

Mateship with Animals: Writing Nonhuman Animals as Channels for Substitution and Expression

Carrie Tiffany

La Trobe University

Abstract: This paper reflects on my childhood fixation with nonhuman animals and considers my father's relationship with the family dog as an example of a retreat to a traumatic wound. In my later work as a park ranger, I was confronted by the conditions by which certain nonhuman animals were categorised as those to be culled, or to be cared for. These memories, together with inspiration from Freud's case studies, informed the writing of my second novel, *Mateship with Birds*. This novel is interested in what nonhuman animals might represent and where the divisions between nonhuman animal and human experience begin and end. I use psychoanalytic theory to draw attention to the role of nonhuman animals in formulating desire in the text and to explore how they are positioned to fill the gap between need and demand where human desire appears. I am aware that my writing about nonhuman animals does not reveal a great deal about nonhuman animals, but about myself. The nonhuman animals are portals through which I reclaim, reanimate and ultimately re-embody the trauma of my childhood. The novel, and my examination of it, concludes that love in human relationships with nonhuman animals can be a powerful conduit for empathy.

Keywords: Transgenerational trauma, writing nonhuman animals, childhood trauma, psychoanalysis, self-analysis, semblant, screen memory, signifiers, domestic animals, stock, the prosthetic, therapeutic and transitional use of nonhuman animals by humans

Perth (Noongar Country) 1975

My childhood memories are divided into tranches for the lifetimes of the nonhuman animals who lived with us. The compression of their lives, their particular natures and their often sudden and brutal deaths season my reminiscences and add a heightened poignancy. The nonhuman animals were silent witnesses to the failings of my family, but from what I could see, they weren't marked by it. They didn't mistake us for someone else or try to find in us some earlier love they had lost. The nonhuman animals took what they needed from us, and they watched.

My father's memory was similarly marked by a childhood pet. His Yorkshire boyhood dog was a cocker spaniel. Not uncommon in English households, the cocker spaniel is a small, honey-coloured dog, gentle with children. Her name was Goldie. When my father talked about his exploits with Goldie, his brothers and sisters were never mentioned. It was Christopher and Goldie going for walks, Christopher and Goldie going fishing, nipping down to the shops, doing the paper round together. My father told us how he would climb into Goldie's kennel on cold winter mornings before going to school and stroke the velvety fur on her muzzle. How, when his father was cruel to him, Goldie would find him in his hiding place and sit with him in silent sympathy. Goldie was the dog-of-all-dogs – a boy's best friend. Goldie was never disloyal; she never questioned my father and she never lied to him or let him down. His grief on finding Goldie stiff in her kennel one morning was more than flesh and blood could stand.

There were no more dogs in my father's life until he was married with two children and had emigrated halfway around the world to Western Australia. My father decided to buy an English springer spaniel, a brown and white dog from the same family as the cocker spaniel, but larger. An English springer spaniel is a lord-of-the-manor gun dog bred to collect game birds on shooting outings. Perhaps my father thought this sporting gents' dog befitted his new and enlarged circumstances in the colonies?

The dog made it through his puppy year and grew into a boisterous family pet. The four of us were equally besotted with the brown and white dog and each of us thought he loved us best. My father, though, *insisted* on the dog's affection. The dog was required to greet my father at the door when he came home from work. When drunk or depressed my father would call the

dog close to him and run his hands urgently through his fur. ‘My poor boy’, he’d say. ‘My poor tiny boy, such a tiny little boy’. Sometimes, after arguing with my mother, my father would join the dog in his basket on the verandah next to my bedroom. It was distressing for me to know that my father was curled up on the dirty blanket next to the dog. I listened to the low keening of my father’s voice as he prated to the dog until I fell asleep.

This breed of dog was not suited for the Perth climate or the terrain. His thick coat caused overheating, and his long droopy ears collected native grass seeds that burrowed into the flesh and caused infections. The brown and white dog would shake his head as he lay under the table at mealtimes, causing a spray of pus to helicopter over our feet and legs. My mother complained that the dog had a foul smell, but mainly we just accepted it. Perhaps acknowledging that the dog was in the wrong place was too loaded – it might have led us to question our own migration.

My father had a quick-fire temper, but he was never angry at the dog. My brother copped the worst of my father’s moods. The most severe beating came when my father accused my brother of not filling the dog’s water bowl. Early one morning my father threw the plastic water bowl across the floor of my brother’s room and hauled him out of bed. My brother said he *had* filled the dog’s water bowl and my father, inevitably, almost triumphantly, accused him of lying. My father told my brother it was the worst sort of lying. ‘You are lying to the dog. How could you lie to the dog – how could you do that?’ My brother held to his denials and the beating started. I made myself small in my bed on the other side of the wall. I pretended to be asleep. I wasn’t just avoiding my father’s anger; I knew my brother would not want me to witness his shame. The beating wasn’t mentioned at breakfast, but when we got home from school that afternoon the list of chores my mother had left out on the breakfast bar only contained jobs for me.

According to the British psychoanalyst, Caroline Garland, trauma ‘touches and disrupts the core of ... identity’ (9). She believes that in the internal world, particularly when it comes to trauma, there is no such thing as forgetting (5). When I think about these incidents now, as an adult, it seems likely to me that the brown and white dog – not to mention my brother – was a vehicle through which my father was re-experiencing the trauma of his own troubled childhood.

The word trauma is derived from the Greek word for wound. In her work on the chronography of trauma, Rob Baum proposes that trauma is foremost an embodied wound that disorders and disorganises the body's sense of time:

Trauma does not exist in the present, but drags the body into the past. If it were in the present then the moment of trauma relived could be halted, as a boiling pot is withdrawn from the stove. But because it is mired in the past, the traumatised body cannot be rescued. And it cannot escape from its past precisely because we have not determined how to handle time. (34)

Wounds weep when they do not heal. My father's wounded self was trapped in a kind of bardo where mature psychic function was always out of reach. I wonder, too, if the physical migration of our family to the other side of the world exacerbated my father's trauma. The new place was even further 'out of time'; he perceived it as a threat and his traumatised body retreated to its familiar wound.

According to Garland, trauma, and primitive anxieties from childhood – paranoia, terror of annihilation – can bleed into adulthood (9-11). Indeed, Freud theorised that the compulsion to repeat or re-enact trauma was a powerful unconscious force. More recently, writers, including Meera Atkinson in *Traumata* and *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*, have proposed that trauma can become transgenerational. I have spent a lot of time wondering if consciousness of familial trauma is a sufficient defence against its legacy.

I pieced together a little about my father's childhood from overhearing the conversations of relatives. My grandfather was a bully; he had routinely belittled, humiliated and beaten his children. His wife, my grandmother, was a timid woman, often overwhelmed and distracted. She was unable to provide her son with the love and containment, the holding and attending, necessary to survive his experiences at the hands of his father, and he went on to enact repetitive and retaliatory desires of his own.¹

When I, as a child, listened to my father recite his repetitive chant to the dog – 'Poor little boy' – the words troubled me. The brown and white dog was *not* little and my father, of course, was a fully-grown adult. The sound, the particular keening tone that my father used,

was chilling; the sad child was speaking through him – or in psychoanalytic terms he was *being spoken*. The brown and white dog was a vehicle for my father's regression, an agent of stored feeling and trauma. What I now realise is that watching my father interact with the brown and white dog created a fixation in me – a fixation on nonhuman animals.²

By the age of ten, my interest in and concern for nonhuman animals had spread beyond the family dog. I spent a lot of time alone on the nature strip and in a bush block behind our house. I watched nonhuman animals with great interest. I watched the way they interacted with each other, how nonhuman animal families functioned. I became the kind of girl that climbed trees to deposit blanket scraps in bird's nests for insulation against the winter cold. I'd noticed how fiercely, how tenderly, the local honeyeaters cared for their young. If you got too close to the nest of a particular sort of pigeon, she'd throw herself onto the ground, dragging a pretend broken wing behind her, ready to sacrifice herself by acting as a decoy for her chicks. The thought of some of these chicks freezing through the winter was too much for my ten-year-old self to bear. So, there was the tree climbing, the use of my brother's hockey stick to reach high perches, my mother's consternation as the blanket on my bed got mysteriously smaller and smaller...

From a psychoanalytic perspective, childhood memories are significant as much for what they hide as for what they reveal – their value lies in the affect aroused rather than the actual content (Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* 46-8). This memory, and the earlier memory of my father's relationship with the family dog, has the quality of a screen memory. Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and Jean Laplanche define a screen memory as:

[a] childhood memory characterized both by its unusual sharpness and by the apparent insignificance of its content. The analysis of such memories leads back to inevitable childhood experiences and to unconscious fantasies. Like the symptom, the screen memory is a formation produced by a compromise between repressed elements and defence. (410)

I think I understood from quite an early age that the nonhuman animals who featured in these screen memories represented traumatic displacement. Nobody else's father treated the family dog in this way. No other girl cared for the flock of honeyeaters in the tree on the nature strip in the way her cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents might have cared for her, if they had not been left behind in another country. Childhood screen memories, because they involve defence, are already, in their way, a fiction. It is no surprise that nonhuman animals have found their way into my writing. I am aware that my writing about nonhuman animals does not reveal a great deal about nonhuman animals, but about myself. The bodies of the nonhuman animals are channels through which I reclaim, reanimate and ultimately re-embody the trauma of my childhood.

Central Australia 1984

A legitimate way for an adult to be interested in nonhuman animals, to want to spend time in the company of nonhuman animals, is through science. At the age of nineteen, I joined the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory as a park ranger. Park rangers care for native nonhuman animals and kill those who are introduced. The decision to nurture or to destroy depends on which scientific category a nonhuman animal falls within.³

We conducted surveys of endangered native nonhuman animals with a view to their reintroduction. I nursed a kuniya – a woma python – as she recovered from an accidental spear wound. The snake lived in my caravan at Yulara (on the outskirts of Uluru-Kata Tjuṯa National Park, Anangu Country), for six months until she was ready to be released. Caring for animals and releasing them back into the wild was rare compared to the killing. Killing is one of a ranger's core duties. Rangers are expected to kill feral nonhuman animals – including donkeys, horses, camels, goats, cats, rats and foxes – on declared parks or reserves within our jurisdiction.

When I had been in the ranger service for six months or so, I was sent on a firearms training course run by the Northern Territory Police. On the last day of the course the police instructor brought out a dozen high-powered automatic rifles with telescopic sights. Rangers

sometimes used these rifles to shoot feral horses from helicopters. I had never shot with a scope before. We lay on our stomachs in a line of dugouts facing a set of human-shaped cardboard targets. I placed my left eye against the scope and squeezed the trigger. The butt of the gun belted back into my shoulder and the hard edge of the scope punched into my face, cutting the flesh around my eye. It was a pastry-cutter wound; deep and perfectly circular. The police instructor was impressed by how much it bled. He drove me to hospital where they stitched the wound and gave me a tetanus shot. That night, when I couldn't sleep because of the throbbing pain, it seemed fitting that in learning how to be a danger to nonhuman animals I had been a danger to myself.

My boss at Yulara said a good ranger was always alert for anything that appeared to be out of place in the landscape. 'If it doesn't look right in the landscape, it is probably introduced and it should probably be shot', he told me. I must have looked a bit uncomfortable at this, so he smiled at me encouragingly. We had this conversation on a long patrol to several isolated parks and reserves northwest of Alice Springs (Mparntwe on Arrente Country). This was serious four-wheel driving country. Not many tourists made it out to these places. We visited the parks and reserves a couple of times a year to check the fences and signs and rubbish bins and to shoot any feral nonhuman animals. On the way back, my boss shot a donkey through the window of the Toyota. It was a sick donkey, thin and dehydrated. He said it was better dead out on the flat where the eagles and dingoes could get a feed than polluting a waterhole. My boss was a good shot, but we still walked over to the donkey to check it was dead. He put his boot under the donkey's head. Its ears wagged dustily, but it was clearly dead. My boss told me that he once shot a donkey in front of an Aboriginal woman and she was angry with him. She told him he shouldn't have shot the donkey because it was part of the Jesus dreaming story and he was a white fella and that was *his* dreaming story, so he'd broken his own law. 'I even showed her my firearms licence', he told me. 'I showed her it was all legal. Not that it made her any happier'.⁴

Writing nonhuman animals — meaning, repression and expression

Novels are made from repressions, obsessions, serendipities and tipping points. By chance, as I was starting to write my second novel, I met a man training to be a psychoanalyst. I began my own analysis. I started to read Sigmund Freud, beginning with the ‘Rat Man,’ Ernst Lanzer (‘Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis’ 155-221). I visited the Freud Museum in London and bought a postcard of the great man in his consulting room standing next to his couch. He is reaching down to pat his chow Yofi, anchored to her warm bulk.

Freud’s case studies read like short stories. I was drawn to Little Hans with his phobia of horses. Some questions were formulating for me. How and why do we use nonhuman animals as mechanisms of substitution and expression? Where are the boundaries between how we imagine human and nonhuman animals – do they mimic the divisions we refer to between the mind and the body? What is instinct and intuition? How do nonhuman animal families function? What lay behind my childhood and adulthood desire to be with nonhuman animals, to ‘be animal’?

Both Freud and Jacques Lacan investigated what names mean and how they function as signifiers that inadvertently reveal unconscious fears and desires. As a young park ranger, I believed that being able to name a place meant that I would understand it in some definitive way. In hindsight, I think this stemmed from a need to make place familiar – to literally make place family. By naming the component parts of the landscape – the plants and animals that inhabited it – their threatening and mysterious qualities would be lessened and my place in this substitute family landscape would be defined and clarified. The desire to make nonhuman animals my intimates can be seen in the naming of the snake that I nursed in Central Australia. When I said, ‘Hello, sweetheart,’ to the snake as I came home to my empty caravan each evening, I am aware I was really speaking to myself.

I started to write. In *Mateship with Birds*, the characters, who inhabit a domesticated farming landscape, assign human names to the non-speaking beings, the nonhuman animals, they live and work alongside.⁵ The cows who make up Harry’s dairy herd are known by a mixture of stud names, names that describe a physical feature, and the common women’s names of the day.⁶ The kookaburras have intimate names that denote their role in the family. Harry’s

whippet, Sip, is his beloved. Her name is a puckered, intimate action of the mouth – almost a kiss. The naming of nonhuman animals within the text invites the reader to experience them as they are experienced by the novel’s human characters – as signified creatures. The author is involved in a double-layered process of naming in the creation of the text; firstly, the naming of the human characters, and then the naming of the human characters’ animals.⁷ This second layer of naming, in which it is necessary to think about and assign signification to animals in a way that is consistent with the psyche of a character, invites an interrogation of the function of nonhuman animals within the text.

The material and symbolic existence of animals is different in rural and urban/domestic landscapes. In the rural setting, nonhuman animals are literally the ‘stock’ of the farm business or are ‘working’ animals. In urban/domestic settings, nonhuman animals are acquired by individuals and families to be petted. In both settings, nonhuman animals *are* their bodies. Humans, as speaking beings, are traditionally figured as more. According to Lacan, only the speaking being (human animal) is possessed of an unconscious:

There is no unconscious except for the speaking being. The others, who possess themselves being only through being named – even though they impose themselves from within the real – have instinct, namely the knowledge needed for survival.

(*Television 5*)

In Lacan’s division of the human and animal world into speaking and non-speaking beings, he draws attention to the role of domestic animals:

non-speaking beings (animals) impose themselves from within the real. This still leaves the category of homme-sick animals, thereby called domestics (d’hommetiques), who for that reason are shaken, however briefly, by unconscious, seismic terrors.

(*Television 7*).

Nonhuman animals are at home in the effort of their bodies, but they are not at home, Lacan suggests, with our desires. They may not be subject to the divisive effect of language, which separates us from the Real, but nonhuman animals can still be *shaken* when they encounter

humans. The man-sick nonhuman animals that are shaken are of course pets or domesticated animals; to the extent that nonhuman animals can be said to be neurotic it is because of their close association with humans.

In *Mateship with Birds*, the domestic nonhuman animals share physical proximity with the human characters and are sites for witness, transference displacement, repetition, and in some cases, transition. The domestic nonhuman animals stand in for, or signify a lack in, the psyche of the characters and in doing so have a critical function in the formulation of desire.

According to Lacan,

Desire is what manifests itself in the interval demand excavates just shy of itself insofar as the subject, articulating in the signifying chain, brings to the light his lack of being with his call to receive the complement of this lack from the Other – assuming that the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of the lack. (*Écrits* 28)

Here, Lacan describes how when a subject finds herself making a demand, she signals a lack of something, a need, and expects to receive the exact thing in response to the demand that will fill this need. But of course, what we really need remains hidden from consciousness, so that our understanding of it is inherently oblique; this means that even if we receive what is demanded it will never be recognised in a way that will produce final satisfaction. According to Lacan, it is in this gap between need and demand that desire appears.

I think this has a particular resonance in our relationships with nonhuman animals. Human demands are made and articulated through the medium of language, but when the demand arrives at (or is spoken into) the nonhuman animal it becomes opaque. Indeed, the nonhuman animal is a channel for the demand to reverberate.⁸ As the demand is unmet, the subject repeats it and can become habituated to this repetition. The cycle is only broken when a transference is effectively established with another human subject and the bond to the nonhuman animal can be broken.

What is returned by an animal is always imaginary; in effect, the nonhuman animal is a cloak for desire. In *Mateship with Birds*, I demonstrate this in Harry's relationship with his whippet, Sip. Dogs are kept for work, and often as pets, on most Australian farms. Access to the

house defines the dog's sphere of influence; the pet dog inhabits the domestic space, while paddock dogs live outside in the work environment. Sometimes the two categories cross over. A working dog can become a pet (which often renders it useless in the paddock) or an unsuitable housedog can be taken out on the false promise that it can work. The status of the nonhuman animal is defined by how it is touched. Harry's relationship with Sip is sensual. She is feminine in her body and her nature – she snakes her long body around his legs, she leans into him, she watches him with her large, liquid eyes. Bar sharing his bed, Sip has taken the place of Harry's ex-wife, Edna. In doing so, she demonstrates the intolerable loss of intimacy, of being known, that Harry experienced when his marriage ended.

Harry is not unaware of what Sip represents; he is cognisant of her symbolic function. He's outwardly embarrassed by her – 'She looks wounded when they go to town and he makes her jump down from the Dodge because he always lifts her when they are at home' – but her connection to him overrides any shame he might feel in public (Tiffany 7). By watching (witnessing) Harry, Sip anchors him to the pattern of his life on the farm, and in offering her feminine attentions, to his masculinity. For much of the novel, Harry experiences his life as mediated and reflected through Sip's gaze. The relationship between dog and man is tender, but it is imbued with a relic, amberoid quality. Later in the novel, Harry's human love interest and next-door-neighbour, Betty, discovers the letters Harry has been writing to her son, Michael, and is confused and concerned by them. In a state of high anxiety, Harry waits for her outside Acacia Court in an attempt to explain and apologise, to 'right' their relationship. Harry manages his feelings with an act of physical daring: riding off to Pyramid Hill on his motorcycle. When he arrives at his destination, he reflects that getting through the day has only been possible because he has been able to imagine that Betty was watching him. This is a critical moment of transition for Harry, for he has imagined himself being watched by Betty, rather than by Sip.

Katie Gentile argues that psychoanalysis demonstrates a number of contradictions about animals. For one, '[o]ur theories rely on a stance of human exceptionalism whereas what we have identified as *human* behavior emerges from studies on captive animals' (7). Animals appear in almost all of Freud's case studies, where they displace, project and stand in for various Oedipal and libidinal objects; but, as Gentile points out, while the animal is often present as the

symptom in psychoanalysis, there is little written directly about nonhuman animals within the discipline. She considers this a curious absence, given that so many of us live in households with nonhuman animals we view as family. She ultimately argues that:

one could conclude psychoanalysis emerges only *with* a particular intimacy with animals, demonstrating an approached interspecies potential of psychoanalytic subjectivity that is actively defended against, held out of conscious awareness to the detriment of our world. (8)

Gentile also draws attention to the critical failure of psychoanalysis to let go of the fantasy of human exceptionalism:

Psychoanalysis remains defended against knowing what we know, that there is a sublime intimacy of being co-emergent with all beings in our surroundings. But to acknowledge this is to also acknowledge that we are merely one type of object in a world of objects. Additionally, we cannot reap the benefits of oneness without responsibility. (12)

Freud's letters demonstrate his close and affectionate relations with family dogs (often present at analytic sessions) even as he theorised animals as 'symbolic reservoirs of our projected images,' (Akhtar and Volkan 3). This separation between humans and animals and the concurrent objectification of nonhuman animals is maintained by later analysts such as Donald Winnicott, who believed nonhuman animals were used by humans prosthetically, as therapeutic or transitional objects.

The complexity of this space of human-nonhuman animal interaction is one I have attempted to navigate in my work. The novelist's challenge is to develop characters that reveal meaning through their specificity and their interaction with other characters, and for me that has always included nonhuman animal characters. The nonhuman animal characters in *Mateship with Birds* have multiple functions. They demonstrate psychoanalytic precepts and are sites for 'working through', but they also mirror a shared physical world in its embodied, intimate sensuality – the feel of warm fur against human skin, the smell of cow dung, the sound of the kookaburra song that wakes Harry each morning. The novel is undoubtably anthropomorphic and theriomorphic. However, I support David Brooks's assertion that we shouldn't be wary

about our capacity for empathy informing our understanding of nonhuman animals; instead, we should embrace it. ‘We must develop, articulate and amplify the feelings we experience in engagement with the world’ (Brooks 52). I also hope that the anthropomorphic depictions of nonhuman animals in the novel challenge and enlarge our understanding of nonhuman animals, rather than reducing them. In the introduction to their essay collection, *Knowing Animals*, Philip Armstrong and Laurence Simmons suggest the need to ‘consider the benefits (and not only for humans) of attempting to know animals differently: more closely, less definitively, more carefully, less certainly’ (21).

When we are shown to be using nonhuman animals as vessels for repression and defence, this invites consideration of what exists in the space outside human perception. It is also worth considering that acknowledging nonhuman animal instinct and intuition might be a way to disrupt the loop of ingrained speciesism, where our abuse of nonhuman animals, their trauma and our (unconscious) experience of this trauma moves backwards and forwards in a damaging feedback loop. Erika Calvo identifies this connection in her descriptions of how men working in slaughterhouses in Britain who brutalise nonhuman animals are subsequently brutalised by that experience (32-45).

The narrative trajectory of *Mateship with Birds*, as the title suggests, is one towards a healthful, embodied kinship between nonhuman animals and humans. This is achieved through the knowledge and methodologies associated with psychoanalysis. Respecting the tenets of psychoanalysis within a novel requires characters to change, not because of external circumstances or the influence and desire of others, but from a return to formative childhood experiences, particularly relationships with parents and early expressions of sexuality. Psychoanalysis requires the analysand to speak. The transference relationship that develops with the analyst functions to *hold* the analysand during this often long and complex process. In *Mateship with Birds*, the letters that Harry writes for Michael, in which Harry describes his sexual history (often using nonhuman animals as a way of euphemistically explaining *the workings*), return Harry’s sexuality from the repetitive attractions of fantasy and memory back to his body. The letters were a formal creative constraint for the writing of the novel. They required me to reverse the processes of memory, creating a coded history for Harry in backstory scenes from

which his memory can then spring. The letters are of little use to Michael – his function as the recipient is transference – but the act of producing them is crucial for Harry. By excavating his sexual history, the letters function as a form of self-analysis. It would not have been possible for Harry to have an actual psychoanalysis in Cohuna in the 1950s; however, the act of writing has been compared to the act of speaking in analysis.⁹ Freud himself made use of the methodology of letter-writing. After the death of his father in 1896, Freud entered an extended period of self-analysis, exchanging many letters with his friend and colleague Wilhelm Fleiss. In his letters to Fleiss, Freud reflected on his intense feelings of love for his mother and attempted to interpret his own dreams.

Harry puts himself in the position of the father to write the letters to Michael. The analytic discourse Harry produces in writing the letters enables him to align his libido in the direction of a woman (Betty). Producing the letters is, for Harry, a way of having a history and revealing his unconscious. In ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working Through’, Freud writes:

The patient reproduces what he or she has repressed, not as memory but as action. This is a resistance to having a history; (constructing a history) by not having a history the patient was unable to put a stop to this acting out of the past they desired to keep at a distance. People are unable to put a stop to the prescriptive power of the past – often at a considerable cost to themselves. (150-151).

At the beginning of *Mateship with Birds*, as noted, Sip has a repressed sexual function for Harry. She is a container for his libido and the site for stasis and repetition, but once the self-analysis has taken hold, her function changes. Betty’s ejection of Sip from her house in the novel’s closing scenes is a further indication for the reader that her role as Harry’s intimate cannot continue (Tiffany 194). Sip is returned, through Betty’s action, to her own being.

Harry’s journal observations of the kookaburra family in the novel were also prompted by Freud’s theories and provided a further psychoanalytic constraint. Harry charts the relationships of the bird family through its seasonal cycle of sex, birth and death. In Freud’s short paper, ‘Family Romances’, he discusses the critical stage in children’s lives where they begin to understand the fallibility of their parents and to compare their family to others.

According to Freud, the liberation from the romance of the family of origin is an essential state for normal development and the ability to create a new family (237-241). When Harry makes his last entry in the journal of the kookaburra family, he is finally free to start his own. The kookaburra family is also then liberated to live their lives free from Harry's desire.

An exploration of how nonhuman animals function in *Mateship with Birds* as vessels for the working through of psychic trauma led me to consider the ambiguous nature of the appearance of nonhuman animals, and how they can have connotations and appearances that mimic those of humans. This raises the Lacanian notion of the semblant. Lacan states, in *Seminar VII*: 'only he who escapes from false appearances can achieve truth' (310). The semblant, for Lacan, is an object of enjoyment that is seductive and deceptive. It stands in for, or covers, the loss of an object that can't be regained. The subject is aware of the ersatz nature of the semblant but opts for it over an encounter with the Real. Lacan translator Russell Grigg clarifies that while 'the English word semblant means being like or resembling, seeming rather than being real, being (merely) apparent, in French there is an additional element connoting an outer appearance, pretence, even imitation' ('The Concept of the Semblant in Lacan's Teaching').

The semblant resembles what it imitates. There is no suggestion of deception; the semblant has a transparent appearance. We can be capable of finding greater satisfaction in the strange ersatz quality of the semblant than the real thing. The semblant is a place where we are happy to make believe. Grigg dismisses the value of Lacan's semblant in relation to nonhuman animals:

However, it is not possible to move seamlessly from the animal to the human world; on the contrary, the differences go to the heart of Lacan's concept of the semblant. In the animal world semblance is mere appearance because it lacks the element of make believe that makes semblance such a strange function in humans. (Grigg)

Grigg focuses on the impossibility of ascertaining whether one nonhuman animal (non-speaking being) can be a semblant for another, but he doesn't interrogate the relationships between subjects and nonhuman animals as having the characteristics of the semblant. If

semblants are a form of substitution of something that provides a source of satisfaction for another object that would cause anxiety, nonhuman animals can surely fulfill this role.

In my novel, Harry settles for a relationship with Sip (a semblant) over the real as she provides a means of satisfaction. Her position as a non-speaking being allows her to fill the gap that separates symbolisation from experienced reality. Sip's silence is seductive and therefore deceptive. According to Grigg's understanding of Lacan, 'the semblant fills a lack by coming to the place where something should be, but isn't, and where its lack produces a negative affect of some sort, usually anxiety' ('The Concept of the Semblant in Lacan's Teaching'). This anxiety is also experienced by Harry in his relations with his herd of dairy cows. In this instance, a herd of nonhuman animals rather than an individual nonhuman animal is overlain with the connotation of the semblant. The herd functions as a kind of meta-cow, bonded by the rapport of a shared routine and the inhabitation of their similar bovine bodies. Dairy farmers empty the cows of their lactation, relieving pain and distress, but also taking the place of a calf. The processes involved in performing artificial insemination on cows (penetration, semen deposit) are ripe with sexual metaphor and the reviving of latent conflicts. For Harry, this is double-edged. Harry performs the insemination as proficiently as he can and tries to cause minimal distress to the animal, but he is aware of the incestuous nature of the process – he is inseminating heifers that he helped birth and raise in a way not dissimilar to parenting the children he has failed to father. As the bull-human to the herd, Harry can masquerade in a paternal role, but this is a father who breaks the laws of the family. His relations with the herd bring Harry to a place where something should be, but isn't. The negative affect of the lack is demonstrated through Harry's anxiety: 'The semen flows forwards and then backwards a little over his fingertips. It's important to withdraw slowly, to fight the panicky feeling that his arm might get stuck inside of her, trapped by the girdles and belts of her flesh' (Tiffany 80).

Erika Calvo's research on the patriarchal discourses that inform cattle farming and breeding in Britain reveals the sexualisation and gendering of farm animals:

Farm animals are constructed in ways resembling human gender dichotomies. Breed journals, for instance, indicate that genetics are manipulated to produce attractive, docile, 'good mothers,' and 'virile,' strong, 'promiscuous' males. (28)

Calvo goes on to suggest that the artificial insemination of farm animals could be classified as rape. The idea that artificial insemination may have a criminal or moral dimension, or that it could cause distress to either cow or human inseminator, is not discussed in any of the dairy farming and artificial insemination manuals that I read while researching and writing *Mateship with Birds*. Harry's anxiety about his role in artificial insemination invites the reader to reconsider the notion of animal husbandry and to see it as an essentially phallogocentric construct.

Lacan believed that semblance operated from humans towards the nonhuman animal but could not operate in the direction of the nonhuman animal to the human. During a seminar, he points to his boxer bitch, Justine, who he says 'has speech but not language: insofar as she speaks she never takes him for another. She is not capable of transference and lives in the demand' (*Seminar IX Identification*). For Lacan, then, nonhuman animals can formulate a demand without it being hampered by the signification that comes with language. This is not the case for speaking beings, where desire forms around objects that meet a psychological rather than a physical need. The difficulty, the rub of having to formulate a demand that will match a psychological need, is hampered by the impossibility of representing that which falls in the gap between needs and demands.

In *Mateship with Birds*, the characters demand love. This is an especially difficult demand to express, as love is poorly served by language. Harry uses nonhuman animals to both express and deflect his demand for love. One of his final acts in relation to nonhuman animals in the novel is to bury the winking owl that has died on a winter's night, hanging frozen-clawed to Betty's washing line. The winking owl has been a talismanic nonhuman animal character for Betty. After her children had gone to sleep each night, she listened for and identified with the owl's lonely call. When Harry buries the owl, shabby and domestic in death, he is releasing Betty from her own transitional identification and removing the final psychological obstacle to their relationship. In the closing scene of the novel, Harry and Betty enter each other sexually, not with speech, but with their own animal bodies, and finally with love.

Love in human relationships with animals can be a powerful conduit for empathy.

Teresa Brennan believes that the emotion of love is different to emotions like anger or fear, as it is specific. 'Love is different in that it directs positive feelings towards the other by attending to the specificity of the other rather than seeing her or him through idealizing or demonizing projections' (32). The beloved nonhuman animal characters in the novel, the vessels for love, are depicted with exacting sensual detail. Their silence does not blunt their specificity but highlights the inarticulateness of love. Their nonhuman animal bodies are places in which human language reverberates, is held, and can then be heard. In Brennan's words, they are examples of a language of the flesh.

According to the psychoanalyst Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, 'A tongue can speak, can go beyond itself, only if we're not too much at ease with it through having heard and practiced it for too long, only if we feel incompetent to handle it altogether as a tool' (18). This is what I want my writing to do: to function like a tongue in an unruly mouth, a tongue making its own language as it speaks. 'Hello, sweetheart', I said to the snake in my caravan when I came home each evening. 'My poor little boy', my father said to the brown and white dog on the verandah outside our house in Perth. Here were our tongues, my fathers and mine, speaking to themselves, enacting a play through the mute but witnessing body of the nonhuman animal and back again. Here was the prescriptive power of the past that Freud identified.

Trauma derives its power from being mute. The mute bodies of nonhuman animals provide people with a way of repeating while simultaneously denying their trauma. An interrogation of the role of nonhuman animals as symbols of traumatic displacement in my childhood, and my psychoanalytic reading, informed the writing of *Mateship with Birds*, a novel that can be read as a kind of tongue. As I wrote Harry's self-analysis in the novel, I was writing my own meta-analysis. The novel speaks the trauma of its characters back into their bodies; it re-embodies the lost language, returning it in time and place. The novel gives testament to the unconscious. It encompasses nonhuman animals within the embrace of the family and includes them in the drive towards love. It is love, through nonhuman animals, that seeks release, and the expression of love is a final flight to health.

A thin girl with English skin, with socks on under her sandals, is waiting on the nature strip in the hot afternoon. She holds the collar of a brown and white dog in one hand. It is early evening. The dog pulls at his collar and whines, looks back at the house where he wants to be, safe in his basket. The girl is waiting for her father to come home from work. Despite the move to the new country, the fresh start, she knows that her father has always been in the process of leaving the family. She understands that her devotion is inadequate to make him stay, but the dog? Her father loves the dog. The dog is the fractured, painful past, but he is also a familiar place her father can put himself, for a while, at least.

Notes

¹ The ‘acting out’ of behaviours from childhood is addressed with examples from case studies. See Earnshaw, *Time Bombs in Families and How to Survive Them* and Miller, *The Drama of Being a Child*.

² Humans are, of course, animals. I use the term animal to refer collectively to nonhuman animal species. I am also aware that nonhuman animals experience trauma on their own terms, although in agricultural settings this is more likely to be described as stress. See Tung, ‘Cumulative Early Life Adversity Predicts Longevity in Wild Baboons’.

³ Ted Benton’s work categorises nonhuman animals into those that can be viewed as ‘wild, used as labour, used for entertainment or edification, installed as household pets, employed as symbols, or consumed as food’ (62).

⁴ I remember being awed and surprised by the generosity of the Aboriginal woman in taking ethical responsibility for a feral animal and including the donkey within kinship relations. Unfortunately, at the age of nineteen, I lacked the ability to have this discussion with my superior. Deborah Bird Rose has written extensively on how colonisation and wildness produce violence on Indigenous lands. In *Reports from a Wild Country*, she argues, ‘We cannot avoid the knowledge that conquest requires death and dispossession’ (4).

⁵ My title was taken from the Australian naturalist Alec Chisholm’s first book, *Mateship with Birds*, published in 1922. Chisholm used the term mateship in the sense of comradeship and friendship. He urged all Australians to open their hearts to birds and believed that if we love living things, they become members of our family.

⁶ The listing of the names of the old men Betty cares for at Acacia Court mimics the cast of names of Harry’s dairy herd and invites a parallel between Harry’s and Betty’s roles with each.

⁷ While I consciously selected the names of the human characters, it was not until these characters were written-into-life that I chose the names of that character's animals from behind (or within) that character.

⁸ The non-speaking animal does not return its own self-demanding language but holds or contains the language within it. The desire of the subject can become 'stuck' within a nonhuman animal – in my novel, Mues with his ewe is an apt example. With other characters, the speaking of desire aloud to the nonhuman animal can make the unconscious conscious and allow the subject to hear the repeated and faulty demand and to seek to make it elsewhere.

⁹ Classical Freudian psychoanalysis began in Australia in 1940 with the arrival of Clara Lazar-Geroe from Budapest. A number of analytic schools now function, and analysts are established within all of Australia's major cities, but psychoanalysis is still unavailable to those in rural areas. See Ellingsen.

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