

Friends, Cuties and Trash Birds

Human–Animal Encounters in Instagram Selfies with Seagulls

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In this article, I examine human–animal encounters in Instagram selfies with seagulls. I ask how human–seagull relations are visualised, narrated and negotiated in Instagram posts with the hashtag “seagullselfie”. While my total data consist of 814 Instagram posts from before 2020 with #seagullselfie, I have chosen six photographs that represent different types of human–animal interactions for more detailed analysis, as they make visible human ambivalence towards non-human animals. For example, humans sometimes call seagulls “friends”, or even “cuties”, but at other times portray them as hungry, dirty and annoying – as “trash birds”. Drawing on Stacy Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeal interactions, I focus on the embodied agencies, both human and non-human, and the multispecies sharing of spaces considered “urban” or “natural”. My method of studying the photographs of seagulls and humans is inspired by new materialist “ways of following” art, being moved by photographs and seeing where they take me. I argue that seagulls cross the hierarchical dichotomies of nature and culture and contest the anthropocentric ideals of nature as something that should be accessible on human terms. I claim that there is no beautiful and passive “nature” in the seagull selfies that remains as a background for human action. Instead, in these six photographs, seagulls stalk humans, take their food, photobomb them, refuse to pose for their photographs and ignore their clumsy attempts at friendship.

Keywords: *human–animal relations, non-human agency, social media, photography, post-humanism, new materialism, visual culture studies*



Image 1. Photographer 1¹. *She and seagulls*, 2019. Image: Screenshot from www.instagram.com, all rights reserved.



Introduction

Nine mew gulls circle above Brighton Beach, perhaps keeping an eye on the humans with their snacks (Figure 1). In this black and white photograph, the sky is almost cloudless, the beach is crowded and, in the foreground, a human with her back to the camera looks at the scenery from under a straw hat. The horizon is tilted, perhaps inspired by the seagulls' gravity-defying flying. Later, the human has posted the image of herself and the gulls on the social media app Instagram with the language-twisting caption, "She and seagulls" and hashtags that can be interpreted as positive, for example "nature", "sunnyday", "relax", "sea_sky_nature" and "seagullselfie". In the photograph, the seagulls are visual and "Insta-worthy"² elements of nature. The image raises questions about the relationship between

humans and animals, cities and natural settings, and social media's visual culture and material bodies.

This photograph reminds me of the time when I worked on the Suomenlinna island just off the mainland of Helsinki. Sometimes taking the ferry was quite intimidating, as opposed to the relaxing experience of nature described in the caption of the image above, since a flock of seagulls would fly skilfully around the ferry, swooping down to grab whatever the humans were holding in their hands, making us feel clumsy and helpless. I am not alone in my ambivalent feelings towards seagulls, as they are a constant topic of conversation in Helsinki and stir up manifold human emotions. According to the local media, seagulls are "a problem" and "torment the customers of Helsinki market square".³ There have been numerous attempts to

1 Two photographers whose photographs I wished to use as examples in this article did not respond to my messages about permission to use their images and after careful consideration, I decided to use their publicly shared photographs without the username, dates or showing their faces since I do not consider them sensitive material. More about research ethics, social media research and the choices I have made in my research later in this article.

2 Visuality is of great importance to the success of Instagram as a platform, in fact, Leaver et al. argue that Instagram is dedicated for "aesthetic visual communication". Today, for instance galleries, museums and cafés keep 'Insta-worthiness' in mind when designing their interior and products. Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield & Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 1, 5 & 40.

3 See e.g. Johanna Mannila, "Helsinki on paininut lokiongelman kanssa vuosikymmeniä –'sodaksi' tilanne muuttui vuonna 2009," *Helsingin Sanomat*, 9.7.2015. <https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000002837287.html>; Ari Tuhkanen, "Lokit piinaavat taas Helsingin Kauppatorin asiakkaita: Katso videolta, kauanko kestää, kun lokki nappaa lihiksen," *Yle* 3.7.2017. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-9698861>

evict the seagulls, for instance by using spikes and alarm sounds.⁴

Gavan P. L. Watson writes about similar attitudes towards seagulls in Toronto, with reference to approximately 60 000 nesting pairs of ring-billed-gulls.⁵ Watson criticises the fact that these birds are seen as pests that steal the humans' food and defaecate on them and whose voices resemble screeching rather than pretty birdsong. At worst, ring-billed gulls are belittled as "shit-hawks", ignoring all the other behaviour of these complex birds except their occasional defaecating on humans.⁶ Tim Dee likewise observes the lowering of the seagulls' status as seabirds (due to their moving closer to humans) to that of "trash birds". They have become "in-between birds in an in-between world. [- -] Bin chickens, some call them"⁷

Seagulls live in settings considered both urban and natural. Images of my research material repeat the familiar symbolism of a bird as an allegory of freedom⁸ and from them it is possible to sense the relaxation of a day at the beach, the free flight of the seagulls, the poetic sunsets at sea and more conflicting feelings when the seagulls steal the humans' food. How humans see them changes drastically, depending on the place, from birds of freedom to flying rats when they

move from beaches to restaurant terraces. Such animals can be defined as "liminal animals", as creatures that move fluidly between categorisations such as wild-domestic, natural-cultural, useless-useful and urban-rural.⁹ Conflicts over the use of space are typical for urbanisation: which creature is allowed to be where and under which conditions?¹⁰ Non-human animals stereotypically belong in "nature" since society is considered to consist of humans.

In this article, I ask how the human-seagull relations are perceived, visualised and negotiated in Instagram selfies with the hashtag "seagullselfie". Drawing on environmental humanities researcher Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeal interactions, I discuss the non-human and human embodied agencies and the multispecies sharing of spaces considered "urban" or "natural". Alaimo suggests that human corporality is intertwined in the more-than-human world and its interactions with other bodies constantly shape it – it is this intertwining that is in the focus of my analysis.¹¹ Animal agency fascinates me from the human-centred point of view of self-portraits.¹² The embodied agency of a non-human animal does not often

4 Esa Pienmunne, Raimo Pakarinen, Pekka Paaer & Petri Nummi, *Kaupattorin lokkitutkimus 2007* (Helsingin kaupungin ympäristökeskuksen julkaisu 7, 2008).

5 Gavan P. L. Watson, "See Gull: Cultural Blind Spots and the Disappearance of the Ring-Billed Gull in Toronto," in *Trash Animals: How We Live with Nature's Filthy, Feral, and Unwanted Species*, edited by Kelsi Nagy & Philipp David Johnson II (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 32–34.

6 Watson, "See Gull," 32–34.

7 Tim Dee, *Landfill: Notes on Watching and Trash Picking in the Anthropocene* (London: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018), 10–11.

8 About seagull as a symbol of freedom, flying and self-knowledge, also see Richard Bach's well-known book *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Richard Bach, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (London: Harper Thorsons, 1994 [1970]).

9 Nora Schuurman & Karin Dirke, "From Pest to Pet: Liminality, Domestication and Animal Agency in the Killing of Rats and Cats," *TRACE* 6, no. 1 (2020), 5. <https://doi.org/10.23984/fjhas.99338>

10 Tora Holmberg, *Urban Animals: Crowding in Zoocities* (London: Routledge, 2017), 2.

11 Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature," in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo & Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 238, 248–249.

12 For example, José van Dijk (2008) sees the role of photography as having changed from preserving memories to a tool for forming and communicating human identity. José van Dijk, "Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory," *Visual Communication* 7, no. 1 (2008): 57, 59, 72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357207084865>. Leaver et al. write in their book, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* about the popular genre of "pelfies" (selfies with pets), which, for instance promotes the photographer's personal views and identity. Leaver et al., *Instagram*, 68–69.

co-operate with the human's intentions related to selfies.¹³ Here, I am inspired by discussions in new materialist and posthumanist thought that question the status of human beings as agents and nature as a passive resource for human actions. In line with new materialist thought, I am interested in co-formations, new perspectives and relationality,¹⁴ and posthumanist thought helps me question human exceptionalism¹⁵ and understand the relationship between different creatures in non-hierarchical and non-dualistic ways.¹⁶

I will approach the photographs inspired by Katve-Kaisa Kontturi's "ways of following" art: describing the seen, writing-with, keeping ethics in mind, learning with, being moved by images, following and moving with the flow, feeling the materiality of the world, and seeing where the images can take me.¹⁷ With this method, taking a photograph is seen as a process which the human photographer does not master, and which non-human forces affect.¹⁸ My intention is to question the fixed viewpoint¹⁹ of a human social media user by taking into consideration the point of view of the seagulls, seeing where

they will take me and what kinds of perspectives they offer.

In the portrait at the beginning of this article (Figure 1), humans and seagulls seem to enjoy their day at the beach in an urban setting²⁰, although the hashtags suggest that the sea, the beach and the seagulls make the photographer consider the setting natural and imply that spending time in nature has a relaxing effect on humans. The division of nature and culture is entrenched in Western thinking; however, Donna Haraway's concept of "naturecultures" emphasises how nature can never be separated from culture or environment from humans and refers to the intertwining of creatures and objects considered "natural" and "cultural".²¹ In a similar manner, Jane Bennett argues that speaking for the vitality of matter is essential, since the perception of thoroughly instrumentalised matter supports the human hubris of consuming and conquering.²² I see Bennett's vision concretise in the seagull selfies of my material: for instance, in the human photographers' tendency to see the value of "nature" as something that enhances humans' well-being. I examine how seagulls, as liminal animals, cross the hierarchical dichotomies of nature and culture and, in this way, also contest the anthropocentric ideals of nature.

The research material

This study maps public photographs on Instagram posted in the 2010s with the hashtag "seagullselfie". In total there are 814 photographs

13 Tiina Salmia, "Marcello the Dog and More-Than-Human Family in Elina Brotherus's Self-Portraits from the Series *Carpe Fucking Diem*," *TRACE* 7, no. 1 (2021): 56. <https://doi.org/10.23984/fjhas.99338>

14 Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, *Ways of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2018), 14.

15 Matthew R. Calarco defines human exceptionalism as narcissistic and hierarchical separation of humans from other animals. Matthew R. Calarco, *Animal Studies: The Key Concepts* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2021), 18 & 70.

16 Karoliina Lummaa & Lea Rojola, "Lukijalle," in *Posthumanismi*, edited by Karoliina Lummaa & Lea Rojola (Turku: Eetos, 2015), 7; Karoliina Lummaa & Lea Rojola, "Johdanto: Mitä posthumanismi on?," in *Posthumanismi*, edited by Karoliina Lummaa & Lea Rojola (Turku: Eetos, 2015), 14; Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity Press, 2013), 3.

17 Kontturi, *Ways of Following*, 11–13.

18 Kontturi, *Ways of Following*, 94.

19 Kontturi, *Ways of Following*, 12.

20 Brighton Beach is located near the centre of the city of Brighton (with a human population of about 277 000).

21 Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2008), 62; Pieta Hyvärinen, Sari Irni, Katariina Kyrölä & Marja Vehviläinen, "Luontokulttuurit feministisessä tutkimuksessa," *Sukupuolentutkimus – Genusforskning* 30, no. 2 (2017), 2; Lummaa & Rojola, *Mitä posthumanismi on?*, 19; Salmia, "Marcello the Dog," 52.

22 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

on Instagram with this hashtag; the first one was posted on 12 August 2013 and the last one included in this research on 31 December 2019.²³ Most of the images are from the English-speaking world²⁴, and the majority of the material includes photographs taken by tourists at popular coastal destinations.²⁵ Selfies are an essential part of the aesthetics and parlance of Instagram as a platform overall.²⁶ In addition to the photographs themselves, I examine recurring words in captions and hashtags, such as those relating to friendship (“friendship”, “friend”, “featherfriend”, “fwends”, “friendly”, “mate”)²⁷, analysing how Instagram users portray seagulls as “friends”. The seagulls are frequently given a humorous human name, for example “Steven Seagull”. In contrast, many words and hashtags also refer to seagulls’ perceived dirtiness and annoyingness (“dirty”, “trash”, “garbage”, “angrybird”, “annoying”, “damnseagulls”, “seagullattack”, “cunning” and “enemy”).

Although I have chosen to analyse only public Instagram photos with the hashtag “seagullselfie”, it should be noted that many social media users may have insufficiently familiarised themselves with the platform’s terms and conditions.²⁸ Individual and cultural perceptions of privacy are ambiguous, and search engines can make

information more widely shared than social media users expect.²⁹ Therefore, even though the research material is publicly shared and not particularly sensitive, I sought for informed consent by the social media users whose photographs I wanted to use as examples, seeing this as essential from an ethical point of view.³⁰

Since, in this case, copyright was partly in conflict with questions of anonymity and privacy,³¹ I contacted the photographers of the example images to ask for their permission and preference for crediting. If I did not receive a response from the photographer, I blurred their username in the image and ensured their face was not visible.³² I made this decision after careful consideration since the photographs are publicly available, humans in the images are not recognisable, and the topic is not, according to my consideration, sensitive (i.e. it is unlikely that the publication of the images would cause harm to the photographers based on their religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or political

23 Instagram Stories and Reels (launched in 2019) are excluded from the material; Leaver et al., *Instagram*.

24 There are also interesting exceptions: a large number of pictures have been taken in Istanbul, for example.

25 Such as Venice, San Francisco, New York, London, Brighton. In addition to photographs that are not publicly shared, I have excluded images in which a human is dressed as a seagull, in which there is no seagull at all or in which another bird has been misidentified as a seagull.

26 Leaver et al., *Instagram*, 40.

27 These are direct quotes from the hashtags used in the captions of the photographs and I have not corrected or changed the spelling.

28 Leanne Townsend & Claire Wallace, *Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics* (Aberdeen: The University of Aberdeen, 2016), 5–6. https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_487729_smxx.pdf.

29 For example, on Instagram, it is easy to search for information using hashtags (like I did with #seagullselfie), which means that the images can be seen by people other than the followers of the account in question.

30 I made this decision after familiarising myself with the ethical guidelines to Internet and social media research, the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) and Instagram’s terms of use. Townsend & Wallace, *Social Media Research*; Annette Markham & Elizabeth Buchanan, “Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AOIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0),” (AOIR, 2012), <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>; Krista Varantola, Veikko Launis, Markku Helin, Sanna Kaisa Spoof & Sanna Jäppinen (eds.) *Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR)* (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2012), https://tenk.fi/sites/tenk.fi/files/HTK_ohje_2012.pdf.

31 Markham & Buchanan, *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research*, 10.

32 Two of the photographers did not answer my inbox messages (which I wrote from my personal Instagram account), four of them gave me permission to use their images and to credit them with their usernames.

beliefs).³³ I also considered the reputational risks that the research could pose to the humans in the pictures.³⁴ My aim is to minimise harm, therefore I left out examples of humans bullying seagulls and decided to just describe these images.³⁵

The last, but not least, ethical issue is related to the treatment of seagulls in the article. Negative media attention to seagulls may lead to individual citizens acting against seagulls.³⁶ The goal of my article is the opposite: the aim is to reduce harm to seagulls, which outweighs the potential risks of the increased attention. In my view, the benefits of the article outweigh the potential harm.

At first, I will comment on the material more generally and then move on to analysing example images. Because I am interested in human–animal relations, I have chosen six images containing both seagulls and humans as the subjects of a more detailed analysis. All six photographs are exemplary in the sense that they represent interesting questions and concepts that show up repeatedly in the material. As the gender and other details of the humans and seagulls in the images are a topic for another study, and as an attempt at equal treatment in writing, I will only describe the subjects of the images as “human” or “seagull”.

33 Iina Kohonen, Arja Kuula-Luumi & Sanna-Kaisa Spooft (eds.), *Ihmiseen kohdistuvan tutkimuksen eettiset periaatteet ja ihmistieteiden eettinen ennakoarviointi Suomessa* (Tutkimuseettisen neuvottelukunnan julkaisu 3, 2019), 11. https://www.tenk.fi/sites/tenk.fi/files/Ihmistieteiden_eettisen_ennakoarvioinnin_ohje_2019.pdf

34 Townsend & Wallace, *Social Media Research*, 7; Charles Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, “Ethical decision-making and Internet research: Recommendations from the aoir ethics working committee,” (AOIR, 2002), 7. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>

35 Kohonen et al., *Ihmiseen kohdistuvan tutkimuksen eettiset periaatteet*, 8.

36 Bel Deering, “‘A Seagull Just Stole My Doughnut’: Humans Versus Herring Gulls in the Fight for Food,” *Field Studies Journal* 13, no. 4 (2017), 1–2.

Most of the images that my research material consists of are not selfies in the usual sense of the word. In just under half of the photographs with the hashtag “seagullselfie” there is no human at all; in these images, a human has taken the photograph on a beach, by the sea, at a tourist attraction or in a coastal town, and there is also a seagull in the photograph.³⁷ However, selfies can also be defined as self-representations, as expressive acts, as cultural practices and gestures, and as tools for self-understanding, and in this sense, the images behind the hashtag “seagullselfie” do imply a human presence and a wish to express something about the human self even without showing the photographer.³⁸

Key concepts and previous research

According to Watson, stereotypes such as seagulls being trash birds derive from the prevailing discourse that reinforces anthropocentric ideals of what nature should be: “meek, unusual, melodious and accessible” on human terms.³⁹ Anthropocentrism is the hierarchical and othering view of the importance, uniqueness and difference of humans compared to other animals and non-human beings, which is particularly typical of Western thought. Anthropocentric views and attitudes are reinforced through violent practices, such as the animal–industrial complex, which exploits animals for human food, as well as in more subtle ways, such as

37 Furthermore, in some of the images, humans seem to be pretending that the picture was taken at the request of the seagull and that the seagull was posing for the camera.

38 Katrin Tiidenberg, *Selfies: Why We Love (and Hate) Them* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018), 7. Similarly, Jessica Maddox proposes that Instagram users who run accounts for their pets use animals in their photographs to express something about themselves, and that these non-human animals are also considered a part of the extended self. Jessica Maddox, “The Secret Life of Pet Instagram Accounts: Joy, Resistance, and Commodification in the Internet’s Cute Economy,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 11 (2020): 3334.

39 Watson, “See Gull,” 34.

seeing animals as entertainment.⁴⁰ For Susan M. Rustick, the term “Anthropocene”, as in the shocking effects of human activity on the Earth’s geology and ecology, is comparable to the story of Narcissus: he stares only at his own image on the surface of the pond and does not see the forest behind him or take an interest in the life in the pond.⁴¹ Many previous studies, critical of the Anthropocene, have attempted to decentralise the human being and human experience in urban or in-between spaces, for example by analysing human–animal relations in cities,⁴² affective encounters between humans and urban animals in social media,⁴³ and art projects inspired by urban animals.⁴⁴ My article adds to this conversation by examining how the agency of animals questions the dominance of the human in situations where self-portraits are taken, and contests hierarchical dichotomies between species, such as subject/object, human/nature and active/passive.

Agency is a key concept in my research. Indeed, Vinciane Despret proposes the term “interagency” which challenges bodily, species and subject/agent boundaries instead of understanding agency as something rational, intentional and

related to human exceptionalism. Creatures become “companion agents” through encounters, conflicts and collaborations, and being dependent on other beings.⁴⁵ The encounters in the photographs with the hashtag “seagullselfie” are, in my view, the most fascinating part of these images; what happens between bodies, what connections and entanglements emerge from them?

Although seagulls often play supporting roles or function as elements of nature photographs in my material, they are actors with an intrinsic motivation to influence the events that are relevant to them. From the point of view of multispecies history, Susan Nance insists that “human and non-human lives exist in symbiosis”⁴⁶ and proposes that non-human and human animal individuals are complex characters who operate in their environment based on their own interests.⁴⁷ The images of my material show how impossible it is for seagulls to see the invisible borders set by humans between natural and urban settings and to understand, for instance, when a sandwich is voluntarily given to them and when taking it is considered stealing.

Following Alaimo’s thoughts about trans-corporeality, the seagull’s bodily agency cannot be controlled or suppressed in these Instagram photographs, and these bodily encounters shape the humans’ behaviour. The humans seem hesitant and their movements uncertain when in close contact with these animals. I will start analysing the multiple, sometimes conflicted agencies of both human and seagull bodies by examining

40 Calarco, *Animal Studies*, 18–20; Heta Lähdesmäki, *Susien paikat. Ihminen ja susi 1900-luvun Suomessa* (Nykykulttuurin tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisuja, 2020), 18–20.

41 Calarco, *Animal Studies*, 16; Susan M. Rustick, “Held Hostage by the Anthropocene,” in *Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene*, eds. Morten Tønnessen, Kristin Armstrong Oma and Silver Ratasepp (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016), 3.

42 Tora Holmberg, *Urban Animals: Crowding in Zoocities* (London: Routledge, 2017).

43 Taija Kaarlenkaski, “Affektiivisiä eläinkohtaamisia kaupunkiympäristöissä: monilajinen lähiluonto verkkomedioissa,” *Lähikuva* 35, no. 1–2 (2022): 61–82.

44 Matilda Aaltonen & Salla Tuomivaara, “Lokkien kertomisesta,” *TRACE* 8 (2022), <https://trace.journal.fi/article/view/113570>; Outimajja Hakala, “Ei-inhimillisen kertomisesta videoteoksessa *Lajienvälisiä kohtaamisia*,” *Lähikuva* 35, no. 1–2 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.23994/lk.116477>. Also rats in the Finnish cities have been researched recently, for instance, in *Urban Rats* and *CitiRats* research projects.

45 Vinciane Despret, “From Secret Agents to Interagency.” *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 52 (2013), 29, 37, 44.

46 Susan Nance, *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 7. In the case of #seagullselfie photographs, it can be seen that seagulls ignore matters meaningful to humans, such as spaces adapted for different purposes inside cities.

47 Nance, *Entertaining Elephants*, 9–11.



Image 2. annathefringe. *Today I got attacked by a seagull*, 2015. Image: Screenshot from www.instagram.com, all rights reserved.

disgust and crossing of bodily borders under the title “Fear and disgust in urban space”, continue with the themes of trash and agency in “Matter out of place”, discuss cuteness, friendship, and power relations in “Seagull friend?” and finally the inseparability of the human body and “nature” in “One with nature”.

Fear and disgust in multispecies urban space

The quickness, intelligence and disobedience of seagulls call into question human dominance over urban space. They compete with humans for the same food and often win. There are several examples in my research material of humans who have lost their food or otherwise commented on the habit of stealing⁴⁸ considered typical of seagulls. There are numerous hashtags related to this topic: “hungrybirds”, “hungry”, “cheeky”, “cheekybird”, “chip”, “mineminemine”⁴⁹,

48 Stealing is a concept that, following Nance's research about animal agency, can be considered human-centred, since non-human animals probably do not have such clear ideas of ownership or views about moral issues related to stealing.

49 This hashtag refers intertextually to dumb and hungry seagulls in the Disney film, *Finding Nemo* (2003).

“annoying”, “damnseagulls”, “seagullattack”, “cunning”.

Seagulls are kleptoparasites in their eating habits. Accordingly, they obtain their food partly by stealing it from other creatures. This is one of the major causes of conflict with humans.⁵⁰ The photographs in my material negotiate how to live side by side with intelligent urban animals. Digital technologies intertwine with the naturecultures of urban and natural spaces in the “#seagullselfie” Instagram photographs:

moments, environments and bodies considered “Insta-worthy” are cropped and transmitted through the lens of a mobile phone camera and the resulting photographs visualise how humans attempt to get along with non-human creatures and the interagencies of photographing them.

In a sunny photograph, uploaded to Instagram at the end of April 2015 by the user annathefringe (Figure 2), the human is smiling in the foreground while holding an ice cream, and in the background we can see a slice of scenery from the Swedish coastal town Gothenburg, with deep blue water, buses, bikes and humans going about their business. In the middle of the photograph, there is a large grey gull standing on a railing, seen in profile. In the caption the human describes what happened a moment after the photograph was taken: “Today I got attacked by a seagull. He landed in my hair TWICE. Disgusting moment. Look how innocent he looks just seconds before...”

The situation described above is familiar to me as well, and it brings back embodied memories of the physical closeness of seagulls pursuing

50 Deering, “A Seagull Just Stole My Doughnut,” 1–2.

my food. The idea of a seagull landing in my own hair makes me very uncomfortable and I am intrigued to study what that means. Kate Marx writes about similar experiences from the point of view of hikers on the Appalachian Trail in relation to mice living in shelters. Mice go through hikers' belongings at night looking for food and do not care if they walk over humans while doing so. This concrete crossing of their bodily borders has shaken the peace of mind of the hikers.⁵¹

I see humans' shock and disgust as related to issues of power and the fact that seagulls exceed their hierarchical position. Sara Ahmed analyses the "performativity of disgust": to name something as disgusting relies on previous norms and power relations and generates the object named. Naming something disgusting works as a verbal form of vomiting, "an attempt to expel something whose proximity is felt to be threatening and contaminating". The bodies of the objects of disgust are construed as something below the bodies of the disgusted.⁵² When a seagull crosses a human's personal space and possibly touches or gets tangled in their hair while reaching for an ice cream, the boundaries between self and "other" are blurred. The transgression of the seagull's hierarchical position and the mixing of inside and outside cause feelings of disgust.⁵³ While walking over humans or touching them when pursuing food non-human animals cross borders and reverse stereotypical subject/object divisions with their agency.

Furthermore, this Instagram photograph can be understood through Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality which questions the separateness of the Western subject from the world.

- 51 Kate Marx, "Transgressive Little Pests: Hiker Descriptions of 'Shelter Mice' on the Appalachian Trail," *Anthrozoös* 32, no. 1, (2019), 104.
- 52 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 88, 93–97.
- 53 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 4, 10.

In contrast to the idea of the subject as separate, the self opens up to the external world and is penetrated by various substances and material agencies.⁵⁴ Alaimo proposes that the unpredictable vitality of nature is an anarchic force, and that the non-human cannot be controlled by humans.⁵⁵ This photograph may aim to capture and control the materialities of the more-than-human world⁵⁶ and present them from a human-centred perspective as relatable to other social media users, but the encounter between a human and a seagull in Figure 2 is an example of how the agency of the seagull affects humans' bodily being in urban space. The fear and disgust expressed in the captions signal human discomfort with non-human anarchic vitality.

Matter out of place

Nagy and Johnson (2013) insist that seagulls and other animals perceived as "trash animals" are associated with and treated like trash because of human misunderstandings of these species based on anthropocentric value systems.⁵⁷ According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, trash is "something worth little or nothing [- -] such as [- -] things that are no longer useful or wanted and that have been thrown away".⁵⁸ The human relationship with surplus is irrational and ambivalent: out of sight, out of mind.⁵⁹ Posthumanist and new materialist approaches to waste animate "trash" by emphasising its agency

- 54 Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 4–5.
- 55 Alaimo, *Exposed*, 8–9.
- 56 Kontturi, *Ways of Following*, 15.
- 57 Nagy & Johnson, "Introduction," 1, 12, 17.
- 58 The webpage of Merriam-Webster dictionary: "trash," read 14 June 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trash>.
- 59 Karoliina Lummaa, "Kuinka lukea jätettä: Pois-halutun aineen olemus ja jäsennykset Jukka Viikilän runoudessa." *AVA/IN* 16, no. 2 (2019), 11, <https://doi.org/10.30665/av.85146>

and pointing out its relativity.⁶⁰ Bennett argues that the vital power of trash should be taken into account: although we discard things, trash reaches us by, for example, creating streams of chemicals and methane winds.⁶¹ I propose that the trash associated with seagulls also reaches and even transfers to humans in close contact. This is exemplified by how the food the human is holding turns from a delicacy into trash in seconds.

In a photograph by the user fotobygmt (Figure 3) taken at Coney Island, an amusement park by the beach in New York, the caption describes “Coney Chaos, 9/2017 ... Trash birds love trash...” and continues with the details of the camera and the lens with which the photograph was taken. The caption suggests that the seagulls and the pigeons depicted in the image among and above humans are on the lookout for trash and emphasises the composition of trash cans in the middle of the picture. In the photograph, the multispecies cohabitation on Coney Island seems peaceful with no conflicts in sight. On one hand, it may appear as if the contrast with the image and the rather harsh caption is striking. On the other hand, the caption sets the seagulls and the tourists at an equal level, referring to both jokingly as “trash birds”.



Image 3. fotobygmt. *Coney Chaos*, 2017. Image: Screenshot from www.instagram.com, all rights reserved.

Following Mary Douglas’ well-known suggestion that “dirt is matter out of place”,⁶² it seems that naming seagulls “trash birds” indicates that they are in the wrong place in urban space, classified as “problem animals”, disobedient to human norms.⁶³ Liminal beings and anomalies are seen as a threat to cultural order and trigger normalisation strategies such as sanitisation.⁶⁴ Non-human animals overall are categorised as pets or pests according to their context-bound relationship to humans.⁶⁵ However, in Instagram images such as Figure 3, seagulls seem to restructure urban space as something that is not possible to limit only for human use.

60 Lummaa, “Kuinka lukea jätettä,” 15; Sarah A. Moore, “Garbage Matters: Concepts in New Geographies of Waste,” in *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 6 (2012), 781; Jarno Valkonen, Olli Pyyhtinen, Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen, Veera Kinnunen & Heikki Huilaja, *Tervetuloa jäteyhteiskuntaan!* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2019), 27.

61 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii–viii.

62 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2003 [1966]), 36, 98.

63 Deering, “A Seagull just Stole my Doughnut,” 1–2.

64 Holmberg, *Urban Animals*, 7; see also Kaarlenkaski, “Affektiivisiä eläinkohtaamisia kaupunkiympäristöissä,” 68; Chris Philo & Chris Wilbert, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human–Animal Relations* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 10.

65 Holmberg, *Urban Animals*, 57.

Colin Jerolmack underlines that seeing a certain type of bird as “dirty” and “trash” is a historical construction. He argues that there has been a gradually developing discourse of pigeons as problem animals⁶⁶ actively constructed and repeated by, for instance, the media and popular culture. Although it has not been proven that pigeons have any diseases that other urban birds do not have, they are considered much dirtier.⁶⁷ Indeed, seagulls depend on human behaviour of creating large amounts of surplus: it is only through human trash that they can become conceptualised as “trash birds” to begin with.⁶⁸ This thorough relationality resonates with Donna Haraway’s concept of “becoming with” which refers to how non-human animals and humans have co-shaped and intertwined with each other in complex ways throughout their history.⁶⁹ Were there no humans with snacks, the seagulls would not fly around Coney Island in search of trash.

In many of the photographs comprising the research material, the seagulls can be interpreted to observe humans, mostly without the humans noticing. This breaks the traditional hierarchical subject/object division, in which humans are seen as the agents and non-human animals as the objects of the human gaze. The fact that seagulls appear as active, quickly-acting agents when stalking on the food of the large, slow humans

66 There is an ambivalent attitude towards both pigeons and seagulls; humans depict both birds as poetic and metaphorical and simultaneously as dirty flying rats, depending on the place where they are encountered.

67 Colin Jerolmack, “How Pigeons Became Rats: The Cultural-Spatial Logic of Problem Animals,” *Social Problems* 55, no. 1 (2008), 84–85.

68 Watson, “See Gull,” 36.

69 Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 42.

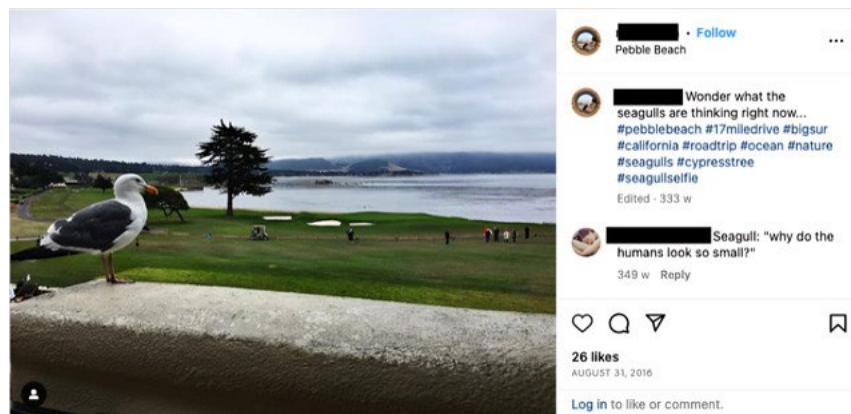


Image 4. Photographer 2. *Wonder what the seagulls are thinking right now*, 2016. Image: Screenshot from www.instagram.com, all rights reserved.

also contests the notion of humans as outside or above nature.⁷⁰ The composition of Figure 4 resembles paintings from the Romantic era with a human on top of the world looking down.⁷¹ In this photograph, in contrast, it is the seagull who is looking down at a golf course located by the sea. The humans on the golf course look small and meaningless compared to the majestic Great Black-backed Gull depicted in the foreground of the image.

Today’s understanding of nature is inherited from the nature poets of the Romantic period, who saw nature as something that was not human-made. Romantic period’s thinkers nurtured the idea of nature as a more valuable “other”, an

70 For instance, Heta Lähdesmäki has proposed that wolves create spatial disorder when they enter pastures, where domestic animals are kept, and cross gastronomic boundaries when they occasionally use humans or pets as nutrition. Lähdesmäki, *Susien paikat*, 203, 206; Mark V. Jr. Barrow, “The Alligator’s Allure: Changing Perceptions of a Charismatic Carnivore,” in *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans, and the Study of History*, ed. Dorothee Brantz (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 127.

71 For instance, Caspar David Friedrich’s well known painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), where the human wanderer admires the sublime wilderness on top of a mountain while turning his back on human-kind.

escape from the burdensome world of humans.⁷² The location of Figure 4 is Pebble Beach, a coastal town in California with a well-known resort and golf course. The old cypress, which is also depicted in this Instagram photograph, appears in the Pebble Beach Company logo, and the use of the tree's image for commercial purposes is prohibited. This is an example of capitalism's attempt to privatise nature.⁷³ However, I argue that the composition of the picture questions the “presumed mastery over an externalized nature” by humans.⁷⁴ Humans are under the constant observation of seagulls, reminding us of the fact that humans are not untouchable. Even if the golf course lawn is kept short and the weeds are poisoned, nature is not something that can be kept outside or controlled.

Seagull friend?

Despite seagulls' reputation as “trash birds”, the hashtags and captions in the photographs of my material are predominantly positive. For instance, the following hashtags are used frequently: “ilovebirds”, “lovebirds”, “bird-brilliance”, “birdlover”, “bird_perfection”, “awesomebirds”, “animallovers”, “naturelover”,



Image 5. m_u_r_t_a. *Seagull friend*, 2018. Image: Screenshot from www.instagram.com, all rights reserved.

“lovenature”, “seagulllover” and “seagullsforlife”.⁷⁵ When looking at these photographs, I find myself wondering how the seagulls might see the “friendship” described in the captions and hashtags written jokingly by humans. To me, it seems that in the photographs the human is often moving very slowly and carefully next to the seagull in order to get a good picture and prevent the seagull from flying away. However, the seagulls' gestures clearly indicate alertness: they seem to be keeping an eye on the human, ready to escape whenever the human gets too close, makes a sudden movement, or otherwise seems threatening. Still, they choose to stay near humans, because they know that where there are humans, there is food readily available.

72 Peter Coates, *Nature: Western Attitudes Since Ancient Times* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1998), 1–5.

73 Coates, *Nature*, 82.

74 Alaimo, *Exposed*, 3.

75 Of course, this is due to my choice of the hashtag. If I had chosen to study, for example, the hashtag “ratswithwings”, the results would certainly have been very different. The hashtag “ratswithwings” is many times more popular on Instagram compared to the hashtag “seagullselfie” analysed in this article. “Ratswithwings” is used mostly by pest control companies and associated with pigeons more than seagulls. This term of abuse is on rare occasions used in the comments related to the photographs of my material. However, the hashtag “ratswithwings” is out of the scope of this research.

In a photograph shared on Instagram in 2018, taken in Amsterdam city centre by the user `m_u_r_t_a`, a human is smiling next to a European Herring Gull (Figure 5). The caption “Seagull friend” and the hashtags “friend” and “friendship” suggest a connection between the human and the seagull. However, the seagull looks in the other direction and the slight blurriness indicates a sudden movement, perhaps an intention to fly away.

Before delving deeper into the material, I imagined that the seagull selfies would reveal conflicts between humans and seagulls, but the frequent rhetoric of friendship in the captions pleasantly surprised me. However, the photographs of my material still lack the mutuality and reciprocity associated with friendship. This aligns with how Kate Marx examines the rhetoric of affective cuteness used by hikers regarding the non-human animals they encounter in nature. The hikers’ writing about wild animals as cute, cuddly and fluffy resembles the other hashtags used with the Instagram #seagullselfie photographs, such as “prettyseagull”, “pretty”, “cute”, and “cutie”. According to Marx, the experience of cuteness derives from the affective reaction of a human to the imbalance of power between them and the animal and is intertwined with pleasure from the higher status of humans.⁷⁶ Marx observes that the rhetoric of cuteness is influenced by cultural representations such as Disney films, cute commercials or toys, and the fact that most hikers have only been in contact with animals kept as pets before encountering wild animals.⁷⁷ The one-sided definition of

friendship and approaching the other with no assurance of consent, visible in the photographs of my material, is also a sign of a power imbalance, obscured by the joke of calling a seagull “friend”.

Arnold Arluke and Clinton Sanders’ concept of “sociozoologic scale” proposes that speciesist attitudes define how important a certain species is to humans, and the physical appearance of a species affects how highly it is valued.⁷⁸ Nance further observes how those animals more prepared to please humans have been perceived to be more intelligent.⁷⁹ An intelligent and human-serving animal alludes to the privileged position of humans.⁸⁰ Although humans unquestioningly assume the right to stroke a wild animal or to go near them to take a picture, the seagulls in Instagram photographs seem to ignore the humans’ attempts for friendship.⁸¹ In some photographs of my material, the humans who take pictures with seagulls seem completely indifferent to the animal’s perspective or the stress they may cause. For example, the seagulls are chased, children are encouraged to shoo them into flight, or they are fed and then startled. These photographs visualise the view of the dominance of humans over the entire animal world, defining for the Anthropocene, which does not create a fruitful ground for multispecies friendship.⁸²

76 Kate Marx, “‘He’s so Fluffy I’m Gonna Die!’: Cute Responses by Hikers to Autonomous Animals on the Appalachian Trail,” *Anthrozoös* 32, no. 1 (2019), 93. See also Maddox, “The Secret Life of Pet Instagram Accounts,” 3332, 3335, 3337; Maddox’s concept of “cute economy” proposes that animal images play a significant role in the visual economy of the Internet. These images typically create a relationship between the (human) consumer subject and the weak, cute (animal) object requiring help and empathy.

77 Marx, “He’s so Fluffy I’m Gonna Die,” 94–95.

78 Arnold Arluke, Clinton Sanders & Leslie Irvine, *Regarding Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2022 [1996]), 225–226; Rebecca Rose Stanton, *The Disneyfication of Animals* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), xvii.

79 Nance, *Entertaining Elephants*, 55.

80 Nance, *Entertaining Elephants*, 58.

81 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984); Marx, “He’s so Fluffy I’m Gonna Die,” 97.

82 Marx, “He’s so Fluffy I’m Gonna Die,” 95.

Image 6. annfieuw. *Feeling one with nature*, 2018. Image: screenshot from www.instagram.com, all rights reserved.



“One with nature”

In a photograph taken at the cliffs of coastal Ireland and uploaded to Instagram by the user annfieuw, the caption asserts “Feeling one with nature!” (Figure 6). In the photograph the human is sitting on the edge of a cliff in sporty clothes in a meditative pose, staring at the bright blue sea and the horizon. A seagull glides by with widespread wings from the upper right corner of the image. Excited hashtags (such as “fantasticview”, “fantasticfeeling”, “amazing”) describe positive feelings, and the amusing coincidence that a seagull appears in the image is emphasised (“seagullphotobomb”). By way of its composition, this photograph resembles Figure 4, where a seagull is photographed looking down at the sea and the humans at the golf course. Instead of a seagull, in Figure 6 a human is depicted in the foreground of seaside scenery, showing the scale of the enormity of nature.

Instagram changes the human relationship to nature by inspiring humans’ hunt for the breath-taking views they have seen on the social media app and encourages framing and experiencing nature via social media aesthetic of mountain views, sunsets, and other similar

compositions.⁸³ These nature images shared on social media convey a human aspiration to connect with non-human nature and the well-being that this connection produces. The hashtags used related to Figure 6 are “relaxed” and “mindfulness”. In fact, similar hashtags such as “relax”, “naturelover”, “lovenature”, “naturelovers”, “naturelove”, “natureporn” and “seascapelovers” are commonly used in the captions of the seagull selfies in my material.

Accordingly, seagulls are not necessarily viewed and photographed on the beach because they are loved in particular, or because they would be of particular interest to the photographers, but as metonyms of nature that brings well-being to humans. Indeed, humans often harm nature when pursuing the perfect nature photograph to post on Instagram: social media users frequently disregard national park regulations and damage natural environments.⁸⁴ Sometimes they also harm animals with wildlife selfies by causing

83 Ellen Marie Saethre-McGuirk, “Why We Need Some Perspective on Landscape Photography in the Instagram Age,” *PDN Pulse* (2018). <https://theconversation.com/why-we-need-some-perspective-on-landscape-photography-in-the-instagram-age-100093>

84 Saethre-McGuirk, “Why We Need Some Perspective on Landscape Photography.”

stress and interrupting feeding and breeding habits.⁸⁵

Behaviour like this is based on an anthropocentric view of the world, in which human interests are prioritised.⁸⁶ However, nature can have more than instrumental value for humans; it can be seen valuable as such, without any purpose or goal (e.g. in the case of seagull selfies, human relaxation, aesthetic experiences, well-being or recreation in nature). The starting point for reclaiming nature's intrinsic value could be recognition and acknowledgment that humans are connected to their environment, a part of nature.⁸⁷ Tuija Kokkonen suggests the concept of weak human agency, meaning active passivity of the human subject leading to a non-human-centred way of being in the environment.⁸⁸ Weak agency can be a conscious choice not to use force and power but rather encourage perceiving

non-human animals as agents, understanding and respecting them.⁸⁹

For instance, Alaimo sees images of environmental and feminist activists taking off their clothes to draw attention to their cause as the intertwining of material human bodies and geographical places. Naked protesters emphasise the intimacy between flesh and place and the trans-corporeal intertwining of the human body and the environment.⁹⁰ In many of the photographs with the hashtag "seagullselfie", nature is not merely a resource for human desires, visual pleasure or a place of relaxation, but inseparable from the human body.

The caption of Figure 6, "Feeling one with nature", accords with Alaimo's thinking about humans and nature, suggesting that "nature is always as close as one's own skin – perhaps even closer".⁹¹ The world consists of carnal beings and the movement among them reveals the connections between the human body and the more-than-human.⁹² Recognising the agency of the more-than-human world is necessary in order to question the reduction of lively, intra-acting phenomena into passive resources controlled by humans.⁹³ There is no such "nature" in the seagull selfies of my material that would remain separated from the human embodiment, or simply an obedient and beautiful background for photographs. Seagulls, representing nature in this case, have needs and agencies of their own that question the hierarchical binary divisions into nature and culture, object and subject, animal and human.

85 Eleanor Ainge Roy, "'It's scary': Wildlife selfies harming animals, experts warn." *The Guardian*, 3 September 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/03/its-scary-wildlife-selfies-harming-animals-experts-warn>. In Finland, there has been a popular live stream to raise knowledge about endangered Saimaa ringed seals during many summers, but in 2021 the live stream had to be shut down early because the location of the live stream camera was exposed, and humans crowded the beach hoping to get photographs of the seals. Juho Liukkonen, "Suositettu norppalive suljetaan jo tänään: kameran sijainti paljastui," in Yle News, 27 May 2021. <https://yle.fi/a/3-11950568>

86 See, for example, Leena Vilkkä, *Ympäristöetiikka. Vastuu luonnosta, eläimistä ja tulevista sukupolvista* (Helsinki: Yliopistopaino, 1993), 101–102. Vilkkä also notes that in the background of this, typically Western, attitude towards nature, is for instance Christianity: in the Bible, humans were appointed to cultivate and protect the Earth. See also Calarco, *Animal Studies*, 18.

87 See, for example, Vilkkä, *Ympäristöetiikka*, 127, 139, 156.

88 Tuija Kokkonen, *Esityksen mahdollinen luonto – suhde ei-inhimilliseen esitystapahtumassa keston ja potentiaalisuuden näkökulmasta* (Helsinki: Taideyliopiston Teatterikorkeakoulu, esittävien taiteiden tutkimuskeskus, 2017), 157, 168.

89 Kokkonen, *Esityksen mahdollinen luonto*, 156, 163, 166; Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 42.

90 Alaimo, *Exposed*, 70–77, 80.

91 Alaimo, *Exposed*, 2, Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003 [1993]).

92 Alaimo, *Exposed*, 238

93 Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms," 249.

In conclusion

In this article, I have analysed the ambivalent relationship between seagulls and humans on Instagram by shedding light on what kinds of power relations are intertwined with the “friendship” hashtag, the rhetoric of cuteness, human well-being, and associating seagulls with “trash”. I started with the hypothesis of conflictual encounters between humans and seagulls, which reflected my own perception of seagulls as transgressive animals. However, writing this article has been a process that has changed some of my anthropocentric preconceptions.

The living spaces of wildlife have been steadily declining: many non-human animals move to urban areas and some find that cities have spread over their residential areas.⁹⁴ It is appropriate to seriously question the notion that urban space is reserved primarily for humans and that no other animal species should cause humans any disturbance. “As much as we would like all our interactions with nature to be clean, safe and cuddly, ‘nature ... is as likely to shit on us as to embrace us’”, Nagy and Johnson assert in the introduction of their book, *Trash Animals*.⁹⁵

I have argued that the embodied agency of the seagulls – stalking humans, taking food from their hands, photobombing or refusing to pose in their photographs, and ignoring their clumsy attempts for friendship – in Instagram photographs with the hashtag “seagullselfie” questions the hierarchical, anthropocentric world view. When a seagull grabs a human’s food, nature that should be something “out there” comes too close. The human loses control of the situation and is faced with the vulnerability of the body. This trans-corporeal, fleshy permeability questions the emphasis on the individual and rather

gestures towards “the multiple, the intertwined, the sensate”.⁹⁶

Facing the vulnerability of one’s body also means understanding that humans are not separate from nature. For instance, it is possible to understand the body as a complex naturecultural entity that consists of the human and bodily microbiomes as an ecosystem of many species.⁹⁷ Living compassionately with non-human others does not require a complete understanding of the other. Rather, it requires facing our responsibility in the encounter, welcoming the agency of a stranger, and being prepared to touch and be touched as well as changed.⁹⁸ With knowledge, interest, time and approaching the other with respect, perhaps new interspecies languages and even friendships will be possible.⁹⁹

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94 Holmberg, *Urban Animals*, 1.

95 Nagy & Johnson, “Introduction,” 19.

96 Alaimo, *Exposed*, 78.

97 See, for example, Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

98 Karen Barad, “On Touching: The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” *Differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 219.

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