Abstract
Recent research has shown that children who have suffered traumatic experiences, such as divorce, illness, or grief – are more likely to confide in their companion animals than in their siblings. Moreover, though these children may suffer later from poor academic performance and mental-health disorders in comparison to non-traumatized children, the study demonstrates that “children with stronger relationships with their pets had a higher level of prosocial behaviour–such as helping, sharing, and co-operating–than their peers” (University of Cambridge, np). While the research has been deemed “new” in terms of its empirical approach to studying human-animal relationships, the argument itself should not be particularly surprising to many lay dog-people: popular culture depictions of children and their companion animals make common currency of the tightly knit and secretive relationship between the child and the “pet.” Donna Haraway has argued, however, that as domestic-animal terminology has shifted over the past several decades – from “pet” to “companion animal”– so too have the dynamics of the […]

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Donna Haraway has argued, however, that as domestic-animal terminology has shifted over the past several decades – from “pet” to “companion animal”– so too have the dynamics of the human-animal relationship: “[n]ew names mark changes in power, symbolically and materially remaking kin and kind” (emphasis added; When Species Meet 135). This presentation works through the potential of this “remaking of kin and kind,” using Margaret Atwood’s novel, Oryx and Crake, to consider the possibility and nature of a “posthuman family.” The protagonist, Jimmy, is caught in tension between the traumatic dissolution of his humanist, nuclear family structure and the emotionally-altering relationships he has with different companion species (per Haraway). Like the real subjects of the above-cited research, Jimmy not only confides in his companion animals, but importantly, they are companion species, in Harawayian terminology, partners in a individual-forming, affective relationship. Specifically, in the formative vacuum left by the personal isolation and emotional estrangement Jimmy feels towards his parents, these animals – the pigoons, the rakunk Killer, and the parrot Alex – become Jimmy’s “posthuman family.”

Presentation speaking notes:
Recently, I came across a study conducted by Cambridge PhD candidate Matt Cassels, which shows that children who have suffered traumatic experiences, like divorce, illness, or grief, are more likely to confide in their pets than in their siblings. Moreover, even though these children may suffer later from poor academic performance and from mental-health disorders in comparison to other children, the study demonstrates that “children with stronger relationships with their pets had a higher level of pro-social behavior – such as helping, sharing, and co-operating – than their peers” (University of Cambridge n.pag.). While the research has been deemed “new” in terms of its empirical method to study human-animal relationships, the
findings regarding confidentiality and pro-social behavior shouldn’t be particularly surprising to many lay dog-people: popular cultural depictions of children and their companion animals make common currency of the tightly knit relationship between children and their “pets.”

The influence and effect of interspecies relatings is at the heart of Donna Haraway’s \textit{companion species} theory, in which she argues that we have never been the perfectly individuated subject that “we” think “we” are. Instead, every seeming individual is a hybrid of inter-species relatings. At the microbial level, we are constructed through relatings with beneficial gut bacteria, without which we cannot live. At the macro level, we are constructed through relationships with environments, technologies, history, and politics. In these micro and macro scales, the fleshly individual is \textit{always} involved in worldly, co-shaping relationships with \textit{companion species}. As she repeatedly claims, “Beings do not preexist their relatings,” and, later, “all that is is the fruit of becoming with” (\textit{Companion 6}; \textit{Species 7}).

But in order to illustrate \textit{companion species} as a theory, Haraway spends significant time in her texts discussing particular companion \textit{animals} – most notably, her canine agility partner, Cayenne. Like the children in Cassels’ study, Haraway roundly acknowledges her affective relationship with her dog, saying that “[She and Cayenne] are, constitutively, companion species. […] Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love” (\textit{Companion 3}). Most important for my purposes, she writes: “I am who I become with \textit{companion species}, who and which make a mess out of categories in the making of \textit{kin and kind}” (emphasis added; \textit{Species 19}).

Yet, Haraway has earlier claimed that “I am sick to death of bonding through kinship and ‘the family,’ and I long for models of solidarity and human unity and difference rooted in friendship, work, […] and persistent hope. It is time to theorize an ‘unfamiliar’ unconscious, a different primal scene, where everything does not stem from the dramas of identity and reproduction” (\textit{OncoMouse} 265). So, if the co-constitutive \textit{companion species} makes a “mess out of kin and kind,” how then does the theory work in terms of “families,” the problematic origin of the humanist subject?

Clearly, Haraway must be considering some aspect of kinship within \textit{companion species}, if not explicitly “family,” despite saying that she is “sick to death” of both. I agree that “family” is, in the oedipal, filial, and anthropocentric perspectives, counterproductive to posthumanism. But I don’t want “to throw the baby out with the bathwater.” I find that the deeply emotional and intimate ties to the idea of “family” can, when extended to include nonhuman animals, be positive and productive in decentering the human family into a larger, inter-species spectrum. Nor do I think that a “posthuman family,” following in the tracks of \textit{companion species} theory, is far from what Haraway is arguing for.\footnote{Full disclosure: Haraway says she is not a posthumanist but a \textit{companion species}, that what she is trying to do is not humanism or posthumanism but non-humanism: “\textit{Companion species} – coshapings all the way down, in all sorts of temporalities and corporealities – is my awkward term for a non-humanism in which species of all sorts are in question” (\textit{When Species Meet} 164). This is the type of posthumanism that I endeavor to practice: a critical eye looking back at humanism in order to decenter the human, to see a co-shaping of all beings together at the same time.} Like Haraway, I want to be clear that dogs and
other companion animals are not fuzzy children nor are they projections of the human individual. Instead, and as seen in Cassels’ study, companion animals and companion species occupy a place and role that is not adequately named nor identified within the humanist vision of the oedipal family structure. But rather than abandoning the concept of family entirely, I’m arguing that companion species offers the means of imagining a “posthuman(ist) family,” as a non-nuclear, non-oedipal group of beings whose relations of affinity, response, and co-shaping draw all the parties into an intense “becoming with,” which occurs regardless of kind.

My argument emerges from a posthumanist reading of Margaret Atwood’s novel Oryx and Crake (2003), which depicts both a humanist and posthumanist family structure. The humanist family is made up of filially related humans who see their pets as objects and commodities. The posthumanist family depicts humans as just one member among an interspecies family group. The narrative intertwining of these relationships decenters the parents from their traditional role in forming the subject and extends to “animals” the familial role of teaching pro-social behavior. These nonhuman beings cannot be called “parents,” and can only figuratively (in a humanist understanding of language) be called “siblings.” Rather, these animals and these types of affective relationships require a new term, one which blurs the lines between “kin” and “kind,” to allow for an “unfamiliar” family of “becoming with.” I think that “posthuman family” is the most straightforward way to identify the inter-species becoming at the heart of the novel, as will become clear through an analysis of both family structures.

Atwood’s protagonist, Jimmy, is part of what can be considered a conventional humanist, Western nuclear family. By a humanist family, I mean one based upon filial descent and reproduction and oedipal crises of identification, but also of patriarchal elements and emotional trauma. Like Cassels’ subjects, Jimmy experiences domestic trauma as his parents become violently estranged, culminating in the dramatic departure of his mother, the rapid remarriage of his father, and, to Jimmy’s emotional detriment, his eventual estrangement from his mother, father, and step-mother.

- His father is a workaholic, characterized by Jimmy as being emotionally closed-off, patriarchal, yet good-humored; Jimmy feels as if he can never measure up to his father’s expectations (Atwood 2013, 57).
- Over time, Jimmy grows estranged from his father, telling himself: “He didn’t want to have a father anyway, or be a father, or have a son, or be a son. He wanted to be himself, alone, unique, self-created, and self-sufficient” (206).
- Jimmy’s emotional estrangement from his father is depicted in the lack of physical description for this character; his father is described only as a “pastiche,” (56), a collection of detached body parts – the Adam’s apple, the hand on the table – while his mother is remembered as a vivid mental “polaroid” (ibid).
- Nevertheless, Jimmy’s mother is similarly characterized as “detached,” as well as “tired,” and “flat.” Her career as a microbiologist involved closing off the pigoons’ cells to invasive microbes; likewise, her defining feature during Jimmy’s childhood is her emotional inaccessibility. As a result, Jimmy must resort to increasingly negative behavior in order to gain her attention, if not her much-desired approval.
She eventually runs away, taking Jimmy’s rakunk, Killer, with her.

- I’ll return to the significance of this departure shortly in my discussion of Killer, but for now, my purpose is to briefly set out the adverse childhood situation in which Jimmy is raised; an environment characterized as devoid of overt affection and love, leaving Jimmy feeling isolated, except for the presence of several companion animals.

- In the perspective of the parents these animals are experimental subjects, commodities, or simply not known: the pigoons are the objects of their research; Killer is a last-minute a gift to Jimmy from his father; and both parents are unaware of Alex the parrot’s significance to Jimmy, let alone of his existence as an internet celebrity.

But like Cassels’ subjects, Jimmy confides in and finds comfort through these companion animals.² He empathizes with the pigoons, enters into a mutually responsive relationship of affect and touch with Killer, and engages in a fantasy sibling relationship with Alex, the subject of Irene Pepperburg’s avian study.

- In terms of Jimmy’s perspective, these animals are hardly commodities or objects; rather, they are fellow individuals with whom Jimmy enters into individual-producing relationships of affect and response. Jimmy “becomes with” these animals; he is, with them, companion species, and, arguably, “family.”

**Pigoons:**

For example, the gaze of the genetically modified pigoons awakens in Jimmy a sense of self; like Derrida’s cat in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and Levinas’s Bobby in “The Name of the Dog, or Natural Rights,” their gaze is a force of self-identification through affective response, producing a sense of self based on *sameness* with the animal, not difference. In contrast to his parents, whom Jimmy feels “knew nothing about him and who “thought he was only what they could see” (66), when the pigoons “glanced up at [Jimmy],” he remembers feeling that “they saw him, *really saw him*, and might have plans for him later” (emphasis added; 30). The repetition of “saw him” and reference to the pigoons’ ulterior motives depicts a consideration and knowledge of Jimmy that he does receive from the gaze of his parents. Unsurprisingly then, he is disquieted when the compound cafeteria serves pork because he is “confused about who should be allowed to eat what. He didn’t want to eat a pigoon, because he thought of the pigoons as creatures much like himself. Neither he nor they had a lot of say in what was going on” (27). Importantly, this reluctance to eat potential pigoon meat stems not from the traditional vegetarian theories of ethical responsibility or environmental degradation, but from a belief in a common-self: the pigoons, like him, lack agency in the world of his parents. Following this, he is awakened to a sense of shame; looking at the urine- and feces-filled pens of the pigoons, his affective response concludes by constructing a link between their bodies to his, as he thinks “He hadn’t wet his bed for a long time…” (30). Finally, when his father warns him away from the edge of the pen, Jimmy thinks that the pigoons wouldn’t hurt him, since “I’m their friend … Because I sing to them” (30).

**Killer:**

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² *Companion species* is used here to signify the process of subject formation through relating, rather than the category of animal.
While the pigoons do not precisely fit the role of companion animals (as “pets), being organ donors (or, they are the most intimate of companions!), Jimmy’s rakunk offers him the same therapeutic empathy that Cassels identifies in his research between children and their companions. For example, Jimmy’s confessional relationship with Killer is unique among all of his relationships in the novel. Subsequently, he calls her “his secret best friend … the only person he could really talk to” (67). When he worries about betraying his parents, he turns to her and she “licked his nose; she always forgave him” (67). More than just a confidant, however, Jimmy loves Killer. While, later in life, he admits to using the word “love” as “a tool […] to open women,” the first time he is described as “falling in love” is by the omniscient narrator, when Jimmy meets Killer (58). Furthermore, this love produces the only narrated moment of Jimmy laughing; Killer makes Jimmy laugh after he has witnessed a particularly violent fight between his parents, the last to be narrated before his mother leaves. The juxtaposition of the cause and the audience emotional release (Killer), and its timing (after Jimmy’s parents fight for the last narrated time), is significant in highlighting Killer’s uniquely close and positive relationship with Jimmy, in contrast to his parents. Subsequently, the loss of Killer, after Jimmy’s mother leaves, is devastating. So much so, that Jimmy cannot separate the despair he feels over the loss of Killer for the despair he should feel over the loss of his mother: “Jimmy had mourned for weeks. No, for months. Which one of them was he mourning most? […] In secret, in the night, he yearned for Killer. Also – in some corner of himself he could not quite acknowledge – for his real, strange, insufficient, miserable mother (70, 77). His grief for Killer supersedes that of his mother; but also allows him to acknowledge, subconsciously, his grief for his mother. Finally, their relationship is physically close. From the first night together, they sleep either nose to nose or feet to paws. But more than just touch, his own bodily boundaries are blurred by Killer’s presence. This is seen when his childhood crush pets Killer’s body: “[Wakulla] stroked Killer’s fur, brown hand, pink nails, and Jimmy felt shivery, as if her fingers were running over his own body” (62). His close emotional bond with Killer – unique to the novel in its intensity, honesty, and confidence – spreads into a physical relationship so tightly knit that it overcomes boundaries of the self: He becomes-with Killer, emotionally as well as physically. As a result, Jimmy’s relationship with Killer blurs the boundaries between kin and kind. To call Killer merely Jimmy’s “pet” is to undermine her status as a mutual partner in affective response and being open to love.

**Alex:**

Finally, I want to briefly address the companion species relationship between Jimmy and Alex, which takes place through a TV show. Given the theme of blurring between reality and simulation in the novel, it shouldn’t be surprising that one of Jimmy’s most significant relationships takes place through despite the barrier of technology and material objects (or, in a Deleuzian reading, the assemblage of Jimmy and Alex is simply expanded to incorporate the interceding technologies. Nor is this lack of fleshly interaction preventative to companion species, as Haraway herself argues that “not much is excluded from the needed play [of companion species], not technologies, commerce, organisms, landscapes, people, [or] practices” (Species 19).

Jimmy first sees Alex in videos from *Classics of Animal Behavior Studies*. From these videos, Jimmy adopts Alex’s parlance, using the term “cork nut” (meaning “almond”) as a secret code, known to “no one but him and Alex the parrot” (67) to insult his
classmates. Significantly, “cork nut” later becomes a term of affectionate teasing between him and Crake, his closest friend, but Crake gives no signs of knowing the origins of the term. Alex’s role in Jimmy’s emotional development becomes evident, however, in a scene of emotional distress, when Jimmy has watched the video depicting his mother’s execution. Jimmy subsequently descends into an abyss of depression and alcohol, where “on the worst nights he’d call up Alex the parrot” (306). In one of these videos, the handler doesn’t understand Alex’s demand for a cork-nut and is given corn instead. At this misunderstanding, Jimmy cries. Until that point, he is only depicted crying over at the death of his mother (who refers to Killer) or in scenes of emotional distress as the last-man surviving the apocalypse. His tears over Alex’s dismay are significant in their rarity. Finally, in this moment of emotional distress, the narrator, focalizing through Jimmy, reports that “If Alex the parrot were his, they’d be friend, they’d be brothers” (306). Even Crake is not honored with the categorization of “brother.” As with the pigoons and with Killer, Jimmy stretches the boundaries of kin beyond the limits of kind; extending kinship (fraternal or otherwise) to those who awaken self-identification and create affective reactions of empathy, confidence, sharing, and response. Jimmy “becomes with” these animals in a way that he does not with his parents or even his own peer group.

In conclusion, the novel is not simply replacing the emotionally absent parents with animals. You could read the pigoons as symbols of the patriarchy, for example. Likewise, Killer could be read as a figure of the disavowed mother / lover, who foreshadows Oryx as animalized love-interest, and Alex can be seen as the desired human sibling. But I think that doing so would simply allegorize the problematic humanist family structure and would result in a simplified reading of what seems to be a far more complicated depiction of the “family.” Through my analysis, I’ve demonstrated how these animals offer something new to Jimmy, either in terms of self-awareness, confidence, love, and affection and, in doing so, they constitute the formation of his character. They are individual-forming, they are companion species in the Harawayian sense but, more simply, they are Jimmy’s “posthumanist family.”

This expansion of “family” is made evident in an post-apocalyptic scene at the beginning of the novel, where Snowman thinks back to nature documentaries which featured hunting, viscera, gore, and mother cats licking their cubs. He wonders “Why had he found them so reassuring?” (10). This question is never answered but I argue that the scene is characterized as reassuring in the same way that nostalgia for one’s childhood is reassuring; though he can’t remember his father, and memories of his mother create anxiety, images of animal eating, socialization, and love trigger memories of becoming with his posthuman family of pigoons, Killer, and Alex.

To return to Cassels’ study: while I think he is right in his findings regarding children and their pets, I counter that his terminology of “pets” grounds his study in hierarchal humanism and in so doing, undermines the significance of his own research. Instead of the term “pet,” or “companion animal,” I think that by deploying the troubled term “family” to the excluded nonhuman, we can reappropriate the term and give it, and the extended kin group of human and nonhumans, appropriate recognition and understood significance. We affectively “become with” our posthumanist family and in doing, we are awakened to our posthumanist selves. Thank you.
Works Cited:


