(Making) Animal Tracks

KAREN HOULE

I. Prologue: Animal perception

My good friend, Bruce is an animal tracker. He lives in Northern Alberta, Canada, outside a teeny tiny town. I went to visit him last winter wanting to trade in the serious winter blues of 40-below Edmonton for any other kind of winter blues that might be on offer. He warned me that some people find the bush really boring. He meant two things by that remark: that I might be the kind of person who might find it boring. And that he was the kind of person who did not.

One of the first things we did was go for a run in the bush. The bush is basically everything except his trailer. While running Bruce was looking intently left and right, even overhead, and making the odd squawking sounds. I can’t hear anything when I run except my laboured breathing, and I can’t see anything except the tops of my running shoes, and the path below them. When I run I am exercising. I asked him later what he was doing? “Checking in on folks,” was his reply: ‘folks’ being the birds, coyotes, owls, deer; really anything within the moving circle of his perception and impact. When Bruce runs he is visiting.

The next day we went for a very long X-country ski on a very long, frozen lake. It was totally empty. By “empty” I meant we were the only truck in the parking lot. By “empty” I meant that on the white flat indentless surface of a lake at our feet I saw nothing and nobody. Except
Bruce who took off ahead and who doesn’t chat when he skis. He listens. He looks everywhere except where he’s going. He was excited as a kid coming up to his buddies in the schoolyard, accelerating. Then he stopped abruptly and pointed with the pole to a long U-shaped groove in the snow surface. “Otter” he said. We followed the otter trough for about 2 miles. Occasionally, Bruce would stop and take a picture of hair or scat. Or consider something written in the snow by the body of the otter. A head blip. An especially hard push with the back left leg. He would scratch his head, thinking it through, the minor sign. Bruce guessed that some noise had come from the left making the otter push right. Bruce looked left. I looked left. Nothing. Then he got his binoculars out, and scanned. A big eagle’s nest in the trees on the lake’s edge. We wondered whether eagles eat otters, decided they did. But not this one, this day. The otter went ashore miles down the lake, for what, we don’t know. We lost the groove in the dead reeds. But then at the shore we noticed hundreds of lacy mouse dashings out from the grass cover onto the lake surface (about 3-5 ft) and back again. Cursive, drunken trails. Bruce stood totally still, wondering about this. *What in the heck would make the mice rush out onto the surface of the lake, wide open kamikaze below the eagle’s nest?* I have to admit it was a really good question. Maybe there was no eagle in that eagle’s nest? We watch it too, for a while, to see. There was an eagle in there, alright. We saw the yellow bald head and yellow marble-eye after 15 minutes. I wasn’t even aware of the cold. So these crazy mice dashed out anyhow right under the beak of the eagle, for what? For snow fleas? Do mice eat snowfleas? Are there more fleas 3-5 feet out from the edge? We didn’t know, but were really interested in the mystery. Were the men mice just showing off, a pissing contest, for the mice ladies watching? I still don’t know. If you know the answer, please write to me. I think about it often.
Then there were the wolf tracks. Beautiful, regal, distinct. “I've tracked many but never seen one” Bruce tells me. A lone male wolf. Bruce knows because of the piss patterns. (See Helen Chadwick’s “pissflowers”: http://fineart.ac.uk/works/bt0005/). A wolf just bee-lining it across an open frozen lake. How fast, Bruce wondered? How far ahead of us is he? He checked the depth that the fur pads went into the snow, the degree of drag on the back steps and the width of the gait, for an answer. Very fast. Next question arises: Is he in pursuit? More things to find out: Are there prey tracks ahead, or will we come upon something he’s been tracking downwind, perpendicular, and will meet at a perfect kill site? We ski faster, forensically. Bruce stops. Takes a picture. He seems to be taking a picture of nothing. He points down at nothing. I look. “There,” he says, “the two left prints are deep on their left sides and the two right prints are shallow on theirs. He slowed down a little here,” he says, “and looked to his left.” What makes a wolf slow and take a look but not stop? A quick scout about gets us one possible answer: A smallish lunch. The goofy loopy tracks of a snowshoe hare almost cross, but do not cross, the bee-line of the wolf. They stop short, literally. And crouch. The rabbit paws are distinct and deep in the snow: a crouched rabbit makes those tracks. Bruce surmises this: The wolf is on a mean clip across the lake and the hare is clued out, meandering. All of a sudden the hare senses the wolf and tries to camouflage himself as a snow mound. Does the wolf chase the hare and eat it? Nope. Does the wolf stop and freak the hare out? Nope. Does the wolf look left? Yes. Wolf sees Rabbit, but doesn’t always eat Rabbit. I didn’t know that about Wolf-Man. I wonder though if Rabbit knew that about Wolf? Still more questions emerge: Where is the wolf going so fast with a full stomach? Is he going toward something, or away from something? Away. What is after the wolf? Maybe from a hunter. A human in hot pursuit. Is it not, in fact, us he’s on the run from?
Spending time with a tracker is like going down the rabbit hole into the main ballroom of one’s perception and finding a big party underway. The world we move around in is fully occupied, fully inscribed, at the same time and in the same places as we find ourselves, by our animal, feathered, vegetable and insect kin. We mostly don’t know enough about them to even notice their company, let alone their signs. Some of us don’t want to know, especially about the parasite pals. Usually we are too busy thinking about something else, or searching for something we think and hope will be there, or making noises thus not hearing them call the name they have for us, or sticking too closely to the path. Literally and metaphorically. But once we do notice, become aware, learn the rudiments of their signs, the questions which those encounters pose, are very good ones. They too, open unexpectedly onto other underground tunnels of further questions. Possible answers to those questions shake our sense of the world: a shaking orders of magnitude greater than one would think a little hunkering rabbit capable of. Tom Brown Jr. writes about awareness, the quality of quiet that lets the natural world come close, losing oneself among non-human kin. That all seems possible and good. But equally possible, as the wolf experience above shows, is that the cultivated openness to the Other such as tracking permits & requires, can sometimes lead us right back to ourselves. But it is a very different version of ourselves than the picture of our selves we carry around with us, and present to the world, as it were, from the inside out. It is as though the animal others we are trying to read reads the backs of our greeting card and ask us pertinent questions about those parts of ourselves we somehow can’t even see.
II. Tracking the tracker

In this paper, *qua* philosopher, I want to *track* for the reader a recent sequence of *readings* and *writings* of mine, but not just my own. I want to show a map of an intellectual meander outward toward animality and toward the question of the ethical status of the *non-human animal*. With hindsight, I can now spy the blind spots, blind corners, of my pursuit. Through this exercise, I want to try to illustrate how that path of questions *about the non-human animal* in the first instance permits a suspension of attention to ourselves—the human animal—as contested moral subjects *and* an oblivion about that suspension. But, in the second instance, the questions posed by the animal, on the meander outward, lead to other questions which in turn make our oblivion so crystal clear that it calls our apparent naiveté and goodwill into question. The result is, literally, a sudden about-face which (re)contests ourselves—the human animal—as moral subjects. An implication of my exercise and analysis is to call into question our adequacy, as epistemic agents, to the task of what feminist epistemologists call “critical self-reflection”; that is, knowing oneself more fully by perceiving what one is up to in ones line of questioning, catching oneself unawares in particular. My experience of tracking the animal and then finding myself suddenly being tracked, casts what I hope is a useful doubt on the capacity of the isolated rational agent to accomplish a making-visible of what is invisible about her own perceptions; that is, reveals the very real limits of her evidence-gathering capacities. I want above all to argue that our own blind spots are disabled and critical self-reflexivity becomes possible, not by a willing and able isolated self but by a strange-making encounter with a non-self who stops us in our tracks.
III. Animality: Starting (out)points

I regularly teach a course on Ethics and Animals. It’s a second year philosophy course which focuses on the arguments, ontological and moral, which have been offered throughout the course of Western thinking, on what it is that makes a being the kind of being deserving of the status of moral subject: having a nature and a telos, rationality, sentience, membership in a community, capacity for a sense of justice, complex tool-use, a sense of self, time, etc. By extension, our work in that class is to assess whether or not the demarcations between human and non-human animal maintained by, for instance, René Descartes, and the conduct that such a demarcation permits, are philosophically tenable. Especially in light of recent evidence on animal emotion, animal language and animal consciousness supplied by animal ethology. The course is a course about the nature of moral community: Who owes what to whom, and on the basis of what. We talk a lot about dolphins.

I also teach an advanced Ethics course which covers some very different territory; that of recent Continental thinkers on the question of responsibility: Levinas, Irigaray, Heidegger, Derrida, Bataille, Butler & Cixous. Common to these thinkers is their existentialist-inspired attempts to articulate a capacity to be responsible not in terms of a self-sufficient rationally-cued moral agent setting out on the high path to the moral life but in terms of some kind of a concrete, shattering encounter with a genuine not-me, not-us—marginal, difference, non-knowledge, absence, silence, infinite, death and vulnerability. We talk a lot about “the Other” and mostly we are talking about a human other. On occasion, though, one of my students asks whether or not an encounter with a dolphin or a leaking tap could count as the kind of confrontation event that precipitates responsible capacity in a human subject, a human subject. Of course, this is just the kind of direction that some of these thinkers, especially Jacques Derrida, eventually took their
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own thoughts, once they had considered further the implications of, for example, the ‘Face-to-Face’:

‘The Animal that Therefore I Am’ rather explicitly takes up what Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* called “concrete relations with others,” a chapter that many French thinkers including Lacan and Lévinas have rewritten, knowingly or not. Whereas Sartre, Lacan and Levinas have emphasized face-to-face encounters between humans, Derrida supercedes them by asking how an animal (such as his cat) regards him naked in the shower. (Rapaport, *Later Derrida* 100)

These philosophical interests of mine positioned me to write and deliver a commentary on Chloë Taylor’s paper, “The Precarious Lives of Animals: Butler, Coetzee, and Animal Ethics,” at the Existentialism, Phenomenology, Theory and Culture annual conference this Spring. Taylor’s article is subtle and its implications far-reaching. Its effect on me, frankly, squirm-inducing, though not before a meander had happened.

   The paper’s express question is to ask about the absence of the animal and the silence around animal lives in a contemporary philosophical (ethical) text: Judith Butler’s ethical work *Precarious Life*—a work on vulnerability and grievability and a book that I have taught. Specifically, Taylor calls into question Butler’s “failure to mention” the lives of animals as among those vulnerable and grievable lives “addressing us; that we are responsible for.”

   I was less interested in tracking the possibility that the question of the animal is *the* ethical question for us, than I am of exploring more fully Taylor’s other claim: that Butler missed the point. What does it mean to *miss a sign*?

   Charging a text, any text, with an omission is an onerous charge to defend since there are different kinds of absences, different forms of silence. Like any critic, Taylor must first establish the empirical claim that the non-human animal is missing from the ethical landscape Butler paints. She does that. But on its own it has no more interest or traction than the observation that
Descartes didn’t say much about feminist rights. The charge starts to get some teeth only when we make the case that a writer could have, and on her own terms, but did not.

The second thing Taylor needed to do, then, is thus establish the fact that a Butlerian ethical landscape could, without grotesque distortion, include the precarious lives of animals as among those to whom we (also) have duties of attention and responsibility. This is not quite the same as complaining that Judith Butler could have, in Precarious Life, but didn’t. The charge is more diffuse. It is to say that such-and-such a philosophy contains within it the means to make just such an extension or application, but/and the author didn’t happen to focus on these possible implications of her work. It is to suggest that Butler might have included animals, and would be in principle amenable to that extension and those concerns taken up by others. Indeed Taylor writes that “there is nothing about Butler’s ethics which would justify an exclusion of non-human animals.” This confirms that there are components in Butler’s system which, when thought through again, pursued a bit further along, allow but perhaps do not require, animals to be included in the moral addressees among the vulnerable and dehumanized human lives that Butler does focus on. This version of the charge of missing the point lets Butler off the hook by crediting features of her work with containing the kinds of principles required to do the kind of work that Taylor and others, but possibly not Butler, wants to do. The two features of Precarious Life Taylor highlights to ground this claim of legitimate extensibility are: 1) Butler’s insistence that the ‘Face’ (the site of ethical address) addresses us non- or pre-linguistically (“the sound of language evacuating its sense”) which clearly leaves room for non-linguistic beings like wolves or otters to be among the kinds of beings we could be addressed by, ethically; and 2) Butler’s explicit claim that what makes us (all) vulnerable is “the sheer fact of being embodied”; hence it
follows that all embodied beings are on a Butlerian ethical landscape, including us, the darned parasites, and the mice men and mice ladies.

Having established the basic philosophical integrity of extending Butlerian insights into the question of the animal, Taylor takes us through two working examples of texts which feature the animal as ethical vector: J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*. Through these examples, she fleshes out Butler’s (and Levinas’) own insights that “experiences of violation, of exposure to violence, however negative, can thus be used as a resource for ethical and political reflection” (*Precarious Life* 29). She maps the “negative” experiences of the protagonist of *Disgrace*, David Lurie, a perpetrator of violence, witness to violence and recipient of violence—violences involving human and non-human characters in all positions—through to Lurie’s metamorphosis into being the kind of human being with a new capacity to “recognize that even in its degradation and vulnerability, in fact precisely because of them, man [sic] shares a kinship with the animal” (“The Precarious Lives of Animals” 18). Taylor shows Lurie’s eventual ability to, to use Butler’s own words, “refuse the cycle of revenge in the name of justice … to take stock of how the world has become formed in this way in order to form it anew, and in the direction of non-violence” (*Precarious Life* 17), and that Lurie accomplishes this ethical growth through the route of animality. Instructively, Taylor wants us to see Lurie not as a fictional exception making a distant and mildly interesting philosophical point, but as a concrete example of the kind of complex beings all humans presently are: the kind of animal-being who manages to fail to “mention” or “notice” that animality but nevertheless comes to be in the world as a more responsible member by virtue of responding to that very animality. In other words, Coetzee’s and thus Taylor’s work are of a piece with the very ethical projects that Levinas, Butler, Derrida,
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Cixous and Sartre have been mounting, and, as I mentioned above, of a piece with the directions that some of these thinkers are taking their own thinking. Taylor’s point is strong.

What Taylor then does for the remainder of the paper is to strike out in a new direction, making the case, for her own purposes and leaving her own signature on that purpose, that the ethical landscape insofar as it is a territory marked by duties to the vulnerable should include the lives of animal-vulnerables. For these lives are, according to Taylor, subject to an “even vaster and more systematic violence which occurs every day” (8), lives “which we have made dependent on us through domestication, and on which we depend in many ways for our way of life....lives in general far more vulnerable than our own.” (5). Though I have sympathy with this undertaking, Taylor’s assertions raise a number of new empirical and normative questions which, far from being settled by the sincerity of the gesture, suddenly connect up with a number of well-worn, criss-crossing trails in the animal-rights debate including Singer on the question of animal pain, and Regan, on life-boat choices. Chloë Taylor might very well be right. The non-human animal concrete reality might very well be the Levinasian ethical site par excellence. If so, the implications are complicated and exciting.

But let’s stop chasing that set of tracks and circle back to another question Taylor raised a while back, but we did not pursue: that Butler’s omission is a symptom of something, and that something is connected to a philosophically rich motive, even an unconscious one.

In several places Taylor does make the much stronger charge against Butler: that Butler’s discussion of, and focus on human but not animal derealization is a sustained, repeated (8), ‘implicit exclusion’ (12) and ‘repeated removal’ (3). That is to say, not a simple forgiveable omission to be recuperated by another thinker in subsequent ethical work. Not naïve. Under this charge, the fact that the animal is not an ethical event in Butler’s ethical philosophy becomes
itself of some philosophical interest, not just what can be done, by others, with what was omitted. Taylor makes the bold suggestion that the omission “itself derealizes the lives and deaths of non-human animals.” She is suggesting that the work she would like to do to realize the vulnerability of the lives of animals does not take place on a neutral platform extending out from such ethical tracts as *Precarious Life* but that the ethical tract itself undermines and works against such a project in the first place. This audacious charge sweeps us out recklessly into the vicinity of Lake Foucault.

Foucault made us—and by “us” I mean talkers and thinkers—permanently nervous. Or, if we aren’t, we ought to be. Because he suggested and then demonstrated that it is entirely possible that the form of a text is capable of undermining the very content that it promotes. And in doing so entirely below our radar, making us complicit hypocrites. Oblivious and sanctimonious, at once. Taylor’s hard hitting charge made me start to squirm because it raised the question whether it is not possible that widespread conscious or unconscious disavowals of responsibility to animal lives within a discourse which avows concern, avows responsibility for the vulnerable, might not itself be participating in the exploitation of vulnerability in general, and the increase of exactly what it denounces? Since my teaching has form, rhythm and content; since my reading has form, reading and content, is it not possible that some of the same slippage is enabled by my projects *on behalf of extending moral community to animals*? I mention this here not to solve the question that popped its head up when I was reading Taylor’s charges. I honestly wish I had never seen that head pop up. I mention it to mark out loud, and without shelter, how suddenly with this one suggestion we were in a different kind of territory altogether: and our own reading, (mine in this case), felt uncomfortably close to the very thing I thought was at a comfortable distance from. I can hear its breathing, behind me.
Let’s press on into that briar patch: How is it that Judith Butler, one of the most trenchant philosophical voices of our time, can miss animal lives, or forego it, given the inclusive character of her ethicopolitical mandate that “the sanctity of life be honored equitably and truly” (Precarious Life 103-4) How is it, in general, that we (not just Butler) manage to perpetually, and for the most part, not include animals within our ethical imaginings or daily reckonings? I ask this in Foucault’s funny birdcall: How does this question, this name, this territory, these bodies, become, or not become, invisible and unsayable, or visible and sayable? Let’s follow this track and see where it goes; see if it comes across Butler’s, and hence my, and hence (now) your, complicity in sustained invisibilities? This chase is partly sanctioned by Butler herself, who, in Precarious Life is relying explicitly on just such kinds of rhetorical questions about the invisibilizing and visibilizing discourse dynamics. Speaking to the impossibility of saying anything against the Bush Administration in the aftermath of 9/11 without such queries being heard as victim-blaming and in solidarity with terrorists, Butler writes:

One way a hegemonic understanding…is achieved is through circumscribing what will and will not be admissible as part of the public sphere itself….To produce what will constitute the public sphere; however, it is necessary to control the way in which people see, how they hear, what they see. The constraints are not only on content—certain images of dead bodies in Iraq for instance—but on what “can” be heard, read, seen, felt and known. The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths. (Precarious Life xx-xxi)

Given that Butler is using Foucault in part as her compass, it is odd to discover in Precarious Life a predilection to describe discursive “production” as something they do: they, in this case, being the Bush administration and mainstream media. Sovereign power and its main trick: prohibition. But, after Foucault we know that other forms and modes of power—disciplinary and biopower—work directly in and through a “multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere
in which they operate and which constitute their own organization” (History of Sexuality 92); a “general matrix” (94) in which we ourselves are embedded, and operate. These other descriptions of power ask about the complicity of readers and writers of texts in the uptake and dissemination of hegemonies, in addition to our express resistances to it. Though perhaps warping the public sphere in quite different ways than the “Bush Administration” can and does, we are always already involved in its production, not immunized from it and at a safe distance with a nevertheless excellent vantage point to critique it. Sovereign power is easier to point to because you point away from the self to indicate its whereabouts.

To sum up where we have come so far: Butler is producing a widely-read book for the public domain to contest one narrative about what deserves the grief work of that very public. She does not name herself as among those producing the list of grievables, though that is, of course, what she is also doing when she is adjusting an existing list which does not include many Iraqis and sans-papiers. And she, a member of that public, does not name animal lives as among the revised list of grievable lives, a silence or absence which dovetails perfectly with the absence of animals lives in that public. It dovetails with my own reading of, then teaching of Precarious Life, and my not noticing the absence of what I am apparently concerned about: animal lives. By her own terms, Taylor’s tough question about omissions and inclusions is fair game. An answer like “I’m sorry I just didn’t think of it” is the kind of answer already ruled inadmissible by the Foucauldian approach Butler is using. Poor Judith. She can’t defend herself here. If she were, the most productive thing to do would not be to defend the omission as innocent—as her simply not having seen anything to see in the animal—but to explore with us what it is about our/my habits of perception which continue to enable us (all) to not say or see that animality when what we see ourselves as doing is diligently tracking (down) our responsibility? We ski by the kill sites every
day. In some sense we do see the grief and aggression suffered by animal kin. But they do not
really, to use Butler’s beautiful phrase, “unbearably stigmatize us,” any of us, including one of
the most conscientious and politically motivated among us, Judith Butler. How interesting. I find
myself absorbed by, interested in the absence of the animal in my sights. What else might we see
from this thicket? (If you can’t see where I’m pointing, I’m pointing over there, toward the
animal tracks yonder.)

IV. Our tracks come upon themselves

"Skin me Brer Fox," says he. "Snatch out my eyeballs, tear out my ears by the roots," says he,"But please, Brer Fox, don't fling me in that briar patch," says he.

In continental ethical theory, the “question of the animal” is receiving the complex,
sustained treatment I agree it deserves. What that discussion insists upon, and what Taylor
rightly uses as her leverage against Butler’s limited vision, is that the sphere of the ethical, the
moral community, cannot simply be presumed to be circumscribed by: rationality, reciprocity,
fungibility, proximity, utility. Though each of these concepts play a role in what we call “the
ethical,” taken as a cluster, they seem to consistently leave something or someone important out.
Derrida’s work on responsible mourning, and Levinas’ work on respectful objectality are efforts
to draw our attention to some compelling feature of the ethical terrain which traditional
principles and approaches have nothing much to say about. These efforts keep open the
discussion about animality and ethicality. The question of the animal can enter, and stay on, the
ethical terrain because continental theorists refuse to declare in advance who or what counts; and
refuse “the human” as the primary moral subject, the exemplar of what counts. Butler takes
responsiveness to suffering and vulnerability as the basis of the ethical. Levinas insists that our
ethical responsiveness begins with what comes to us with force, even without comprehension or preparation. Deleuze recommends becoming-minoritarian as the ethical life, and takes whole chunks of life (“assemblages”) as the units of possible transformation, not a single bit like an autonomous human agent. Paul Patton’s advice on how to develop respectful relationships with dependent or juvenile others happens to be about horses, but it could be about other kinds of beings. All these approaches begin with an ethical moment, or event (like suffering) which involves us and calls for our response qua responsible beings. That such moments or events are phenomena emitted from other beings than our fellow skiing human, and signs for other beings than just us, means that these theoretical perspectives include from the outset more than just the human. They are not, except for our one truck in the parking lot, empty.

A meta-question, though, suddenly comes up out of nowhere. If the moral terrain is opened up in new and inclusive ways by these starting-points, which do not \textit{a priori} name the members and non-members of the sphere of moral concern, then who, or what, is still missing from our view? In principle, nothing should be out of sight, nothing should catch us unawares. And yet, we only ever follow tracks when we move, and leave others unheeded. Only certain kinds of “new” moral questions come upon us, and take our time and attention. As I have been describing, the “question of the animal” is receiving a great deal of attention and treatment. So much that I almost don’t notice that we have passed directly from the “question of the human” (Iraqis, sans-papiers) to the “question of the animal” without having passed through, or touched down anywhere on the vast, populous terrain that stretches between these two categories. Among the occupants of that middle distance is the human fetus.

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Will an overdue attention to the vulnerability of the bodies of battery cage hens manage to prevent the equally less welcome attention to the precariousness of womb-bound fetuses to the habits, ideologies, necessities, or whims of their “keepers”? Will a strong emphasis on the sanctity of all lives manage to steer us clear of the zone of the question of the sanctity of the lives-to-be of unborn human animals? Will the types of vulnerabilities that States and collectives are open to—train bombings, ebola outbreaks, avian flus—be prophalactic enough to prevent us, collectively, from thinking on sexuality as another particular, widespread and life-alerting site of vulnerability, for many many bodies, from early on until very late in their lived lives? Will the repercussions of the specific vulnerability-profiles of women’s bodies compared with the vulnerability-profiles of men’s bodies be unthought as we profile the ways that domesticated cow bodies and wild deer bodies suffer their peculiar vulnerabilities? Will unwanted pregnancy never appear among these (re)un-drafted lists of ethical import? Taylor, after Butler, after Derrida, hones in on the ethical event as the moments when our plans are ruined … and identifies 9/11 and thinking too hard about where our chicken fingers come from as among the candidates for the hard work of ruining our complicit silences. Thinking back over what, though, in my life arrived “unbidden, unexpected and unplanned,” and managed to “ruin my plans” (in a most productive way, if you follow Derrida), I count: the death of a bunny “Snowball”; the phone call that told me my grandmother, Jean Dufty, had died; the automobile accident that took the life of my friend’s only child (Jesse Duke); the evidence on a scrap of paper that told me my beloved husband was having an affair with a woman I knew; the news of my parent’s impending divorce; seeing a big hole where the magnolia tree I loved used to live (and scaffolding to fix the soffits on the building it stood in front of, in that hole); news that I was going to have a “little sister”; news that the Baghdad museum had been sacked and looted and American troops nearby did
nothing to stop it;² news that the Taliban had bombed the ancient Bamiyan Buddhas;³ and the news that I was pregnant and didn’t want to be pregnant.⁴

Just as Taylor-Butler-Levinas-Derrida intend us to notice, a capacity to be absolutely and totally punctured by these incoming launches is a gift, an opportunity for me not to recoil from the world and react with defensiveness to its sudden life-inverting assault on the body, the senses, the sense of where one stands in the world in relation to everything else. Like the wolf showing us that we are what it already knows, unwanted pregnancy is a moment in which one can reflect upon the ways in which not only our bodies, senses and relations are shifting and vulnerable, but that many other kinds of ‘ontologically distinct’ others are similarly vulnerable to impaction: a statue to religious rage, a tree to utility, desire to more desire, boys to drunk drivers, museums to hatred, beloveds to cancer, pets to car tires, husbands to failings and bad thinking, parents to something other than the children they already have, bodies to more bodies (fertility). And, just as the idea of these events leads one out onto an open lake to discover them, it is only really in the corporeal encounter and reception of such facts, in one’s present, in the struggle to refuse to accept it as one’s own truth, that the deeper ethical insights available in these “truths” get up and run in our lives. As Butler, Derrida, and Levinas remind us, the task is not to suppress such events, and prevent awareness about these events, but to learn from their hitting us on the back of the head just what it means to be the kind of being capable of being impacted, broadsided, made other, caught in one’s worst nightmare…but also the kind of being capable of responding to the beautiful questions that arise in that experience. Each of the “impacted lives” I listed has to it a kind of spectrum of what could impact it, and a profile of what it, in its turn, is capable of impacting: magnolia trees, cars, blond boys, ancient sculptures, stone tablets, fuzzy bunnies, ovaries. Perhaps taking account of those profiles is another good, workable model for
finding the paths of ethicality between us, through and with our differences. Perhaps it enables us to start to take fuller account of vulnerabilities and griefs without “one view nullifying the other so either the claim or grief or the offer of help is considered disingenuous” (Precarious Life 13).

Can such a model allow us to follow the question of the fetus a little ways along, now? Is this question of the fetus perhaps like the question of the animal, but here and now, even more so than that of the animal, one that cannot be heard? Again? Even by “us”? As I write/ask that out loud, I feel my own internal, extreme resistance, a resistance to even having formed that question in my head. Even after I notice it calling me (and I confess spied it back a bit, when Butler was talking about including refugees in ‘grievable lives,’ but I also confess that I hadn’t seen it missing from my thinking about Butler until Taylor pointed out that animals were missing)… and I pointed it out to you…as among the things I see on the terrain around my lived moral compass (though I thought about not pointing to it). As if to do so, to ask it and point it out—the unborn human—would be to plunge me instantly into “complicitousness with the presumed enemy” (Precarious Life 9). In this case, speaking out loud as a feminist female who enjoys the liberty of abortion choice and OHIP, the presumed enemy would be the presumed pro-life religious right species whose very leverage is gained by an insistence on the sanctity of life of the life of the fetus, the precarious vulnerability of that life to the actions of the pregnant woman carrying it, and the impactfulness of abortion on the lives of all intimate to that choice.\(^5\) A loud squawk in my head tells me to keep quiet, hunker down low. The self-censure is not uneducated. Sometimes the “stigma” that could attach to me by saying this out loud is not the workings of wildly untrained, paranoid imagination. I have seen the kill sites of individuals who try to raise again the question of the fetus from a new angle. I am confident that among the ramifications of
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my doing so will be negative, dangerous. But sometimes the danger does pass, and it wasn’t the
danger you thought it was going to be…

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Thankfully, I see a bit of a trail to reorient myself to a safe shore, in Butler’s own words. She reminds us of the workings of hegemony, and what it takes for us all to not collapse back into the very systems which generate the unworkable, unimaginative, violence-perpetuating binaries we are, as political theorists and activists, trying to speak out against oppression and live our lives as witnesses to a better, more complete vision of collective life. Listen quietly to what she writes of the inability of dissidents to comment on 9/11 in light of American imperialism:

We tend to dismiss any effort at explanation as if to explain these events would be to accord them rationality, as if to explain these events would involve us in a sympathetic identification with the oppressor, as if to understand these events would involve building a justificatory framework for them. Our fear of understanding a point of view belies a deeper fear that we shall be taken up by it, find it contagious, become infected in a morally perilous way by the thinking of the presumed enemy. (Precarious Life 8)

Can you hear and see, what I said about the fetus, between those lines, which are not about fetuses? That our efforts to dismiss any efforts at explanation of the significance of the fetus that might include the fact of shared vulnerability, including the vulnerability of the fetus…that attempts to rethink the nature of the fetus seems to accord the act of abortion a rationality as if it is only a murder…that speaking about the complex trails around unwanted conception seems to open us up to a charge of identification with anti-feminist religious right, the very pole which feminists and abortion activists have fought, without respite, for almost 30 years…and that all of this belies a deeper fear. A fear, which tracking demonstrates, not only can not be diminished,
but may even become exacerbated if we continue to head on outwards, chattering, toward the Other, toward *animality* and refuse to be confronted by what, in the most disturbing ways, that sequence of (quest)ions turns around and suggests to us about what we still don’t know, still can’t see, about our own selves.

Why this inexplicable self-risking behaviour…I still don’t know. If you know the answer, please write to me. I think about it often.

**Notes**


**Works Cited**


