

The Point of View of the Animal: An Ontology and Ethics of Alterity in Emma Geen's *The Many Selves of Katherine North*

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses how Emma Geen's *The Many Selves of Katherine North* (2016), a contemporary work of science fiction, represents the construction of human and animal consciousness and selfhood, and the ways in which it adapts and subverts phenomenological principles (Levinas) in order to create the conditions for an ethics of alterity which includes the animal. In this context, this essay considers the ideas of language and communication presented in the work, as well as the limitations and the (mis)uses of the technology described. This article furthermore examines the manner in which Geen's novel promotes the disruption of the human *versus* animal apparatus (Agamben) and, lastly, it considers the concept of subjectivity defined in the novel and how it allows for a new kind of human-animal relationship to be conceived.

KEYWORDS: science fiction, phenomenology, interspecies ethics, alterity, human/animal apparatus, technology, Emma Geen



...there is no limit to the extent to which we can imagine ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.

J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*¹

Since time, therefore.

Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us?

What animal? The other.

Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*²

What are the limits of empathy? Will we ever be able to confront the gaze of the animal, the other who has interpellated us since time immemorial? What changes in terms of our notions of subjectivity, selfhood and otherness would this entail? What revision in the fields of epistemology and ethics would be needed for a new relationship between humans and animals to be established? Emma Geen's debut novel, *The Many Selves of Katherine North* (2016), deals with these and other closely related matters. This work of science fiction is set in a near future and describes the predicaments of Katherine North, 19, who for seven years has been projecting her consciousness through a neurological interface into the bodies of lab-grown (printed) animals. In this essay, I will argue that *The Many Selves of Katherine North* proposes new paths to understanding and conceiving the animal, the human, and their relationship within complex ecosystems of actors. Likewise, I will contend that the novel subverts phenomenological concepts, as developed by Emmanuel Levinas, to include the animal in the concept of the other whose gaze not only interpellates us, but demands of us responsible action. It does so by recognising that, in a basic phenomenological sense, animals have the gifts of consciousness and of language, a realisation which is made possible by the radical effects of the use of technology. Complementarily, I propose that the novel offers a revision of the concept of the human itself, through an implicit dismantling of the political and ontological machine which, perhaps since the beginning of civilisation, has prescribed and enforced the opposition between human and animal, making the latter the forgotten foundation of humanity, as described by Giorgio Agamben. Moreover, the work enacts a discussion

on the uses and misuses of technology, and on its limitations, that is of great relevance today. In this respect, I contend that *The Many Selves of Katherine North* is ambivalent regarding the benefits technology may afford us. While the work shows that technology may serve to reinforce structures of exclusion, mostly when its use is informed by the values and procedures characteristic of capitalism, it also highlights that, despite its limitations, it can be used to promote the understanding and valorisation of diverse modes of being-in-the world. Finally, I argue that the novel reinstates the political dimension of the body, which is presented as the grounds for (ever-changing) subjectivity and for a new form of ethics to arise, corresponding to a qualitatively improved relationship between what so far have been regarded as inherently different and even opposing entities: the human, the animal, and their surrounding ecosystems. In this context, I propose that the novel puts forward a utopian view consisting in the imagination of a potential posthuman future in which interspecies community based on the mutual respect for unique forms of life may be achieved.

ANIMAL ETHICS, SYMPATHETIC IMAGINATIONS, AND SCIENCE FICTION

In the Western tradition, the animal has almost invariably been perceived as the excluded other. For humans to preserve their condition of exceptionality, they needed to exclude the animal in themselves from their identity and likewise to separate themselves from the world (and from animals), which they then manipulated by means of science and technology. This logic became increasingly prevalent as societies underwent relentless processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. In this context, animals gradually became more invisible, as they were farmed and their bodies exploited out of sight in factories with the purpose of mass consumption. Furthermore, those species that now suffer a process of mass extinction are perceived abstractly and discarded as the necessary victims of a system of exploitation of resources. It is true that pets have entered our homes and that wild animals are present in zoos and on TV screens; it can also be argued that of late animals have gained some legal rights in many countries. However, any changes regarding the

status (social and legal) of animals seem to occur only to the exact extent to which they may continue to be manipulated into serving human needs.

As Derrida pointed out, philosophy has displayed a distinct lack of interest in, or inability to address, the subject of the animal.³ Only recently have we seen attempts on the part of philosophers to tackle this issue, for instance in the fields of hermeneutics and phenomenology.⁴ Derrida's contribution to this discourse was very important, but so too were those of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and even of Levinas and James Hart.⁵ Indeed, phenomenology has inspired approaches which have attempted to radicalise the thought of key authors such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, with the goal of defining what Ralph Acampora calls "transhuman morality."⁶ Acampora himself coined and developed the concept of "symphysis," corresponding to a "bio-existential hermeneutic of the body," which in his view can form the basis for interspecies ethics and community.⁷ Finally, although Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben did not make the animal the principal focus of their reflections, choosing instead to deal with the human animal and its relations with the animal other, their contribution to this area is likewise crucial.

Artistic expressions informed by an ecocritical perspective have contributed to the rethinking of the animal and the human, in ways which are to some extent more productive than discussions arising in the fields of science, philosophy and politics. This is due in part to the flexibility of approaches and materials that characterise the arts in general. In the case of literature, the dynamics between reflection and intuitive imagination allows for problematisation and for fruitful insights to emerge. As we shall see, although the logic of literature is fundamentally different from that of science, and specifically of phenomenology, its effects in terms of the reconceptualisation of the relation between human beings and animals may be quite extreme and consequential.

In this context, J. M. Coetzee's work *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) is of special interest to us since it opens important avenues to understanding the epistemological and ethical issues raised in *The Many Selves of Katherine North*. *Elizabeth Costello* tells the story of an aged Australian writer who travels the world delivering lectures, which

in many instances, and due to the seeming inconsistency and at times sheer emotionality of the arguments she presents, are not well received, or even understood, by her audiences. Both in her lectures and in lengthy discussions with several characters, she often addresses problems relating to literature and ethics, including animal ethics. With respect to the latter, she expresses her view that literature (unlike philosophy) enables an understanding of the other through the exercise of what she calls “the sympathetic imagination”—one’s ability to imagine oneself in the place of the other (including an animal other):

there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. ... If I can think my way into the existence of a being who never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life.⁸

Elizabeth Costello’s famous statement—“there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination”—could be read literally, and as such would appear as a gross simplification of reality and as an overestimation of human beings’ imaginative capabilities. This is a matter I will return to when considering *The Many Selves of Katherine North* and its representation of animal consciousness. In any case, for now I would like to underline two aspects of the dynamics of the construction of otherness presented in the novel. First, Elizabeth Costello argues that in order to exercise their sympathetic imagination, subjects must be willing to open themselves to the other; after all, she claims: “Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object.”⁹ What seems fundamental here is therefore the attitude of openness on the part of the human subject towards the other, not necessarily the accuracy of the representation itself, which is only implicitly mentioned. Secondly, it becomes clear that empathy hinges on a given subject’s awareness of sharing “the substrate of life” with other beings. Indeed, throughout *Elizabeth Costello* a notion of embodied identity is posited, one which in turn is contrasted with the concept of subjectivity proposed by Cartesian philosophy:

To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive in the world.¹⁰

Thus, for Elizabeth Costello, embodiment is the crucial element for the definition of identity. Furthermore, we can surmise from the text that a new formulation of ethics may be achieved by breaking with anthropocentrism and the supremacy of *logos*, and by stressing openness towards the other with whom a substrate of life is shared, and whose view may be imaginatively and sympathetically (if not accurately) understood.

In many respects, there is a coincidence between the arguably unsystematic thought of Elizabeth Costello on subjectivity and human/animal ethics, and that of Derrida. Indeed, Derrida posited that the subversive logic of poetry can become instrumental in the reconsideration of philosophy's approach to the animal; on the other hand, he also stressed the importance of the awareness of a common vulnerability as the basis for responsible action, and claimed in an admittedly autobiographical tone that his work was “destined in advance, and quite deliberately, to cross the frontiers of anthropocentrism, the limits of a language confined to human words and discourse.”¹¹ In line with this, Derrida moreover stated that he envisaged “acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise and as something other than a privation.”¹²

I will argue that *The Many Selves of Katherine North* constitutes a radical exercise in sympathetic imagination that aims to accede to modes of experiencing the world that surpass an anthropological and logocentric framework. At the same time, the novel problematises the very possibility of acceding to and expressing this other experience of the world, by focusing on the issue of human vs animal language, but also by examining the limitations of technology, which imposes a logic of hybridisation that leads to a self-destructive pattern of behaviour on the part of the

main character. Additionally, a new notion of ethics is configured in the work, arising in the first instance from the sheer awareness and recognition of the presence of the animal other. The latter is coupled with the recognition of a shared “substrate of life,” as well as with an understanding that animals possess a distinctive worldview and language, which are beyond words. The novel therefore proposes an elaborate literary reflection on questions relating to the concept of the animal, the borders between human and animal, the uses and effects of science and technology, as well as on the construction of otherness and its ethical implications.

These concerns are frequently explored in science fiction (SF), a genre which, according to Sherry Vint, has often established a close dialogue with Human Animal Studies (HAS):

Both are interested in foundational questions about the nature of human existence and sociality. Both are concerned with the construction of alterity and what it means for subjects to be thus positioned as outsiders. Both take seriously the question of what it means to communicate with a being whose embodied, communicative, emotional and cultural life—perhaps even physical environment—is radically different from our own.¹³

Vint furthermore stresses that, since it presents the point of view of the animal, on the basis of imaginative extrapolations grounded on scientific data, SF allows readers to get closer to the animal experience and, in this manner, contributes to the understanding of animal alterity.¹⁴ Finally, and even more importantly, she underlines the potential SF displays to imagine new worlds, new societies, and a new ethics, as a consequence of both the revision of our concept of the animal and the reassessment of the concept of human subjectivity (which Vint associates with a posthumanist stance). Both of these reconceptualisations have fundamental implications for how humans relate to the world, meaning that these changes may lead to the subversion of the currently dominant bio-political regime:

Thinking about our relationships with animals—social, conceptual, material—equally forces us to rethink our understanding of what it means to

be human and the social world that we make based on such conceptions. In reconnecting with animals, we are also reconnecting with our embodied being, what might be thought of as our animal nature: this new way of conceptualising human subjectivity and our relation with the rest of the living world thus has important affinities with scholarship on posthumanism.¹⁵

Returning to *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, I propose first to examine the representation of consciousness in the novel. I will then relate this to issues of epistemology and language, technology and identity, and ultimately to ethics posed in the work. Subsequently, I will address the deconstruction of the human/animal apparatus enacted in the text and, finally, I will consider the concept of subjectivity defined in the novel and how it allows for a new kind of human-animal relationship to be conceived.

BEING THE OTHER

At an early age, Katherine North, or Kit, started working for ShenCorp, a company originating from a research programme conducted at the University of Bristol. The company hired teenagers as phenomenauts, whose mission was to inhabit the bodies of lab-grown animals via an interface and for very limited periods of time. The bodies, ResExtendas, or Ressies for short, only have a cerebellum, so while retaining their higher brain functions phenomenauts share the cerebellum of the animal's body in a process designated as "jump." Phenomenauts are chosen on the grounds of the plasticity of their brains: for this reason, they tend to be very young and their period of activity is relatively short. In this respect Katherine is an exception since she managed to remain active for seven years. In their jumps, phenomenauts are guided by an engineer (in the case of Kit, by Buckley) who during their missions is the voice that helps them with relevant information: about the goals of the mission, animal behaviour, the surrounding ecosystem, the dangers phenomenauts may face, among other matters. Missions were in the first instance designed to collect relevant data about animal behaviour and their environment and Kit chose to work for ShenCorp precisely in order to acquire a better understanding of animals. Additionally, this

allowed her to vindicate her mother's legacy (her mother had instilled in Kit an appreciation for the natural world and for animals), and it also provided our hero with an excuse not to have to deal with her mother's degenerative disease nor with her father's long absences.

The process of jumping involves three stages: the first, called "Spearman's shock," derives from the immediate experience of transition into another body, and is followed by a more lasting stage of adaptation named "Uncanny Shift." After a mission is over, phenomenauts return to their bodies in a stage called "Coming Home." In the text, Kit's jumps are described in detail and there is an attempt to imagine how different animals perceive the world (a fox, a bird, an elephant, a snake, a tiger, a spider, a whale). The descriptions, the accuracy of which is impossible to determine, are very detailed and seek to convey how each RexExtenda has a unique perception of the world, of space, different behaviour patterns and needs. It could be argued that in *The Many Selves of Katherine North* we find a fine-grained representation of animal worldviews, made possible via the use of technology.¹⁶ However, the fact that Kit retains her higher brain function creates a double layer of meanings associated with her human and non-human worldviews and therefore the text's effect is to highlight the contradictions inherent to the condition of the hybrid, in this case Kit, who is permanently divided between two worldviews, and who furthermore displays the awareness of this fact by exercising a distinct form of self-analysis. This creates the conditions for the questioning of the possibility of understanding the other and, as we shall see, will later lead Kit to put into question her own human identity in a desire to fully immerse herself in the other, a process which in turn brings about a self-destructive pattern of behaviour.

At first the project seems simple enough. In one of the tours organised by ShenCorp, aimed at attracting children to phenomenautism, Buckley explains:

Other species have different bodies and senses to ours. For instance, a bat *sees* the world through sonar. A catfish by smelling chemicals in the water. A platypus can even locate its prey using electricity. As humans don't have these senses, our imagination struggles when we try to fully comprehend what it

means to be these creatures. To understand we have to wear their shoes—their skin. That's where projection comes in.¹⁷

But the experience of phenomenauts is substantially different. The passage in which Kit embodies a spider is in this respect exemplary. First, Kit goes through the shock of “waking up to find myself something else.”¹⁸ As she adjusts to her new body, she engages with it both internally, letting herself be carried by the body's own logic, and externally, expressing a mode of self-analysis predominant in the novel:

I psych at what twenty minutes ago would have been human limbs. Something twitches, but I don't seem to move. My perception is completely skewed. This body is too simple for a direct mapping, but running off the Ressay's own motor as I am it shouldn't take long for everything to come naturally. So I experiment, stimulating whatever I can—like reaching for my own hand in the dark, only to find it gripped by someone else.¹⁹

The self-analytical tone of the passage, which permeates the work, is the consequence of the questioning of identity (human and animal) and of knowledge production and expression brought about by the use of the technology, which are dramatically experienced by the protagonist. Because the spider's *umwelt* (its perception of the world) is so vastly different from hers, Kit reflects on the impossibility of understanding this experience: “With invertebrates I have to wonder if I'm actually gaining any understanding or if I'm just distorting the incomprehensible to fit human constructs. Of course, there is that possibility with every Ressay, but it rarely feels such a farce as this.”²⁰ However, instead of refusing to take part in this farce, Kit dismisses her “philosophising” as an impediment to her mission, choosing instead to let herself go and to try to be this animal other. While the process unfolds, Buckley reads aloud news of the human world, a rather unconvincing strategy devised by ShenCorp to prevent phenomenauts from relinquishing their humanity. Nevertheless, “words begin to crumble, revealing innards of brute breath” and Kit, still resisting, does eventually let her spider instincts take over and attacks a prey that falls into her web.²¹ Returning to the human body is perceived by Kit as a contradictory, somewhat disappointing

experience, since it presents itself as the transition from a complex, disjointed body, to the “one voice” of the human body, a rationally constructed unique entity.

As a human subject, Kit attempts to make sense of the animal experience, but, as we have seen, she can never truly shed her human skin and fully identify with the animal she embodies. Hers is the view of a scientist who organises the data collected in a way that makes sense to her and who is ultimately aware of her failure to adequately understand and express a particular animal *umwelt*. The perspective is concurrently internal and external, which paradoxically highlights the extent to which Kit’s standpoint is inherently human. However, progressively and consciously, Kit begins to identify with the Ressies she embodies and to detach from her human self and from humanity in general. Consequently, the moment of “Coming Home” is increasingly marked by confusion and doubt. The alienation from her human body culminates with Kit’s identification with a fox, a process which nevertheless comes across more as a desire than as reality. I will return to the fundamental issue of identity and its relation to the body later in this essay. For now, I will focus on the problematic representation of *umwelt* in the novel.

The procedures of construction of consciousness depicted in *The Many Selves of Katherine North* establish a creative dialogue with developments in the fields of neuroscience and of phenomenology. In both areas, the body appears as a unit that enables perception and the notion of embodied consciousness has crucial relevance. Although *The Many Selves of Katherine North* is inspired by recent developments in neuroscience and closely engages with phenomenology, as a work of literature that seeks to reinvent the human/animal apparatus and the human relationship with animals, it clearly departs from these fields of studies in its representations of both knowledge and ethics.

With respect to neuroscience, António Damásio asserts that emotions, which are ultimately physical, chemical reactions, inform reason in a decisive manner.²² He also found that the cerebellum plays a fundamental role in the development of consciousness, whether superior or inferior; according to Damásio, animals possess a type of inferior consciousness. Furthermore, he has found that consciousness and

selfhood are in the first instance the result of an operation of mapping of the body performed precisely by the cerebellum.²³ On the other hand, as Marco Caracciolo points out, there have been attempts in phenomenology to understand how human consciousness is constructed, of which the work of Russell Hurlburt is a good example.²⁴ With the method of “descriptive experience sampling,” Hurlburt attempts to overcome presuppositions associated with culture and language via random experience sampling and qualitative interviews, in order to reach a desirably objective description of sensations.²⁵ Nevertheless, even in this case, the results of scientific research can be regarded as somewhat approximative: the fact that there is general agreement as to what a given sensation might be does not necessarily equate to stating that all human subjects experience the same sensation in the very same manner. Descriptions of sensations are always to a certain degree subjective. If we were to transpose this problematic to non-human subjects, the questioning of the accuracy of phenomenological representation would necessarily be multiplied. This fact leads Caracciolo to the conclusion that any claim on the part of literature to accurately represent the animal *umwelt* is unfounded, hence his denunciation of Elizabeth Costello’s assertion of the potential of poetry and fiction to achieve an accurate representation of a given animal’s perspective. Instead, for Caracciolo, such representations are better understood as human constructions that build on presuppositions:

Thus, while phenomenology works by bracketing or suspending presuppositions, literary representations of consciousness cannot exist without them: in my understanding readers consider a fictional account realistic or plausible when it aligns with their presuppositions about the world (that is, their beliefs) and/or with the conventions underlying literary representation.²⁶

Literature operates by exploring cultural assumptions and scientific data in order to attain believable (if not accurate) accounts of a given worldview. Furthermore, literary texts often reveal the seams of their workings, as occurs with Svevo’s “Argo and his

Master,” which, according to Caracciolo, contradictorily discloses in its narrative framing the anthropocentrism at the heart of its attempt to break away from a human worldview. As we have seen, this also occurs in *The Many Selves of Katherine North* in quite a clear manner, since Kit frequently reflects on the constructed nature of her worldview, determined to a great measure by her human condition.

Geen herself felt compelled to present a disclaimer at the end of her novel, in which she stresses that, although she researched intently on the subject of animal worldviews, she makes no claims regarding the accuracy of her representations. Moreover, she states that she came to realise that “the pursuit of particulars could blind me; that really my eye should be on the fundamental fleshiness of the living, breathing, feeling, 221.2 kg beast in front of me,” a sentence somehow evocative of Elizabeth Costello’s standpoint.²⁷ For Geen, the main goal of the novel is therefore to bring attention to the possibility that there are many ways of being in and of seeing the world. She further sustains that literature affords an opportunity to “glimpse such refractions,” to walk in someone else’s shoes, in someone else’s skin: “So, while I make no claims for the factual accuracy of this novel, I hope instead that it might inspire you to a different way of questioning, sensing and feeling, of which Kit’s story is only the beginning.”²⁸ Geen professes the belief that despite its factual inaccuracies, fiction can change human perceptions, possibly generating an empathy that would ultimately modify human behaviour. In this sense, Geen’s reflections tie in with Caracciolo’s assessment that although literature problematises the imaginative and linguistic limitations of representing animal consciousness, this does not undermine its effects in terms of the reconsideration of human attitudes towards animals. On the contrary, he claims, this process brings about the awareness that there are other ways of being in the world, which in turn generates empathy towards the other, an empathy which is based on more than emotional perspective taking, and is grounded instead on the notion of a common shared limited biological existence.²⁹

In my view, *The Many Selves of Katherine North* proposes a revision of our concepts of the human and the animal, as well of the ethical foundations of human action, dependent on the broadening of the concept of the animal other who, as

Derrida mentioned, both sees and concerns us. I will argue that the novel addresses these issues by means of its representation of human and animal language and communication, but also via the reinstatement of the body (the “shared substrate of life”) as the condition for identity formation and for the establishment of meaningful and responsible relations between beings.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

As noted above, Kit’s main goal as a phenomenaut is to better understand the other and to translate this understanding into knowledge that could be conveyed to academic and non-academic audiences. But she soon realises that words (*logos*) cannot express the radical immanent experience of sensing, feeling, and perceiving the world through another body: “Because how do you cram the living experience onto a page? The words available to me were never enough. Something would always slip the sentences.”³⁰ The drama of being on the verge of understanding, but not quite being able to fulfil this desire, coupled with the difficulties of expressing a given lived experience, lead Kit to posit the possibility of giving more of herself over, of abandoning herself to the Ressies, a process with negative consequences for the protagonist which I will return to shortly.

It is important to stress, however, that forms of non-verbal communication are explored in the novel: the predominance of vision and of words, which define flawed human communication, illustrated in the ineffective and awkward exchanges between Katherine and Buckley (not until the later stages of the novel are they able to verbally express their thoughts and feelings), is replaced by gestures, touch and, of course, by music, which is associated with both the human voice (Buckley’s, while Kit is in Ressay) and with animal sounds. Instinct and basic emotions take over and a sense of shame related to human speech develops. On the other hand, in this context music emerges as a privileged means of communication, one which induces a sense of community between animal beings. The session in which Kit embodies a whale presents a good example of this process. Here, touch, sound and music become dominant modes of communication and of perception of the surrounding elements:

“Water reverberates, a groan bulged with static. The song is a kaleidoscope of shape and sound, its motif in Euclidean stitches. As I acclimatise, the variations begin to unveil; here a staccato tremble, now angles of shimmering blue. I just wish I could understand.”³¹ The frustration associated with the limitations of *logos* gives way to the meeting of beings in the vast oceanic expanse, to dance, and it all culminates in a basic mode of communication, sex.³²

Language is here represented as a pure expression of the body, as enactment and as an enabler of encounter. In the novel we consistently find references to basic modes of communication or, as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, to forms of salutation or of adoration.³³ According to Nancy, these are a feature of secular societies in which the notion of relationality has replaced the idea of transcendence and, by proving a bridge between thought and emotion and between entities in flux, they allow for a precarious notion of sense to be achieved. I would like to stress the ethical implications of this form of communication, since the representation of animal encounter in the novel arguably serves to subvert the phenomenological tradition, and specifically the thought of Levinas.

The first form of salutation found in the novel is very simple, but also very meaningful: “Hello fish!” is the sentence pronounced by Kit as she is entering the facilities of ShenCorp at the beginning of the narrative.³⁴ Throughout the work, a desire to touch the other is repeatedly expressed, the belief in what is also regarded as an impossibility.³⁵ Additionally, the notion of a magic of presence is configured: the presence of the animal other. And it is in this context that we can partly understand why Kit identifies with a fox, why she ultimately attempts to become this animal. Other reasons for this identification might lie in the fact that she dies while embodying a fox, a passage which I will consider later when taking into account the process of alienation from the human body Kit undergoes. And, moreover, an association can arguably be made between the name Kit and the Japanese word for fox, *kitsune*, an animal which in Japanese folklore is renowned for its qualities as a shape-shifter and trickster, and who circulates between the animal and human worlds, a role that Kit quite literally takes on.

But returning to the main argument of this part of the essay, at a given moment in the novel, Kit reflects upon how, as a child, she used to go on nature watches, an activity she was very fond of (unlike some of the other children). For one of the girls taking part in the expeditions, foxes were a particular source of terror: “They look at you,” she explained.³⁶ For Kit, though, encountering a fox cub was for her an instant of absolute amazement. First, there is a moment of silence, of suspense and anticipation, then the realisation of presence, which is followed by the desire on the part of the protagonist not just to see, but to be seen by the animal other, which is eventually fulfilled:

Those eyes like molten silver, nailing me back inside my tingling skin; suddenly conscious of my full bladder and the itch of every muscle to move. A few scant seconds unfolding into infinity ... over too quickly as the fox would turn and run.

Even when the dark had swallowed it, even after the others had returned to their whispers, I would remain entranced by the space it left behind.

There was no other word for it, just magic.³⁷

The other thus becomes a valid interlocutor and has an effect upon Kit herself, the discovery of the fox entailing the discovery or the awareness of the self.³⁸ The implication is that the animal other has a bodily presence and a perspective, it sees the world in a certain manner, and, as the passages quoted above clarified, it is endowed in a basic phenomenological sense with the gift of language, and with agency.

There is, however, a marked ambivalence as to whether communication with the animal other is indeed possible. When trying to get closer to Tomoko, a fox she has a deep connection with, Kit states: “That look is so intelligent that it is hard to believe that she doesn’t understand *something*. Because even if English is useless, that doesn’t mean communication is impossible. ... Sometimes a body is all the language you need.”³⁹ Yet immediately afterwards, Kit questions the possibility of communicating with Tomoko, in a reflection that also underlines the self-analytical

quality of the narrative: “One of her ears twitches towards me, then returns to examining the road. But it doesn’t matter if she can’t understand, doesn’t even matter if she isn’t listening, just telling the story helps. And a fox or not, she’s a better audience than thin air.”⁴⁰ The other aspect of the passages quoted I would like to highlight has to do with the sheer materiality of presence, of identity and interaction that they convey: senses are activated and heightened during her first encounter with a fox as Kit’s being seemingly stretches. The use of this descriptive strategy allows for the construction of the illusion of the fullness of being in the world, which is one of the most distinctive and convincing features of the novel.

FACING THE ANIMAL

The effect of the logic described above is that the animal other becomes a “face” which demands responsible action from the human. This perspective constitutes a radical subversion of traditionally accepted views in the field of phenomenology, and more precisely of the thought of Levinas, a matter which I will now explore.

Levinas develops his ethics of alterity precisely on the basis of the notion of embodied consciousness. The human other is perceived sensitively and affectively, and interpellates the subject directly with its interrogative and imperative gaze, which signifies: “you shall not commit murder.”⁴¹ And while Levinas does conceive of a transcendental ego, associated with conscious intentions, for him the face of the other is the *locus* from which transcendence first emerges, as transcendence-in-immanence.⁴² A fundamental aspect of his thought is that, for Levinas, ethical meaning begins in the interhuman and arises primarily from the contemplation of the face of the other: “It is precisely in that recalling of me to my responsibility by the face that summons me, that demands me, that requires me—it is in that calling into question—that the other is my neighbour.”⁴³ Importantly, Levinas dismissed that animals, beings who in his view react, but do not respond, might be considered others whose gaze summoned identification and responsible action.⁴⁴ He also made two other points which are crucial for an understanding of *The Many Selves of Katherine North*: first, that *logos* cannot convey the immediacy of perception (after all,

immanence cannot be verbally expressed) and that therefore communication is first achieved via gesture or enactment; and, second, that the order of rationality, often reified in institutions, tends to be associated with the instrumentalisation of the other.

The Many Selves of Katherine North operates a broadening of the scope of otherness, which Levinas limited to the human being. And it does so in quite a radical manner: by recognising that animals have an *umwelt* directly associated with their bodies, and moreover that, like human beings, animals also possess language, the latter being understood as enactment or expression of the body. One of the most important effects of *The Many Selves of Katherine North* is precisely to produce the dismantling of the animal-without-language apparatus critiqued by Derrida, and thus to enable an ethics of alterity that includes the animal.

As we have seen based on Kit's interaction with the fox, the observation of the other reverts onto the subject itself. In contrast to Levinas' views, in the novel the gaze of the animal other imposes itself on the subject in such an imperative manner that Kit not only feels a moral obligation towards it, but begins to identify with and ultimately desires to become this other. Complementarily, and again resorting to Derrida, the contemplation of the animal other who both looks at and concerns us leads not only to a reflection on the definition of what an animal is, it likewise brings about a revision of the very notion of the human.⁴⁵ In *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, this matter is addressed via a fictional reflection on embodied identity, which has profound impact in terms of ethics, and likewise of the subversion of the human/animal apparatus.

LIMITATIONS AND MISUSES OF TECHNOLOGY

Kit experiences a process of detachment from her human body which ShenCorp designates as Neo Body Dysmorphia (NBD): she begins to distance herself from humanity and to identify with a fox. The split in Kit's self-identity is the logical consequence of the use of a technology which allows phenomenauts to jump into the bodies of other beings; it is also the result of a critical view with respect to the human condition, which Kit begins progressively to associate with artificiality and the

instrumentalisation of the other; but it fundamentally derives from the desire of the protagonist to develop a better understanding of the animal experience, from the irresistible appeal of being many. In any case, the event that triggers this inner division is Kit's death while in Ressay. While embodying a fox, Katherine is run over by a car and dies. When she returns to her human body, Buckley attempts to reassure her: "It was just the fox Ressay, you're OK."⁴⁶ However, Kit remains unconvinced. The fact that her human body begins to bleed is the physical manifestation of the psychological and physical trauma she experienced. In line with this, Kit states later in the novel:

This Ressay isn't just an object, but a way of being me.

This snout is mine—I am willing it—the sensation of scales imprints into my mind—I am those scales—the pressure of snout tracing along my length. Flesh and me.⁴⁷

Embodying the Ressay equates to being another, to living in another's shoes, and therefore has a decisive effect on the main character's identity. Kit's dissociation from her human body and the negative effects of this process are facilitated by the subversion of the goals of phenomenautism by ShenCorp.

As would be expected, the company attempts to profit from the technology and to sell the exclusive experience of inhabiting an animal body. A new form of tourism is created (betatourism), and Katherine is chosen as ShenCorp's poster-girl, the veteran phenomenaut turned star. The commodification of research undermines the original goals of the project and it soon becomes clear that tourists are not truly interested in immersing themselves in the animal experience, in understanding the point of view of the other; in fact, tourists behave like humans, and attack and kill for pleasure, as if they were experiencing the upgraded version of a safari. This means that they are utterly unwilling and unprepared to change their identities and behaviour according to their new bodies, which they perceive merely as external technological tools. In this respect, Katherine notes: "Mislead by buzzwords and marketing, they really seem to believe that there is an 'animal experience' separable from the flesh."⁴⁸

And she further comments: “How is it possible to become anyone whilst remaining yourself? What is it that survives the change?”⁴⁹ When things go wrong, beta tourists assume problems will be sorted out through the payment of money. Thus, the language and logic of managerialism and consumerism replace any notion of ethics which, in Kit’s view, had originally informed the project.

This context produces three instances of dramatic alienation on the part of the main character. First, when she commutes home, she sees her own image in a hologram—part of ShenCorp’s adverts to the animal immersion experience. This leads her to further detach from her human image, as she faces a simulacrum of herself, in effect a phantasmagoria or fetishistic image characteristic of a commodified capitalistic existence. In this instance, Kit perceives human existence as artificial, a construction that deliberately masks real bodies and intentions.

Furthermore, to facilitate the promotion of the company’s services, Katherine gives ShenCorp permission to print ResExtendas of herself, which she would inhabit from afar. The problem is that, when she inhabits her own Ressie, Katherine feels it as a strange body. This is partly because the new body is an imperfect replica, although it corresponds to another stage of the detachment process, associated with the jumps and with her holographic image. When Mr. Hughes, the company’s sleazy director, embodies Katherine’s Ressie, a new stage of estrangement is reached.

On another occasion, and with the goal of denouncing ShenCorp’s production and use of human ResExtendas in mind, Katherine breaks into the company’s facilities to find and steal her own Ressy. The arduous task is complicated by the poor physical condition she is in (she had gone AWOL) and, when she is eventually able to retrieve her ResExtenda, she has difficulties carrying it, leading her to drop her doppelgänger repeatedly, causing it light, albeit clear, injuries. This amounts to an action of self-mutilation, of destruction of her own body via the damaging of her Ressy.

The instrumentalisation of the other, be it the Ressies or the phenomenauts themselves, and the fact that the project is subsumed in the logic and language of mercantilisation and consumerism, undermines the ethical basis for the enterprise.

Animal bodies fabricated in a lab are turned into marketable goods, and Katherine herself, her image and her body, are turned into a commodity. In this manner, an entire system of capitalistic technological exploitation is indicted. In a neoliberal economy, not only the bodies of animals, but even those of humans are turned into goods. In this context, it is both ironic and meaningful that Professor Shen, the founder of the company, has adopted the identity of a wolf and roams the corridors of the company's headquarters, like a bitter ghost dissociated from the enterprise she had created. Shen's dramatic mutation into Grandma wolf is an extreme reaction to the subversion of the company's original goals and a denunciation of the human greed that lead to this situation. Moreover, and logically, Professor Shen is the only character who understands Katherine's situation and who helps her in her decision to reveal ShenCorp's dark secrets to the world.

In this respect it is noteworthy that Katherine does not seem to mind that the bodies of Ressies, both animal and human, are artificially created. A certain degree of awe is evidenced in the description of the printing of these bodies, mixed with underlying criticism of the casual yet proud way in which technicians conduct themselves while they carry out their work. It seems that because they have no higher brain functions and no independent consciousness, Res-Extendas are not conceived of by Katherine as fully living beings, but only as instruments. In this sense, the fact that Kit uses the printing of human Ressies as an argument to denounce the company's activities could be read as a device related to commonly accepted social norms, not necessarily to her own essentially negative view of this violation of a major cultural taboo. It seems clear that for Katherine the creation of Res-Extendas is justified only to the extent to which it may serve the purposes of acquiring knowledge and understanding of the complexity of modes of perceiving the world.

Phenomenautism is undermined by the commodification of the programme, as well as by the restrictions inherent to the science and technology used, which require phenomenauts to have a high degree of neuroplasticity and may in any case entail their dissociation from the human body and likewise the development on their part of a self-destructive pattern of behaviour. However, what the process endured by

Kit demonstrates is the extent to which one's body is essential to the definition of selfhood and identity (seen as unstable), and how crucial it is to assume and recognise embodied identities in order to establish meaningful relations with others.

EMBODIED IDENTITY, THE HUMAN/ANIMAL APPARATUS AND ETHICS

Kit is conscious of the materiality that provides the grounds for subjectivity. She is aware that when she inhabits another body, she is a different person. She is also aware that, due to her illness, her mother is no longer the same person: the degenerative disease she suffers from causes progressive and inexorable changes to her persona, to her identity, over time. As Kit reflects, her mother suffers from Spearlman's shock from which there is no cure, her body transformed into a frail, uncontrollable and strange organism. But her reflection on this matter goes into further detail. At one point, while peering over a microscope, she comments: "It still amazes me that consciousness can come from such brute biology, from these tiny individual cells. But perhaps that's the truth of anything: one is nothing, connection is everything."⁵⁰ Subjectivity and meaning are thus regarded as the fleeting product of interaction and relationality occurring within specific material conditions. The dilemma Kit faces is whether or not to accept the limitations of her own body and identity.

For Kit, accepting her situatedness is perceived as limiting: "to calcify into one being"; she desires to share the point of view of the birds, to "encompass it all," but the threat is that, as a result of NBD and like a fellow phenomenaut, she will end up committing suicide. After the complicated process of detachment from her own body, at the end of the novel Katherine eventually understands and accepts the limitations of her situation and standpoint ("This is you, Kit. This is me."⁵¹), and she is finally able to communicate with Buckley, to build a connection and a relation which had for some time been postponed. Coherently, the relationship is fulfilled at a physical level, which induces in Katherine the same effect as Spearlman's shock, i.e., she is transformed via the contact with the other.⁵² It is then from her physical situatedness that Katherine manages to forge a meaningful and responsible relationship with the world around her.

In a sense, we can say that in this respect there is a coincidence between the novel and the thought of Agamben, namely regarding his attempt to subvert the human/animal apparatus. As Agamben argued in *The Open*, it is fundamental to question the strict separation between human and animal that characterises Western thought.⁵³ According to him, overcoming this separation requires no new articulation of the relationship between human and animal, but instead a suspension of the logic organising the *apparatus* of exclusion which makes the animal the forgotten foundation of humanity. This, in turn, renders such an exclusionary apparatus inoperative: “That which—once again in the form of the exception—was separated and then articulated together in the machine must be brought back to its division so that an inseparable life, neither animal nor human, can eventually appear.”⁵⁴ Explaining the workings of the apparatus, Agamben states that it functions by defining a principle of origin or *archè*, set up by dividing experience and by including half of it as a foundation which is not manifested:

Thus the city is founded on the division of life into bare life and politically qualified life, the human is defined by the exclusion-inclusion of the animal, the law by the exception of anomie, governance through the exclusion of inoperativity and its capture in the form of glory.⁵⁵

Agamben further develops his ideas regarding the concept of the human via the notion of *form-of-life*. The concept of the human, he argues, is defined on the basis of a mechanism of separation between *zoè* (nutritive life) and *bios* (politically qualified life), the first being converted into *arché* or foundational principle of the second, and thus eliminated or excluded within the logic of this ontological-political apparatus. As we have seen, for Agamben this principle of exclusion should be suspended, so that the notion of *form-of-life* may arise, one in which both *zoè* and *bios* form a unit with political significance.⁵⁶

The Many Selves of Katherine North proposes a reconsideration and revalorisation of the animal dimension of humans, grounded on the recognition of the body as enabler of identity. As such, the novel proposes a deactivation of the

anthropological machine that turned the animal into the foundational and forgotten principle of humanity. And consequently, it points to the inseparability of nutritive and political life.

The assumption of the importance of the body as enabler of identity extends to animals. Kit is well aware that each species and individual has a different *umwelt*, depending on the peculiarities of their bodies, environments, and life experiences; as a phenomenaut, she was also aware that actions should be consistent with each new body and identity she acquires. This explains why she became particularly incensed when other human animals, namely beta tourists, failed to perceive this and to act accordingly. This reality, furthermore, leads to an acknowledgement of the impossibility of combining human and animal: in fact, human higher cerebral functions are always present when phenomenauts jump, so the identification between them and the animals whose bodies they inhabit is flawed and self-destructive. Katherine will always be either a human in the body of an animal or an animal in the body of a human animal.

The ethical implications of the abovementioned realisations are significant. In the first instance, the notion of a commonality between human animals and other animals is established on the grounds of the consciousness of sharing the substrate of life and a common vulnerability. This is the result of the extreme experiential process of jumping into the body of another animal, as well as the consequence of an equally extreme process of accepting one's situatedness. Acampora designates this awareness of situatedness "symphysis" and for him it constitutes the foundation of ethical behaviour towards the other. The notions of fleeting subjectivities and modes of knowledge, dependent on material conditions, are very much present in the novel, as well as the idea that the other, whether human or animal, interpellates human subjects and demands of them responsible action.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I demonstrated how *The Many Selves of Katherine North* redefines the notion of the animal and, consequently, transforms the relation between humans and

animals. It achieves this effect by subverting the phenomenological tradition, attributing to animals a unique *umwelt* and the gift of language and thus turning them into subjects whose presence interpellates humans ethically. Additionally, the novel operates a movement of suspension of the human-animal apparatus and institutes the notion of embodied human subjectivity, which breaks with a long tradition in Western thought. As we have seen, it is on the grounds of this embodied, arguably posthuman subjectivity (precisely because it enacts a departure from anthropocentrism and a metaphysics of human subjectivity arising from the human-animal distinction), that a new interspecies community may be established—one based on mutual respect, which does not annul differences and furthermore values the multiplicity of the experiences of being-in-the-world. In this sense, *The Many Selves of Katherine North* joins a trend of revolutionary thought initiated and continued by those who, working in several disciplines and having different perspectives, concur in seeking to redefine ontology and ethics by placing the body at the centre of their reflections.

Moreover, the novel shows the extent to which the uses of technology may be contradictory. As Vint argues, it can be used to escape reality and/or to reinforce a system of exclusions (based on cartesian dualism and on liberal humanism); however, depending on the values informing it, technology may also enable the exposure to multiple realities and favour the understanding of the complexity of beings, as well as the creation of new relations structured around embodied subjectivities.⁵⁷ *The Many Selves of Katherine North* explores the utopian potential of literature and of SF to imagine other worlds, and it contributes to the rethinking of the ethical foundations of our societies, and likewise towards a necessary revision of the governing neo-liberal bio-political regime.

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NOTES

¹ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004), 80.

² Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 3.

³ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 3.

⁴ For a general presentation and analysis of some of the contributions to this field by contemporary philosophers, see: Ralph Acampora, "Continental Approaches to Animals and Animality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*, ed. Linda Kalof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199927142.013.10>.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); James Hart, "Transcendental Phenomenology and the Eco-Community," in *Animal Others*, ed. H. P. Steeves (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

⁶ Acampora, "Continental Approaches to Animals and Animality," 9.

⁷ Acampora, "Continental Approaches to Animals and Animality," 9.

⁸ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 80.

⁹ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 79.

¹⁰ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 78.

¹¹ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 104.

¹² Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 48.

¹³ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 1.

¹⁴ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 6.

- ¹⁵ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 8.
- ¹⁶ David Herman, “Storyworld/Umwelt: Nonhuman Experiences in Graphic Narratives,” *SubStance* 40, no. 1 (2011): 165.
- ¹⁷ Emma Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 123.
- ¹⁸ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 33.
- ¹⁹ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 33.
- ²⁰ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 35.
- ²¹ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 37.
- ²² António Damásio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (London: Vintage, 2006), 245–252.
- ²³ For a summary of Damásio’s views on this subject, see: António Damásio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (London: Vintage, 2012), 241–263.
- ²⁴ Marco Caracciolo, “‘Three Smells Exist in This World’: Literary Fiction and Animal Phenomenology in Italo Svevo’s ‘Argo and His Master’.” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 60, no. 3 (2014): 484–505; Russell T. Hurlburt, *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience: Moments of Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- ²⁵ Caracciolo, “‘Three Smells Exist in This World,’” 491.
- ²⁶ Caracciolo, “‘Three Smells Exist in This World,’” 487.
- ²⁷ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 351.
- ²⁸ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 352.
- ²⁹ Caracciolo, “‘Three Smells Exist in This World,’” 500–501.
- ³⁰ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 66–67.
- ³¹ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 224.
- ³² Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 226.
- ³³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, trans. John McKeane (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 60–64.
- ³⁴ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 22.
- ³⁵ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 138.
- ³⁶ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 169.
- ³⁷ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 169–170.
- ³⁸ It could be argued that the imagery of the fox and the dynamics here described bear an implicit reference to Emily Dickinson’s famous poem, which can be read as signifying precisely

the encounter with the other and the discovery of the self: “Distance—is not the Realm of Fox / Nor by Relay of Bird / Abated—Distance is / Until thyself, Beloved.” Emily Dickinson, “Distance—is not the Realm of Fox,” *The Morgan Library & Museum*, accessed December 5, 2018, <https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/emily-dickinson/3>.

³⁹ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 18.

⁴⁰ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 18.

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 199.

⁴² Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), 5.

⁴³ Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 24–25.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights,” in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton, (London: Continuum, 2004), 47–50. For Derrida’s critical reading of Levinas’ essay “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights,” see: Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 117.

⁴⁵ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 5.

⁴⁶ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 11.

⁴⁷ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 144.

⁴⁸ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 263.

⁴⁹ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 229.

⁵⁰ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 132.

⁵¹ Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 345.

⁵² Geen, *The Many Selves of Katherine North*, 348.

⁵³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 92.

⁵⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 265.

⁵⁵ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 265.

⁵⁶ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 206–207.

⁵⁷ Sherryl Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2007), 25.