodied nature of viewing digital snakes, combined with the efficacy of human mediators, makes it possible for online discussion groups to produce a composition of digitally-mediated human and snake bodies that has the potential to change relationships.

Tableau Two: The Looking Glass

There are many snakes in this area of a metropolitan museum. There is a corn snake, rat snake, and a hognose. In a different circumstance, the hognose might be attracting attention. They have a defense mechanism in which, when startled, they play dead: they roll over, let their tongue flop out, and may even defecate. However, the hognose—like all of the other snakes

safely situated in a glass terrarium—is resting calmly, and people are only giving it a passing glance. When the snakes move, they attract more attention. “It’s a real snake,” one girl exclaimed, watching a snake move. “It *is* real,” a boy agreed. Some snakes, even when remaining motionless, still attract attention. “Honey, that’s a copperhead,” one woman said to a child. She then turned to another adult-child pair with whom she was walking around the museum and explained that her neighbor brought a copperhead to her house once to show the children, so they would know to keep away from that snake if they ever saw one. “I told him, next time, just kill it,” she continued.

Although venomous snakes, in general, attract attention, the Eastern diamondback got the longest looks and most conversation during my observations. This snake is the most centrally located in this area of the museum, is in the largest terrarium, and is the largest snake “on display.” The diamondback’s size is frequently a topic of conversation, “Whew, big,” one woman commented. “Nana, look at the big one!” another boy directed. If one watched closely enough, the size of the snake and the proximity afforded by the glass barrier enabled viewers to see the snake breathing, to watch the scales expand and separate with each inhale.

The five children gathered around the diamondback may not have been watching the snake breathe, but they certainly seemed engaged with the snake. “He tried to lick you,” one child said to another, referencing the snake’s tongue flicking. The comment was met with giggles and, facing the snake, she replied, “Lick if you like me.” Five more children and two adults come over. “That’s a mean-looking dude,” one adult male proclaimed. He continued, “Imagine walking in the woods and stepping on that.” The children laughed and began to echo “mean-looking dude,” and told other children from their group (they were part of a school field trip, as judged by the matching school tee-shirts they wore) to come look at the “mean-looking dude.”

As some snake insiders point out, terrariums can serve the important function of helping people slowly become sensitized to the bodies and presence of snakes. “People are more likely to go look at it if it’s in a box,” said snake insider Lisa. “They’re like, ‘Oh ok, it’s not going to touch me, so I don’t have anything that I need to worry about.’” Indeed, many visitors came upon the terrarium area and, whether expressing awe or disgust, were drawn to the enclosures. Comments ranging from “I love snakes” to “ew, no” were mainstays of my observational experience. Some adults used it as a chance

to educate children about “good” snakes (e.g., “This is a good snake, he eats copperheads”) and “bad” snakes (e.g., “Stay away from any snakes you see like this”). Children often engaged in “pointing and naming” (Milstein, 2011), making connections between species they recognized and the creatures present before their eyes. Pomykala (2017) details a moving encounter with an Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake at a zoo that inspired her to explore serpentine rhetoric. Pomykala argues that a sensuous moment with a serpent can help us to re-member our embodied existences and be more rhetorically powerful than an ethical injunction against violence upon nature.

Even as the glass serves as a bridge, enabling safe viewing amongst species, it can simultaneously function as a chasm. This vignette demonstrates why some snake insiders reported preferring talking to people about snakes online over having people walk by a terrarium without an educator, docent, or animal caregiver present. Without interpretation by a snake insider, vision becomes the privileged, and the only accessible, vantage point for visitors (for a thorough exploration of the rhetorical nature of visual vantage points function in sites of captivity, see as Milstein [2009]). Although seemingly transparent, the silicate wall obscures much. With the physical barrier, the diamondback is seen as both liking one child and as being a “mean-looking dude” to others. The issue with *seeing* the snake as a friend or foe—beyond the contestable anthropocentric categories—is that the visitors and snakes are experiencing two different places. The terrarium is enclosed in a manner that prevents the odors of snakes from reaching visitors. While visitors stand on carpet, the snake moves and rests on stones and wood bedding. The heat is different depending on which side of the glass you are on. Glass is a “rhetoric of display,” and, like all apparatuses, as it reveals some things (e.g., the opportunity to see the diamondback’s body expand and contract with each breath), it conceals others (e.g., how different the snake’s environment is just on the other side of the glass).

Vision, in isolation of other senses, has an unsavory association with gaze and domination (Haraway, 1988; Milstein, 2009; Pink, 2015), with making judgments from a distance (Abram, 2014). “To see” is a verb loaded with meaning in Western culture. We use it to describe all sensory experience. One snake insider, Marie, said she likes for people to get to touch snakes so they can “see what a snake really feels like.” One adult waiting for a program to start, not knowing how to answer her child’s question,

instructed, “Let’s see what they have to say.” “Seeing” also indicates understanding. When snake insider Olivia responded to a comment with, “I think I see what you’re saying,” “seeing” was a stand-in for comprehension. Thus, when one “observe[s] the natural world from a detached position utterly outside that world” (Abram, 2014, p. 102)—such as on the other side of a glass terrarium—and one “sees” a friend or a “mean-looking dude,” the glass barrier has allowed the person to engage in a “god trick” (Haraway, 1988). And, like all media, as long as the glass is working (e.g., there are no cracks), we do not see its mediation. We do not see the proximity and intimacy the glass allows (e.g., being able to see the tongue flicking of the diamondback, something we likely would not see in the wild, as snakes try to flee from people), nor do we recognize the distance it imposes (e.g., the snake cannot slither away from us to demonstrate the absence of ill intent). These insights into the mediation of glass barriers may help explain how “displaying live specimens also failed to improve students’ attitudes in our research” (Morgan & Gramann, 1989).

Insider Laura offered a suggestion: have a “docent at an exhibit, where they’re not necessarily holding the snake . . . but they would still be able to answer questions and present fun facts.” I decided to act as an informed visitor during one of my observations of the terrariums, wearing a snake-identification T-shirt I bought from a children’s science store. I was standing in front of two rat snakes, aware that they had mated and some of their offspring participated in educational programs. As a woman and child, who had been quickly looking over the snakes, approached, I said, “These two snakes have actually had babies. The babies are juveniles now and sometimes get used in programs.” They smiled, and the woman called out to another adult with children whom she recognized, “Come here,” she requested with excitement in her voice, “these two have had babies!” The other woman turned her head downward to the children and said, “Come on, let’s go see the snakes; they’ve had babies!”

The distance imposed by the glass was mediated by a human presence: my being on the same side of the glass as the visitors and affectionately (the tone of my voice spoke volumes) sharing things about the snakes they were seeing changed the nature of the glass barrier and decreased the distance between human and snake. The snake became less “other”; now, it was a creature who also has babies.

Tableau Three: Skin to Scale Contact

A school group shuffles into a classroom located in the middle of a museum's floor space. The few rows are arranged in stadium-style seating, and windows allow peering outside the classroom and into the rest of the museum. The group does not know what they will encounter in the room, just that they are there to "meet the animals." Two Madagascar hissing cockroaches, a male and a female, make their way around the room, carried on the hands of the educator delivering the program, Irene. The educator then uncovers a tank in the front of the room, which reveals a caiman who pops his mouth open to bare his teeth and bumps against the tank. We—the meeters of the animals—are told he is "feisty," to which some people respond with, "Awww, cute." Irene then announces her next animal greeter: a snake. The mood shifts. Comments like "Whoa," "Ah!," "Oh, no," and "Nobody wants to see a snake," echo around the room. Irene brings out a ball python, and she wraps around Irene's arm and rests her head on Irene's hand. Irene moves around the room, encouraging people to touch the "beautiful" snake who "feels nice and smooth." One adult touches the snake and remarks, "Wow, she feels really smooth," while another exclaims, "Oh! It's not slimy!" With the stadium-style seating, when Irene steps up next to me to allow the row behind the ability to touch the python, I notice the ball python's head is very close to mine. I watch the tongue slip in and out of her mouth, and I wonder what she knows about me that I do not. What chemicals signals am I giving off, and what are they revealing about my body? At the end of the python's journey around the room, Irene asks if there are any questions. A child raises her hand and asks, "Can I hug it?"

In this encounter, which was a typical sequence of events for the educational programs I observed and discussed, visitors first hear about and watch a snake and snake insider interact before having the opportunity to touch the snake. Watching a snake insider interact with a snake can serve as a model, demonstrating both attitudinal and physical responses the insider would like the visitors to perform with the snakes (Morgan & Gramann, 1989). After the observation, the act of touching can generate new feelings about snakes.

The entanglement of snakes and snake insiders.

Watching a snake insider and snake interact in this kind of setting has multiple effects. First, the visual perception is no longer distanced by the medium of glass. While the snake may be ten feet away from an observer's body, the distance between their bodies is now mediated by another human's body (the insider holding the snake) and by the easily traversed elemental media of the room—like oxygen (Peters, 2015)—which has the ability to decrease the psychological distances between the human and snake bodies. Snake insider Malcolm describes it this way:

It's just more 3D if it's in my hands. If it's moving a little bit. If they're able to touch it, then it's just more real than behind glass. It's not as real behind glass. It could be a video behind glass.

Second, the snakes' "moving bodies" has a rhetorical force (Hawhee, 2009) that helps visitors to construct snakes as active agents and re-establish human animality. It can have the effect of, "Oh, I'm an animal, too," snake insider Kara said, or "knowing that you're also a living, breathing thing" said insider Laura. They witness a human and snake engaging one another, with quite-literally entangled bodies. During one observation, Alison, a snake insider, wanted to show the spurs on the ventral side of a ball python, the vestigial remnants of the snake's hind legs. She acknowledged to the audience that it was taking her longer than she expected because she was having difficulty unraveling the snake from her arm. Olivia related a similar experience:

[when the audience sees a large python wrapped around her body] They're like, "Isn't she hurting you squeezing you?" I'm like, "Nope, she doesn't have arms or legs, so she's just kind of using me like a branch or something on a tree," and that people don't really get a lot of the times either. They have control of those muscles, it's not just like an on or off. So, once they just hear talk about snakes in a positive light, you see that starting to turn gears, and that's a new idea for a lot of folks.

Third, snake insiders get the opportunity to see human-snake communication. Snake insiders give a lot of consideration to snake body language, and all insiders offered similar descriptions of what a stressed snake feels like (e.g., jerky movements, head twitching, rapid and persistent tongue flicking, tense muscles, strike poses) compared to a calm snake (e.g.,

more slow and deliberate movements, relaxed muscles, tongue flicking decreasing over time, perhaps resting head. However, they are quick to acknowledge that these behaviors vary more by species and individual; for example, rat snakes, in general, tend to move more than ball pythons, and the movement should not be taken as a sign of stress). With years of handling experience, Lisa reveals an aspect of her relations with snakes that might be surprising for some:

You know I'm definitely a dog person because I can read them. I can understand them. Whereas with cats, I have no clue what they're thinking. It's like one second, you're fine, and then you're not. And it's kind of like the same with dogs as it is with snakes. I don't know why, but I can just tell whenever they're getting upset and when they are calm.

Finally, visitors get a chance to observe how communication helps the snake insider generate a compassionate understanding of the snake and make decisions about how to proceed. Gideon has had occasions where, based on a snake's actions, he has decided to return the snake to the travel case and apologized to the visitors for them not being able to touch. He explains to them:

And whenever I do a program, mammal, bird, snake, it doesn't matter, when I'm pulling it out, I kind of handle it for a while . . . just to get its demeanor. To see, "Okay, are you in the mood or are you not? If you're not in the mood, I'm not taking you out." . . . That's fine. You're telling me you don't wanna come out. I never force my animals to do something they don't want to do. Never, never, never.

However, like all the assemblages presented, the snake holding/being held in the insider's hands does not always rise to the level of an encounter for visitors, nor is it certain to be a positive experience. Irene shared a story of a woman running screaming for an escalator when she saw Irene was holding a snake on the floor below. Katharine understands how the lack of glass changes the immediacy of the snake, and not always for the better:

Some people are okay if it's behind glass, if it's locked up. So, it goes to another level when you're open, in the hand, and the animal's moving, and it's a little less predictable of whether or not it could

actually reach out and touch you or “get you” or whatever their thoughts might be.

Further, not all insider-snake interactions are good compositions. Sometimes, musking occurs, and the room becomes permeated with a foul-smelling odor indicating a snake’s distress. Other times, bites happen, and snake insiders worry how observing such a relation contributes to the larger scene of human-snake intra-action. Teresa described one such experience:

When I was bitten, the snake latched on and did not immediately let go. And there were a group of children and their chaperone around me. And some of the children thought it was awesome, and others got upset. And I didn’t want the children to be super afraid. I didn’t react. I did not even say, “Ow!” I think I said something like, “Oh, wow! That doesn’t usually happen.” And I told the kids, “You know what? This doesn’t hurt, but I need to . . .” He didn’t let go. So, “I need to dislodge the snake.” And unfortunately, what was more important to me in that moment . . . the chaperone decided to start filming on her phone, and I immediately said to her, “Hey, I would really appreciate it if you don’t put this on social media.” Because I understand the importance for making sure the kids don’t get scared, but the last thing I want is something going around Facebook, saying, “Look what happens . . .!”

Part of Teresa’s concern was how the clip could be sensationalized. She explained that bites rarely occur during an interaction, but when they do, they run the risk of confirming the bias that snakes are dangerous. Thus, snake-snake insider compositions reveal a plurality of possibilities. Although insiders often emphasize—in both observed presentations and during interviews—that they have “control” of the snake’s head to assure visitors of their safety from bites, the lived experience of encounters are testaments to the snake’s agency in (co)constituting the event. Insiders may have sufficient grip toward the snake’s head to prevent a visitor from receiving a bite, reducing one affect of the snake, but the snake has other affects. Many insiders I spoke with looked for explanations to the bite (e.g., did the insider forget to wash hands between handling a rodent and handling the snake, was the snake in shed and unable to see well?), but Malcolm embraced the

different relations between bodies that lead to good or bad encounters on different days:

The handling, there again, is another variable that's different from person to person. And even though we're trained, everyone's touch is going to be different from everyone else's no matter what you do. And their smells and the heat of the body and all that. So, some animals can be held for an hour or so, and then they turn around and bite for some reason. So, there is an element of mystery to it, too.

The acknowledgment of the mystery of strikes and bites is a move away from the ideas of human mastery and control. Rather than an educator "controlling the head," the snakes are understood as intra-active partners with desires and movements of their own.

Feeling for yourself.

The second part of this tableau centered around the experience of a snake visitor making skin to scale contact with a snake. Snake insider Teresa explained that despite the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' research showing the benefits of touching, it is not without controversy in the snake insider community. Some fear that touching has become gratuitous and is being allowed "for no educational benefit," said Teresa. However, the insiders I interviewed seemed eager to discuss the transformations they see happening when people touch a snake.

Being able to touch the snake is a powerful invitation for some. During one of Marie's staged encounters, I watched an adolescent male sit in the back of the room with arms folded, eyes closed for much of the encounter. When the opportunity to touch the snake arose, he perked up and took the opportunity to run two fingers along the snake's body—from head to toe, in the direction of the scales, so as not to damage the protective covering.

Beyond the provocative invitation, the ability to touch helps re-situate vision in a multi-sensory experience. Rather than perpetuating a dominant gaze, and reducing agents to objects to be grasped as representations in the mind, looking at and touching the snake puts the sight of the snake into interplay with the other senses and helps enable a visceral engagement with the material world, including embodied others (Pink, 2015). In the same staged encounter with the adolescent, one child proclaimed, "I love the snake's skin." Marie concurred, "Yeah, it isn't slimy." Another child chimed

in, “But why is it squishy?” “You are feeling the snake’s muscles move underneath the skin. You are feeling what is going on underneath,” Marie explained.

Karen Barad (1998) explained how technoscientific practices can make matter matter, how material bodies can come to have social significance. Specifically, she looked at how ultrasonographic images made a fetus “real,” with social and political consequence. Because visuals of snakes’ bodies have long been used in popular culture, often to invite fear, seeing a snake’s body alone may not be enough to make snakes’ bodies matter. Touching, skin to scale contact, helps situate the physical form of the snake differently in one’s corporeal intellect. Through touching, living creatures encounter each other’s stories (Haraway, 2013). Snake insider Kara describes the significance similarly:

I think it’s important just because it makes that animal more real. It’s not like something that’s “oh snakes are out there and it’s not something I even need to think about.” Or you know just have a complete disconnect with. I think the touch really kind of seals that connection with this creature.

Experiencing, “Oh, he’s not slimy” or “I love the snake’s skin” is not a mundane verbalization of sensory experience. These statements are acknowledgments that “we do not even know what a body can do” (Deleuze, 1970/1988, pp. 17-18), which is why snake insiders often ask visitors, “Did the snake feel like what you expected it to feel like?” Laura said it is not uncommon for her to hear, “Oh, I never expected a snake to feel like this.” The touch offers embodied, material confrontation to an ideational construct.

Learning something new about the snake—challenging presuppositions about their bodies and their affects (Stibbe, 2015)—is one affordance of the physical contact between humans and snakes. Another possibility is a recognition of one’s “becoming,” of being able to see one’s self as a different person than the person who entered into the staged encounter. A group of three young girls sat next to me, undecided about whether or not they were going to touch the black rat snake coming around the room. After I touched the snake, they followed suit, and one child turned to me, looked me in the eyes, smiled, and proclaimed boldly, “I like snakes!” Laura recalls being told by visitors, “I didn’t think I was brave enough to pet

the snake” or being surprised that they were “able to be in the same space as a snake.”

Multiple insiders described visitors commenting something along the lines of, “Wow, I touched a snake today, and I didn’t die.” There is enough of an expectation for a bad relation—a lethal relation—that touching a snake and “nothing bad happens” can be a powerful disruption for one’s internal understanding of “snake.” Some insiders express concern that the experiences may be so positive that people come out feeling *too* comfortable with snakes and attempt to pick snakes up in the wild, risking re-entering a composition in which the human, snake, or both get hurt. The insiders strive for the staged encounter to navigate a space between a detrimental fear of what nature can do to you and a detrimental sense of mastery over nature; they strive for a harmonious encounter from which both species increase their power of living.

From Multispecies Encounters to Multispecies Ethics

A lingering question from each tableau is *how can these various multispecies encounters encourage multispecies ethics?* Multispecies ethics can be defined as “one that takes seriously the fact that all life, including human life, occurs with fundamental and constitutive relationships with other kinds of beings, living and not” (van Dooren, 2019, p. 7). A multispecies ethics embraces the sharing of worlds. To share worlds with other beings is to exist in a state of commonality and distinction with a recognition that many beings understand, inhabit, and “do” their own unique lives and relationships, even in this shared space of Earth (van Dooren, 2019). Snakes are good companion species for thinking “shared worlds.” We traverse much of the same land and sea as snakes, yet we travel quite differently. Each of the three tableaus makes manifest different commonalities and distinctions between human and snake lives, and each mediated encounter has a different rhetorical force in the contemplation of multispecies ethics.

The first tableau focused on the experiences of people on social media groups dedicated to snake identification and education. Although this was an “unnatural” setting, people were able to visit these groups and transport what they learned into their physical encounters with snakes. This suggests that virtual reality (VR) programs could be productive in changing attitudes and values toward snakes. An obvious benefit of VR would be the ability to encounter snakes without snakes being kept in captivity. However, there are

reasons to be cautious of the so-called “empathy machine,” and high among them are the limits of empathy. Bollmer (2017) argues that any media that attempt to invite empathy by providing a first-person account of what it is “really like” for another is actually a way of assimilating the Other into the self, and thus stands in the way of sharing worlds. Bollmer’s argument cautions against the development of VR experiences that attempt to provide a first-person experience of being a snake. An alternative VR experience that could better elicit multispecies ethics would pair a snake encounter with a knowledgeable and compassionate snake insider with the first-person perspective of the person in the VR headset.

The second and third tableaux both featured snakes in captivity. Whether the snakes were touched or left alone in their terrariums, they were all kept in the physical and psychological conditions of captivity. Marino (2019) explains that captivity features two important elements. First, those held captive are dependent on the captors and their will is subject to the captor’s will. Second, the captor benefits from the confinement of those held in captivity. In such conditions, a multispecies ethic of world(s) sharing is hard to realize. However, Petto and Russell (2017) acknowledge that animal-based learning can foster a *humane attitude* that encourages people to appreciate animals’ natural lives, their role in their environment, and the costs to animals of being held in captivity. However, to produce the conditions in which a humane attitude is likely to emerge, the conditions of captivity and the animals’ well-being have to be taken into *active consideration*. The animals’ presence in captivity needs to be part of the conversation.

“There can be no generalizable or final answers to these questions. Rather, ethics is about what Haraway (2016) has called ‘staying with the trouble’” (van Dooren, 2019, p. 9). Each mediated encounter with snakes invites ethical questions that are unique to each situation and each particular instantiation of that situation. We must acknowledge that an ethical solution is always partial and incomplete, and we should maintain an active consideration in how we share our worlds with snakes whenever and wherever we encounter them. The hope of each of these tableaux is that those ethical questions extend beyond the particular moment of encounter and become a practice of active consideration.

Conclusion

Goldie, the python discussed at the start of this journey, reminded me of the complexities of intra-action. I met Goldie two years after working as a snake insider and a year into my ethnographic exploration of human-snake relations. I did not expect to be startled, momentarily frightened, when her head came near mine. But then again, her ancestors and mine have been killing each other for millions of years (Greene, 1997; Isbell, 2009), and I do not know what memories rest deep in the DNA of my body, or her's. This encounter gave me a sympathetic reading of our villainous snake stories. Deleuze (1970/1988, explaining Spinoza's (1677/2000) concepts of "good" and "bad," describes that Adam (and Eve, I might add) was instructed to "not eat of the fruit" not because it was evil or forbidden, but because the fruit would enter into relations with Adam's body that did not accord with Adam's own essence; that is, the fruit was poisonous to Adam. Perhaps snakes function similarly in our stories: as a caution, to warn us snake bodies can and may enter into a harmful relation with our bodies. However, Goldie's steady reaction to my fearful jolt helped me shift from sad passions of fear and shame (for being afraid) to something more pleasurable. Despite what could be labeled a "prey response" on my end, Goldie's muscles did not tense; she did not pull her head back into strike position, nor did she make any jerky movements. Her head began to move away from mine, as the bulk of her body continued to rest entangled with my forearms, pressed against my upper abdomen. I smiled at her, and I held her with more joy than in the moments *before* I flinched at her presence.

Snakes are "event-al subjects themselves . . . capable of constituting an event for which, and in response to which, a subject might come into existence" (Calarco, 2008, p. 13). Often maligned and treated as mindless automata reacting solely on "instinct," various modes and configurations of meetings between human and snake bodies can produce the joyous realization that these different corporealities can enter into good, or harmonious, composition with one another. As we strive to be(come) ecological in the Anthropocene, making kin with distant species like snakes is one way to embrace a multispecies ethics of shared worlds, extend our web of relations (Abram, 2014; Haraway, 2016), challenge human exceptionalism (Calarco, 2015; Jensen, 2016), and remind ourselves that, "All earthlings are kin in the deepest sense" (Haraway, 2016, p. 161).

Importantly, this ethnographic investigation illustrates that exposure to a snake is not a guarantee that a human will actually *encounter* the snake

(i.e., entering into a subject- and object-shaping dance). In addition to visitors' own convictions of their presuppositions or level of fear, which may prohibit them from being able to engage in an encounter, various media are important actors in the meetings of human and snake bodies. This ethnography showed how some members of a snake-based social media group resist notions of technological determinism. Human mediators who (re)direct attention to the snakes and their agencies played an important role in all three types of stagings, which supports Morgan and Gramann's (1989) study of the effectiveness of wildlife education programs altering attitudes and knowledge about snakes. In this way, snake insiders can act as allies through their mediation of the encounter and are positioned well to engage people in discussions of multispecies ethics. Further, a key take-away from the different tableaux is the recognition that an intimate encounter, such as seeing an educator hold a snake, can be distancing if it fails to get visitors to think differently about snakes beyond the space of the encounter. A distant encounter (e.g., viewing online pictures of and stories about snakes from around the globe) can produce local change when visitors are able to use their emotional experiences from digital viewing to respond differently to the next embodied snake body they come across.

At its most productive, staged human-snake encounters generate such a space for human and snake kinship to be possible. Between the often-surprising language of human mediators (e.g., referring to snakes as "friends" or explaining their beauty) to the unexpected sensorial experiences of touching a snake, sometimes an epiphany occurs. An epiphany like the sudden realization, "I like snakes!" is both a process of identification (i.e., understanding the snake as an individual "being-in-the-world" that is intersubjectively sensing you simultaneous with your sensing the snake) and distancing (i.e., a distancing of the individual from the idea of "human," a de-centering of the human; Marchesini, 2017, p. 3). This epiphany is an embodied realization of Calarco's (2015) "indistinction" approach to human-nonhuman animal relations and can afford fertile cognitive and emotional ground for developing a multispecies ethic. Engaging animals from an affective and intellectual position of indistinction is one way to help renew our visceral connection to the world (Abram, 2014) and to create a sense of being-together (Shepherd, 2006) in shared worlds. Indistinction is not a negation of self; rather, the experience of always-becoming and becoming-with affords an "expanded sense of self" (Shepherd, 2006, p. 24). As selves

arise by or through relations with others (Shepherd, 2006), being with more diverse selves—including more-than-human selves—affords a greater opportunity for more diverse *becomings*. Perhaps you will even find yourself (re-) *becoming animal* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

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JCAS Editorial Objectives

The *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* is open to all scholars and activists. The journal was established to foster academic study of critical animal issues in contemporary society. While animal studies is increasingly becoming a field of importance in the academy, much work being done under this moniker takes a reformist or depoliticized approach that fails to mount a more serious critique of underlying issues of political economy and speciesist philosophy. JCAS is an interdisciplinary journal with an emphasis on animal liberation philosophy and policy issues. The journal was designed to build up the common activist's knowledge of animal liberation while at the same time appealing to academic specialists. We encourage and actively pursue a diversity of viewpoints of contributors from the frontlines of activism to academics. We have created the journal to facilitate communication between the many diverse perspectives of the animal liberation movement. Thus, we especially encourage submissions that seek to create new syntheses between differing disputing parties and to explore paradigms not currently examined.

Suggested Topics

Papers are welcomed in any area of animal liberation philosophy from any discipline, and presenters are encouraged to share theses or dissertation chapters. Since a major goal of the Institute for Critical Animal Studies is to foster philosophical, critical, and analytical thinking about animal liberation, papers that contribute to this project will be given priority (especially papers that address critical theory, political philosophy, social movement analysis, tactical analysis, feminism, activism and academia, Continental philosophy, or post-colonial perspectives). We especially encourage contributions that engage animal liberation in disciplines and debates that have received little previous attention.

Review Process

Each paper submitted is initially reviewed for general suitability for publication; suitable submissions will be read by at least two members of the journal's editorial board.

Manuscript Requirements

The manuscript should be in MS Word format and follow APA guidelines. All submissions should be double-spaced and in 12 point Times New Roman. Good quality electronic copies of all figures and tables should also be provided. All manuscripts should conform to American English grammar spelling.

As a guide, we ask that regular essays and reviews be between 2000-8000 words and have no endnotes. In exceptional circumstances, JCAS will consider publishing extended essays. Authors should supply a brief abstract of the paper

(of no more than 250 words). A brief autobiographical note should be supplied which includes full names, affiliation email address, and full contact details.

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