



Becoming-cat or what a woman's body can do

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Abstract

Drawing on a body of literature that considers narrative meaning emerging in intra-species entanglements, in this paper I read Gwen John's letters revolving around her relationship with the many cats she lived with throughout her life. I am particularly interested in throwing light at moments when a woman's body makes strong connections with the animal's body blurring the boundaries between humans and non-humans through a cosmological ethics of care. In doing so, I follow trails of Deleuze's and Guattari's idea of becoming-animal, as it is fleshed out through a narrative analysis of a modernist woman artist's letters.

Keywords

becoming-cat; intra-species encounters; holey spaces; letters; narratives women artists

Epistolary narratives of intra-species relations

I learnt so much at those two visits. I didn't know how much till now. Some things I had found out but it was satisfactory to have them confirmed and expressed well. For instance, I said 'a cat or a man, it's the same thing', you looked rather surprised. I meant it's an affair of volumes.¹

In August 1936 Gwen John, wrote to her friend Ursula Tyrwhitt, a letter containing a significant albeit strange statement: 'a cat or a man, it's the same thing ... it's an affair of volumes.' What did she mean by that? A careful examination of her correspondence indicates that the extract above concentrates in a rather radical and provocative way John's ideas around art in general and painting techniques in particular. In this paper I read John's letters revolving around her relationship with the many cats she lived with throughout her life. I am particularly interested in throwing light at moments when a woman's body makes strong connections with the animal's body blurring the boundaries between humans and non-humans through a cosmological ethics of care. In doing so, I follow trails of Deleuze's and Guattari's idea of becoming-animal, as it is fleshed out through a narrative analysis of a modernist woman artist's letters. The paper draws on archival research I carried out with Gwen John's two extended bodies of correspondence: a) her love letters to Auguste Rodin, housed in the Archives of the Rodin Museum in Paris; and b) her letters to her friend and fellow student at the Slade, Ursula Tyrwhitt, housed in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth.²

Gwen John (1876-1939) was born and grew up in Wales and her talent for painting was supported by her middle-class family. She studied at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London but lived and worked in Paris and the nearby Meudon from 1904 till the end of her life. She met Auguste Rodin while posing as a model for a monument to Whistler and fell passionately in love with him. During the ten years of their affair (1904-1914) and beyond it, till Rodin's death in 1917, she wrote passionate letters twice and sometimes three times a day. As a young artist John lived in a series of studio apartments in the Montparnasse area, which were usually the epistolary places her

¹ NLW MS 21468D, ff.180v.

² I have written elsewhere about the epistemological challenges and methodological approaches in doing narrative research in the archive from a new materialist perspective, but there is no space to expand on this within the limitations of this paper (see Tamboukou, 2016).

letters were written from. John's love letters to Rodin are extremely interesting both in content and in form; they offer rich insights in the minutiae of a young woman artist in the urban spaces of modernity. Her letters about her cats are included in this body of correspondence.

Although John's work was mainly revolving around portraits of women and young girls, her art had moved beyond the conventions and constraints of figurative painting: portraits were merely treated as pictorial problems, Cézannean motifs, canvasses for experimentations with lines and colours. (see Foster 1999) In this context 'a cat or a man is the same thing' for a painter: visual images releasing sensations and forces. Yet, the juxtaposition of the figure of 'the man' to that of 'the cat' as an exemplifying metaphor for the argument of the artist is not accidental in John's epistolary discourse. John lived surrounded by cats till the end of her life: she loved them passionately, wrote many letters about them and painted and drew them. Her emotional attachment to her cats has been well noted, documented and discussed in her biographies and biographical sketches (Chitty, 1987; Roe, 2002), always intertwined with sexual insinuations around her well-known affair with Auguste Rodin and her sexually ambiguous relations with other women, mostly artists:

Flodin (also Rodin's lover) encouraged Gwen John to draw. She even invited her to share a model in the evenings ... Once Gwen John infuriated Flodin by drawing her with a deep décolletage ... Then Flodin threw herself on the bed and Tiger scratched her. She told Gwen it was a good thing she had a cat and not a baby. She'd look a fool going around with Rodin's brat on one arm and a cat on the other. Gwen John agreed it was a good thing. (Chitty, 1987, p. 70)

Moreover, John's cat paintings have always been included in her exhibitions and used as images for the Tate Gallery merchandise; hence we may drink coffee in a cup with the figure of one of her favourite cats, Edward Quinet, on it. What has been barely noted or discussed however is John's serious engagement with scientific discussions

around animals in general and cats in particular, as revealed in the following undated letter to Julie³:

I read a book by Buffon that I bought at the riverbank last week, but I am disappointed with what I read in it. I had seen that he had a chapter on cats and that's why I bought it, since there are many things on natural history and I need to be educated. I don't think highly of Buffon at the moment. He has not observed cats well and the things that he says are wrong 'and that these animals, particularly when they are young and gentle, they have at the same time an internal badness, a pervert character that their training can only mask.' All this is wrong but I can see that someone who has not observed cats in a semi-wild or wild condition can have such an opinion. However, a naturalist has to observe more in depth. It's natural that people in general don't like cats as much as dogs; maybe because cats only love those who are good with them and they are not only interested in the human race like dogs, but they are interested in the entire nature. Therefore they are more independent than dogs. Moreover every cat has its own distinctive character like us. I have so much to say on this subject.⁴

There are many interesting observations and statements in the above extract. John's main argument is that Buffon's analysis does not seem to be grounded on careful observation of cats, particularly those 'in a semi-wild or wild condition.' Notwithstanding Buffon's recognition as the most celebrated naturalist of the eighteenth century, John considers herself much more knowledgeable on this subject, which means that she must have observed cats within urban environments and beyond. Her knowledge is experiential but allows for a nuanced analysis of the character of cats, particularly in comparison with dogs as perhaps the companion species par excellence. Moreover, although cats are initially considered as a species, they are not homogenized: like humans they have 'distinct characters' and in this light, they have the capacity of forming unique relations with other human and non-human animals. As put in another letter to Julie: 'the cat amuses me a lot when I am in bed,

³ Julie was John's imaginary confidante and her letters to Julie were actually addressed to her lover Auguste Rodin.

⁴ MR/MGJ/B.J4 letters to Julie, undated, not localizable.

she talks a lot now in a way that is very expressive and totally different when she talks to me than when she talks to her kitten.’⁵ What is further significant in John’s perception of cats is their independence. Notwithstanding its anthropocentrism, what we can trace in John’s discourse are metonymical signs of her own desire for independence as an admirable and perhaps unreachable state.

The recognition of difference as an ontological condition for humans and non-humans is therefore central in John’s epistolary discourse around cats in general and her own cats in particular. Her relationship with her cats is tightly intertwined with the ethical consequences of this recognition of difference that Felix Guattari (1995) has lucidly theorized. Revisiting the project of subjectivity in his final work, *Chaosmosis*, Guattari has argued for an ethical choice “of being not only for oneself, but for the whole alterity of the cosmos and for the infinity of times.” (1995, p.53) He has particularly stressed responsibility as an ethical stance that would re-establish broken connections between and amongst, humans, non-humans and the environment:

How do we change mentalities, how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity—if it ever had it—a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life on the planet, for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species such as music, the arts, cinema, the relation with time, love and compassion for others, the feeling of fusion at the heart of cosmos? (pp.119-120)

What I therefore argue in this paper is that John’s desire to understand the feline and her engagement with cats as part of her everyday practices, creates a grounded exemplar of this ethics of responsibility and foregrounds gendered interventions in the ethics of responsibility and engagement with ‘the cosmos’. Moreover, John’s letters about her cat leave traces of *lines of flight*, attempts to escape constrictions and conventions of being in the world; they further deploy strategies to redefine conditions of existence laid down by the *molar* order and release intense forces of desire that leave her body free to affect and be affected and thus experiment with possibilities of *becoming other*.

⁵ MR/MGJ/B.J4 letters to Julie, undated, not localizable.

Lines of flight, *molar orders* and *becoming-other* are critical notions in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical writings, particularly elaborated in their collective work, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988). A common aspect in all these notions is an understanding of the world as an open-ended dynamic process, within which reality, power and desire are entangled in complex *assemblages*. Unlike institutions, structural systems, identities and axes of difference—which are the usual terms deployed in analysing the social—*assemblages* do not have any fixed organization, structure or centre; they are rather networks of connections, always in flux, assembling and reassembling in different ways. *Assemblages* are thus emergent features of relationships and can only function as they connect with other *assemblages* in a constant process of becoming.⁶

Deleuze and Guattari's theorisation of *assemblages* is actually traversed by different modalities of lines, including, *molar lines* keeping *assemblages* together, *molecular lines*, renewing and changing *assemblages* and finally *lines of flight* [lignes de fuite] that escape *assemblages* and connect them to the outside, thus initiating processes of *becoming other*. In Deleuze and Guattari's words: 'There is always something that flows or flees, that escapes the binary organizations, the resonance apparatus and the overcoding machine: things that are attributed to a "change in values", the youth, women, the mad, etc.' (1988, p.216)

Assemblages are further related to a group of spatial notions in Deleuze and Guattari's geophilosophy: *striated* and *smooth spaces*, *territorialisation* and *detrterritorialization*. *Striated spaces* are hierarchical, rule-intensive, strictly bounded and confining. In this context, processes of *territorialisation* 'define or sharpen the spatial boundaries of actual territories' Manuel DeLanda has noted (2006, p.13), but they also work towards solidifying the often-moving grounds of the assemblage thus 'increasing its internal homogeneity' (2006, p. 13).

'But there are always forces of *detrterritorialization*, *lines of flight*', Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p.474) argue, 'that shatter segmentarities and open up smooth spaces that are unmarked, dynamic and create conditions of possibility for transformations to occur' (p.474). Moreover, there is no dualistic opposition in this configuration; as a matter of fact, the world is being experienced as a continuum of striated and smooth spaces:

⁶ There is a burgeoning secondary literature around assemblages. For an overview see among others Kinkaid, 2020.

'smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space' (p.413). Processes of territorialisation are therefore always antagonistically related to processes of deterritorialisation, which 'destabilize spatial boundaries' (2006, p.13) and once again create earthquakes in the grounds of the assemblage.

In thus following *lines of flight* in John's epistolary narratives revolving around her cats, I trace the emergence of narrative meaning in discourses revolving around intra-species entanglements. David Herman's (2018) work on the importance of developing narratological theories that go 'beyond the human' underpins my own inquiries in letters that unfold within different frames of reference. How can narratives express modalities of experience emerging from interspecies entanglements, Herman has asked and how can narratological theory make sense of such encounters and their effects? In responding to these questions Herman has persuasively argued that 'telling different kinds of narratives about human's relationships with non-human others has the potential to alter understandings of our place within a more-than-human world, and hence of what constitutes or defines the human' (2018, p.4).

In this context, my archival research with John's letters has shown that her life-long relationship with her cats, challenges stereotypical understandings of 'the woman and her cat' (see Jones, 2005), but also adds intense corporeal and visceral forces in the portrait of an artist who has been mostly presented as an ethereal creature devoted to the spirit of her art and to her conversion to the Catholic faith, as a result of her attachment to Rodin (see Foster, 1999). John and her cats or rather the cats and their John create an *assemblage* of human and non-human bodies, enacting material, embodied and en fleshed forces that matter in our understanding of modernist women artists and the socio-cultural contexts within which they lived and worked.⁷ It goes without saying that the paper draws on lines of a burgeoning literature in the area of critical animal studies, but given its limitations it does not engage in the hot debates within this field.⁸

⁷ For a rich discussion between embodiment and en fleshment, see Huzar 2021.

⁸ For a recent overview of this field, from a posthumanist perspective, see Cudworth and Hobden, 2018. Dona Haraway's work has been foundational in this field and her disagreement with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *becoming animal* is well known (see Haraway 2009, 27-30).

Cats as Companions and as Epistolary Signs

'Eily sent me a letter—I must answer it—she said she admires me because I have two aims, a life with two aims or something like that. What are they? Does she mean the cat for one?'⁹ In the letter above, written to Tyrwhitt on July 12th, 1908, John was reflecting on the message of a letter she had received from their mutual friend and former fellow student at the Slade, Elinor Mary Monsell.¹⁰ If there were two aims in her life— and painting was surely one of them—her love for cats was the second best she could think of. Notwithstanding the humorous irony of this epistolary line, cats became for John a saturating and catalytic presence in her life and a constant theme of her letters to her friends, lover, patron and acquaintances.

Exchanging news about her cat would often sustain the sequence of correspondences or resume broken lines of communication. When Dorelia McNeil—John's companion during a walking tour in France in the autumn of 1904—left Paris to follow a lover in Belgium, the first message she sent after a long silence was a postcard from Bruges with a one-line message: 'How is the cat?' (Chitty, 1984, p.66) Later in the same year, when McNeil wrote again to say that she was expecting a baby, John's response was that her own *ménage* news was rather gloomy since 'the cat's kitten had got ill and died.'¹¹

There is a constant juxtaposition in John's letters between the care and love for cats and children, that sometimes creates tensions and misunderstandings as recounted in the following undated letter to Julie, written on a Thursday night between 1906 and 1907:

My concierge has sent her child to the country and she has become sad and silent. I told her: "Oh, I understand why you are worried—I would be the same if I were separated from my little cat! She seemed a bit offended as if she considered her child to be superior to my little cat! As for me I don't see any superiority in her child. My little cat is so good and sensible. She is never naughty! Or very rarely and then this shows that she is afraid of somebody.

⁹ NLW MS 21468D, f.24.

¹⁰ See Lloyd-Morgan, 2004: 45.

¹¹ Lloyd-Morgan, 2004, p.36.

Sometimes she is stubborn and in a rage, but I like better a cat that puts herself in a rage instead of screaming in a sorrowful way as cats do in general ... Excuse me Julie, if I talk so much about my cat, but for me she is more important than a person.¹²

Not only is her cat equally important and maybe better behaved than a child, she is also quite a character and obviously better than other cats. As already discussed, John firmly thought that animals in general and cats in particular were as differentiated as humans. As put in another undated letter to Julie written on a Thursday afternoon:

Are all humans, humans and all animals, animals? I think that some people are other things than humans and some animals are other things than animals. My little cat is half tiger and half little girl. But sometimes she seems to me older ... But I know that people find in nature clear-cut lines.¹³

Clearly, the boundaries between species and the nature of species as categories are contestable and John and her cat(s) are constituted in terms of social relations that Donna Haraway (2003) has theorized as 'significant otherness.' John seems to be aware of the audacity of such a position and is sometimes ambivalent about it, but also grateful to her friends for accepting it. As put in a letter to Tyrwhitt, written on June 1st, 1908:

You are always proving how wonderful you are, a fact which you knew already, why will you insist upon it? The last unnecessary demonstration is the mention or mentions of my *petite chatte*. Yes, I see you know, she is very, very, important, perhaps the most important thing—but that ought not to be, *n'est-ce pas?*¹⁴

While expressing her ambivalence about her friend's approval of her passionate attachment to her cats, John seems to go beyond the notion of 'significant others', projecting Rosi Braidotti's idea that 'the animal can no longer be metaphorized as other, but needs to be taken on its own terms', within the wider realm of 'the neovitalist

¹² MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie, undated, non-localizable.

¹³ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie, undated, non-localizable.

¹⁴ NLW 21468D, f.21a.

immanence of life' (2009, p.528) In this context it is no wonder that cats become constant companions in John's life and are consequently very much included in her epistolary cartographies of the city, a theme that I will discuss next.

Real and Imagined Spaces, Human and Non-Human Animals

As her correspondence reveals, John was always on the move, while living and working in Paris, between her room and the 'outside'—the Parisian, streets, gardens and the surrounding countryside. The detailed way in which her letters describe interior spaces and particularly the anxiety of finding a room, usually involves a reference to her cats: 'I will never find such nice wallpaper ... Also in a different room there will not be a courtyard for my cat to run and people will cause problems about the cat maybe because the concierges don't like having cats in the houses.'¹⁵

John's cats are cherished companions when she stays in her room: they keep her company when she paints, reads or writes letters and sometimes their bodily traces are included in the *assemblage* of the epistolary materiality: 'I wrote to you some time ago but the letter was left on the table and is now covered with Edgar Quinet's footmarks. I have just been singing "Alice Ben Bolt" but Edgar Quinet does not like it and bites my chin.'¹⁶

Sometimes, John is compelled to remain indoors and paint the cat, even though she had planned a trip out: 'I drew my little cat today ... I read a lot and at the end of the day when I was planning to get the air the cat took so many nice poses and was so tranquil that I started drawing.'¹⁷ But the cat also becomes John's companion during her walking expeditions in the Parisian boulevards and gardens or the surrounding countryside:

This morning I woke up at seven o'clock and went on the boat. My Master has told me not to take my little cat in the country again. But I believed that if I attached her on a lead it would not be the same thing ... I got off at the station before Suresnes and walked at the riverside till I found a place with

¹⁵ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

¹⁶ Letter to McNeil written in Spring 1906, Lloyd-Morgan 2004, 39.

¹⁷ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

shadow by the river ... The cat was running in the forest but always attached by the string. There was nobody there and we were happy ...¹⁸

Being in the countryside in the company of her cat is depicted as a state of happiness par excellence in John's letters. This is a precarious happiness however, often disturbed by the presence of intruders as the letter above goes on recounting:

... From time to time a man would hang around me and sometimes begin a conversation. I wasn't afraid because the street was very near and there were always people there and I didn't have to do anything else but go towards the street so that the man could see that I didn't want to have a conversation. Once a man told me 'Oh, I would like to be the cat of a Miss like you!'¹⁹

John has written many detailed letters about experiences of harassment while moving out and about. Her letters recounting her adventures of searching for her cat that went missing in the Meudon countryside for about a month in the summer of 1906 and then again in 1907 are however quite astonishing, unfolding extravagant narratives, as I will further discuss.

Narratives of becoming-cat

I am now a little savage myself and yesterday I was brown everywhere like a girl of the woods because I have been naked in the sun many times, since as I have told you, nobody enters here ... I think I should live like a savage girl in the forest, maybe for two months! I am under a small tree, which is covered by a climbing plant, making a kind of roof. I have many things here, shawls as coats for the nights, writing material, etc. I feel like Robinson Crusoe.²⁰

Written from a hideaway in a wooded area of Meudon the letter above paints a dramatic picture of a single woman looking for her lost cat in the semi- wilderness of

¹⁸ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

¹⁹ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

²⁰ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

the countryside surrounding Paris. John's adventures of desperately searching for her cat have been recounted in detail in the many letters she wrote to Rodin and her friends in the UK. The cat would usually and repetitively go missing particularly during the summer months and John would spend days and nights looking for her. During these extended periods, she would undergo a lot of harassment and bullying, particularly when she was out at night:

But men were following me and I was afraid to be seen in the street alone and also I did not want to move away from the cat. I was walking for protection very near a man and a woman and the men who had been following me went ahead and when they turned round a corner I went back running very quickly and I hid myself in the dark side of the street that went straight up. There I waited for many hours till all footsteps had stopped and sometimes it seemed to me that I could hear my little cat, not very far from me, near the houses where she had disappeared. I was very unhappy, I was hungry and cold.²¹

Apart from the bleak picture of 'an odd' woman desperately looking for her cat in the dark streets of a little provincial town, the letters about the lost cat unfold many interesting themes around gendered spaces, solitude, fear and human communication. Moreover, boundaries between humans and non-humans are blurred, while unconscious projections emerge in the way the love for the master is interwoven with the love for the cat in the order of the epistolary discourse:

Two ideas are fixed in my mind ... First that my little cat has died from hunger, and the other that I have lost the love of my Master ... I believe that he will not love me anymore, not only because I have not looked after my little animal, but also because I will be bored and troubled without my cat and for this I won't be beautiful any more and I won't welcome his visits in my house very often ...²²

²¹ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

²² MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

The causalities drawn in the above letter are indeed inconsequential and disjointed. However, they release strong affective forces that create a *plane of consistency* which I wish to map following lines of *becoming-animal* in Deleuze and Guattari's analytics: 'we believe in the existence of very special becomings-animal traversing human beings and sweeping them away.' (1988, p.237)

In taking up the rhizomatic thought of *becoming-animal*, Deleuze and Guattari are very careful to make clear that becoming in their analytics 'is not a correspondence between relations [nor is it] a resemblance, an imitation or identification.' (p.237) Becomings should be conceived within 'the Bergsonian idea of very different "durations," superior or inferior to "ours", all of them in communication.' (p.238) In this sense, the relationship between John and her cat (s) should be charted as a complicated cartography: it is not about John becoming like a cat, neither can her cat be projected as an animal with human properties and characteristics. What is traced in John's letters is her experimentation with what a woman's body can do when released free to be affected by the love of her companion—a non-human animal. As Deleuze and Guattari note, 'starting from the subject one is ... becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes.' (p.272) In this light, John's eagerness to experience the cat's world is an expression of her fear and anxiety about what was happening to her beloved companion, but also a will to be closer to her through entering different spatial and temporal rhythms:

I believed that the cat was in the wild territory behind the houses of the road to Moulneaise. ... There is a territory so sad between these houses and the river ... There are big holes and heaps of garbage and all the plants smell badly and there are rats and frogs that make little noises at night. I have passed many nights there and in the small avenues and streets near the downside of Meudon-waiting for the cries of the cats.²³

²³ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

In looking for her cat in the semi-wilderness of the Meudon countryside vividly depicted in the above extract, John makes connections with the cats' habitat and thus enters the cycle of living like a cat. By being naked in the sun, she 'gradually extracts from each body a set of affects: ways in which the body can connect with itself and the world.' (Massumi, 1993, p.93) According to the letter in the beginning of this section, she becomes 'a nymph in the forest', that is neither a woman, nor a cat but a semi-monstrous figure, a combination of bodily affects, virtual forces and mythological images and names. In bringing together two *molarities*—a woman and a cat—John 'actualizes a selective combination of them' (p.93) on the conscious level of being away from people, sleeping out at night. In doing this, unconscious fears and threatening familial figures are also surfacing, 'childhood family memories pour in' (p.94); they become recognizable and thus enter the narrative prose of the epistolary discourse:

I am still in this plantation. The silence oppresses me ... However, I feel more at home here than in the world. These trees and insects are my friends. When I hear human voices from time to time, I feel worried. I am afraid of people right now. However I have to go into the world to work ... But I am attached to nature because like a spoilt child I fear my father and I search for a refuge close to my mother!²⁴

John's escape in the wilderness while looking for her cat is not 'rational', but can be read as a desire to escape bodily and cultural limitations. As Brian Massumi pithily notes, 'what matters is that the constraint is there, and that there is a counterdesire to leave it behind' (p.94), a force that leaves its traces in the epistolary narrative while rendering it excessive, deviant and hard to follow.

The *event* of the cat getting lost irrupts into the domestic calmness of the content *molar* woman in the tranquility of her room, enjoying the 'sweet patience of the cat that even when disturbed always returns in my arms making ronron.'²⁵ This *event* then sets in motion a series of *events* that *deterritorialize* both the woman and the cat and release forces of *becoming other*. 'Becoming in its simplest expression' notes

²⁴ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

²⁵ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

Massumi (94) 'is a tension between modes of desire plotting a vector of transformation between two *molar* coordinates'—the domestic woman and the cat as a pet, an oedipal animal. But something happens—the cat gets lost—and both the woman and the cat enter a space/time *assemblage* that forces 'each contained and self-satisfied identity to be grasped outside its habitual pattern of action, from the point of view of its potential, as what it is not, and has never been, than what it has come to be.' (95) In this light, John does not become a cat, but she is affectively redefined and forced to rethink the constraints that condition her mode of being in the world. As Deleuze and Guattari note, 'there is a reality of becoming-animal, even though one does not in reality become animal.' (1988, p. 273)

Whilst living in the plantation however, John has to return to the world, to work, clean herself, find a hairdresser to have her hair done, sleep in her bed and even be with her lover. But she always returns to the plantation till her cat is eventually found. There is a repetitive rhythm of going and coming back, a fort/da movement unfolding in the narratives of her letters:²⁶

I slept in my room in Paris this afternoon and drank some hot milk with rum as I have caught a cold and I have a terrible fear that I will be incapable of continuing to search for my cat.

I have come here this morning after having my hair done at a hair-dressers ... I had neglected it a lot ... but now it is very nice and even a bit shining ...

I have brought something so that I can write here [the forest of St Cloud] because now the restaurant makes me feel sick, it is so dirty and filled with bad smells. I have come back here soon after I have posed and I have called for and waited for my cat, but she has not appeared yet ...

... it seems to me that I cannot continue the search without being now with you for some time. I have not lost hope but I am very tired, since I haven't got any chance to rest for a long time ...

These repetitive movements are not necessarily effects of conscious, target-oriented decisions or willful acts. 'Becoming is directional rather than intentional' notes

²⁶ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

Massumi (1993: 95) and 'the direction it moves in may appear unmotivated, 'irrational' or arbitrary from the point of view of *molarity*', which is usually the perspective John's letters have been read from and interpreted.

In moving in-between different spaces and rhythms, rural and urban milieus and 'civilized' or 'savage' states, John extends and expands her body's repertory of responses, experiments with unthought-of possibilities of what a body can do: she dares risk good and/or bad encounters. As Massumi points out, 'becoming is always marginal, a simultaneous coming and going in a borderland zone between modes of action.' (1993, p. 106) John's letters thus leave traces of an increasing complication in how she makes sense of herself and the world around her, responding to an event that has created a rupture in her life—the loss of her beloved cat. By roaming in the semi-wild habitat of the cat, her body's degrees of freedom are inevitably increased and new sensations gradually become part of her lived experiences:

Now the night is about to come. The sky is calm after the storm. Everything is beautiful. I love to think of my Master and I would be totally happy if it were not for the thought of my little cat being perhaps unhappy or sick ... In a while the night will fall with all the sounds that I now know so well. Soon the song of the toads will start around me. Two notes that recall the flute and harmony. It's the moan for love of the toads and the nocturnal whisper of the leaves like the rustle of a train. A dog will lament in the neighbouring farm; the train is about to pass ... I put my lips on this paper to tell you goodnight.²⁷

The nocturnal sounds of the country and the city are mingled in John's experience of sleeping out while looking for her cat; feelings of happiness and anxiety are blurred, and new sensory modes emerge as the sounds of the night create a specific plane of sensibility that bring John closer to non-human animals and the habitat of her cat. By sleeping out, John leaves her body exposed to affect and to be affected and unleashes its capacity to act and to perceive. 'We do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity ... for the outside' Deleuze and Guattari note (1988, p. 240). Dona Haraway has taken issue with the notion of 'the pack' in Deleuze and Guattari's

²⁷ MR/MGJ/B.J4, letters to Julie.

idea of *becoming animal*, arguing against their abstract thought that leaves no ground for understanding and indeed engaging with real living animals:

D&G express horror at the “individuated animals, family pets, sentimental Oedipal animals each with its own petty history” who invite only regression. All worthy animals are a pack; all the rest are either pets of the bourgeoisie or state animals symbolizing some kind of divine myth. All worthy animals are a pack; all the rest are either pets of the bourgeoisie or state animals symbolizing some kind of divine myth. The pack, or pure-affect animals, are intensive, not extensive, molecular and exceptional, not petty and molar—sublime wolf packs, in short. I don’t think it needs comment that we will learn nothing about actual wolves in all this. (Haraway, 2009, p.29)

While I agree with Haraway about the abstractness of Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy, I don’t see it as an impediment in deploying their idea of *becoming animal* as a pathway to understand intraspecies relations.²⁸ Here I align with Braidotti’s pithy observation that ‘de-oedipalizing the relation to animals is a form of estrangement that entails a radical repositioning by the subject’. (2009, p.526) Braidotti sees the process of *becoming animal* at the heart of the posthumanist turn, a materialist approach that posits ‘a shift away from speciesism and toward an ethical appreciation of what bodies (human, animal, other) can do. (p.528) What I therefore see, while reading John’s cat letters is that the experience of ‘the pack’—grounded as the cats’ world at night— transposes not just John but also the oedipalized image of ‘her little cat’, which can now be re-imagined in a different non-human world and outside human relations, taboos and regulations:

I am still searching and my sweet little outcasts were so hungry last night. Now the moon is full, I am going to be out all night before the moon wanes and when the cats make love I run to see if my sweet is one of them (and there are always many overlookers beside the lovers).²⁹

²⁸ A more in depth engagement with this debate goes well beyond the scope of this paper, which unfolds on the plane of Deleuze and Guattari’s analytics from a narratological angle.

²⁹ Letter to Tyrwhitt, NLW MS 21468D, ff. 23-4.

It is by being fascinated, dazzled with the world of nature, the outside, that John experiences a rupture in the grid of identities and subject positions that have overcoded who she is and what her body can do; she thus enters a process of *becoming-other*, opening up new paths, inventing new trajectories, following *lines of flight*. Becoming in this sense is *involutionary*—evolution between heterogeneous terms—a creative process not to be confused with regression, as Deleuze and Guattari point out. (1988, p.238)

John's *lines of flight* would be *reterritorialized* at some point and her becomings would be redirected, since the Law of the Father would eventually impose order. On some occasions the cat would be lost for ever, on others, Rodin's intervention would help her find the cat, as reported in the following letter written on Sunday, July 7th, 1906:

My little cat was found. It was myself who found her but it was through your letter. M. Sauvageux read your letter in front of everybody and people would search and come and talk to me about all the cats they had seen and a man had seen a cat which was very similar. We searched for it with a dog for the whole afternoon, but we couldn't see it and then I waited outside at night and at five o'clock this morning I saw her. I am obliged, it was the first time that I was outside after you had advised me against it and the weather was nice.³⁰

Rodin's letter ended the drama in 1906, although the cat went missing the following year as well. Thus although *reterritorialized* within *striated spaces* and *molar* identities, both the woman and the cat would keep following *lines of flight*: the experience of roaming in the wild had already effectuated transpositions and mutations that could not possibly be annihilated by the return of the same. Becomings 'can only proliferate with carefully formulated group strategies', Massumi has noted, (1993, p.102) if they are not to re-enter overcoded *molarities*. Still what happened in the in-between, the *intermezzo* of *becoming-cat* is catalytic in the radicalization of the future, the possibility of re-imagining female subjectivities, then and now. Although the cat was found in 1906, this would not become a happy end: stability would never impose its *molar* order on John's life and she would go on roaming with or without her cats till

³⁰ MR/MGJ/B.J5, dated letters.

the very end of her recorded life when she became *imperceptible* somehow, somewhere in Dieppe.³¹

The *event* of a lost cat would thus initiate a series of *events* and *becomings*, since what is important to remember here is that there is always a third space between the *striated* spaces of patriarchy and the *smooth* spaces of the female nomad: *the holey space* in Deleuze and Guattari's analytics 'and the way it communicates with the *smooth* and the *striated* in different ways.' (1988, p.500) But what is the function of this *holey space*? As its etymology indicates, it 'hollows out' (Frichot, 2007, p.175) transient spaces, hanging in the *intermezzo*. In this light, the semi-wilderness of the plantation that sheltered a woman at night would become a *holey space* for the unfolding of tactics and affective forces. As John's biographer notes following her letters, in waiting for her cat in the plantation John would actually adopt her cat's body-space rhythms: 'like a cat, she could be still ... sometimes she spent a whole hour watching the activities of ants.' (Chitty, 1981, p.107)

The somehow dreary situation of the plantation where John would sleep at night while searching for her cat, also brings to mind Massumi's reconfiguration of *the holey space* as *the derelict space*: 'holes in habit, what cracks in the existing order appear to be from the *molar* perspective.' (1993, p.104) John's spatial experience of the plantation seems to emerge within the cracks and interstices of the *molar* perspective: she is a *minoritarian* figure, an odd woman sleeping out in the plantation while searching for her cat; but the villagers had given her a kind of bed and the plantation would become a relatively safe hideaway that would keep her close to her beloved companion. As she wrote to Rodin in July 1906:

Don't worry that I will be cold at night; yes I will sleep out, but in a bed. Do you know the planks that separate the wild part of your field from another wild field where there are many trees? This is where my cat was seen and where I sleep ... There is a village woman there with her husband and her little child, they live alone and nobody can enter. Yesterday evening she

³¹ I refer here to the unknown conditions of John's death in Dieppe in September 1939 (See Holroyd, 1997: 556). In 2019, artist Anna Falcini created an event in Dieppe to commemorate the 80th anniversary of John's death (see <https://inbetweenthefoldsareparticles.wordpress.com/2019/09/30/dear-gwen/>), accessed 17-4-2021

made a bed for me, she put a mattress on a bench and sheets and a pillow and many blankets.³²

But while being in the interstices of the semi-wilderness of the Meudon fields and a homely bed temporarily prepared for her, something really cracks in John's rhythms of the perceived spaces of modernity. New possibilities seem to emerge in the *derelict spaces* of the Meudon countryside, since the *derelict space* according to Masumi 'is a zone of indeterminacy that bodies-in-becoming may make their own.' (1993, p.104)

There is a conceptual proximity here between spatial configurations within *holey/derelict spaces* in DeleuzoGuattarian analytics and the Foucauldian *heterotopic* relations of John's spatiality. Charted in the peripheries of dominant hegemonic spaces these 'different spaces' allow *molecular* tactics to be deployed and create conditions of possibility for autonomous zones that are 'intersitial, they inhabit the in-between of socially significant constellations, they are where bodies in the world but between identities go: liminal sites of syncretic unorthodoxy.' (Masumi, 1993, p.105) The *holey space* as a tent for the nomad in Deleuze and Guattari's analytics (1988, p.413) or as an autonomous zone in Masumi's redeployment of the notion as the *derelict space* (1993, p.105) constitutes a plane wherein John's becomings, her real and imaginary adventures, can be mapped within and beyond the *event* of the lost cat.

Becoming-cat, Becoming-other

In theorizing desire as movement, 'a method of doing things, of getting places ... a mode of connection and communication' Elspeth Probyn (1996, p.41) has considered her unique relation with and love for horses connecting it to a love for freedom, 'a desire to become other.' (p.39) But what connections could be traced in the line of becoming-cat? As Thom Sullivan (2009) has pointed out there is a definite line connecting philosophers and cats that goes through Montaignes, Derrida and Cixous:

Catching sight of their cat looking at them interrupts the philosophers, even puts them off their train of thought. Moved to write about this unsettling feeling of being watched attentively by an animal, they reflect upon an

³² MR/MGJ/B.J5, dated letters.

awareness of being in the perceptual world of another creature, and what this might mean. (Sullivan, 2009, p.1)

Sullivan's eloquent discussion of the philosophers' relationship to their cat is particularly attentive to Cixous' dilemma of protecting the life of her cat by restricting her freedom: 'I do not want to open the doorway to death. Yet it is I who bring death into your life! Ah, my love, how can I help wanting all that you want? How can I want all that you want? How can I want against your wishes?' (Cixous in Sullivan, 2009, p. 2) The cat becomes an event in the philosopher's life notes Sullivan, disrupting its spatio-temporal rhythms and raising ethical demands of being looked after and protected.³³

John's response to the loss of her cat seems to follow the ethics of responsibility that Haraway (2003) has raised vis-à-vis companion animals but also Guattari (1995) has flagged up in relation to the planet, the possibility of a future *cosmos*. Drawing on Spinoza's affirmative ethics, Braidotti has also highlighted the ethical dimensions of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *becoming* animal: 'Spinoza's lesson is crucial for Deleuze and Guattari's ethical project. The selection of the affective forces that propel the process of becoming animal or minoritarian is regulated by an ethics of joy and affirmation that transforms negative into positive passions' (2009, p.530). John has followed this ethical *line of flight*, which has ultimately *detrterritorialized* her from patriarchal segmentarities but has also created excessive and hyperbolic possibilities of what a woman's body can do. In following traces of her lost cat, John has transgressed boundaries of *striated* spaces and has wandered in tracks of *smooth* spaces, *becoming-cat*, *becoming other*. Her unpublished poem³⁴ below about her lost cat has frozen some forceful moments of such *becomings* and the responsibility of looking after her cat has become a promise to wait for her return:

Oh my little cat
Savage in the woods
Have you then forgotten

³³ For an overview of philosophical engagements with cats, see Gray, 2020.

³⁴ MR/MGJ.

Your life of other times?
Maybe you are
Crossed with me
But I have tried to understand
Your little heart
I have never become aware of
Your superior
Little mysterious soul
In the body of a cat!
I have had so much pain
Not to have seen you
That I have thought of going
To the country of the dead

But I will be here
If you return one day
Because I have been strengthened
By the god of Love

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National Library of Wales, Archives, Gwen John's papers (NLW /MS)

Rodin Museum, Marie Gwendolen John's boxes (MR/MGJ)

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