

Natalie Childs
English/CSCT 767: Regarding Animals
Dr. D. Clark
April 19th, 2011

**Envisaging the Animal Other:
The ethics of alterity in a time of war**

“Envisaging rather than naming: to bring in all that a face presents – character, expressions, imagination, mobility of feature, traces of the past in lines and crowfeet. A face is a face is a face; it is not primarily a linguistic being whose chief virtue is ease of manipulation. And when a lake or a pine marten looks backs, when we are – however momentarily – vis-à-vis, the pause is always electric. Are we not right to sense, in such meetings, that envisaging flows both ways?”
(Don McKay, *Vis-à-Vis*, 101)

We¹ are engaged in a war on animals. Because of massive human intervention in the natural world, up to 8000 animal species are under the threat of extinction, while thousands of other species have become extinct in the past century (IUCN Red List). Through the destruction of natural habitats by the expansion of human populations, invasions by foreign species that threaten native plant and animal life, and exploitation by hunting, trapping and fishing, animal species are perishing globally at an unprecedented rate. Simultaneously, the production of animal corpses for human consumption in industrial farms is increasing – in the United States alone 10 billion land animals a year are killed for meat, often in frighteningly crowded and diseased conditions (Centre for

¹ I want to admit a deep uncertainty with the pronouns used here. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler brings up the troubling question of individual vs. collective responsibility to others, asking “could it be that through the process of assuming responsibility the “I” shows itself to be, at least partially, a “we”?” (35 *Frames of War*). But as she explains, to speak of “we” in this context is necessarily to be involved in the very process of exclusion that a radical ethics of alterity demands I work against. To say “we” could be seen to imply that responsibility is due only to those I recognize as like myself, within a “community of belonging” (36). To move beyond exclusionary ethics to a responsibility that is not grounded in similarity perhaps depends on a “critical reflection on those exclusionary norms by which fields of recognizability are constituted” (36). When I say “we” in this paper, I am referring to the human animal who is already entangled in a process of framing themselves and their responsibility towards non-human life. Throughout the paper I hope to engage in the type of “critical reflection” that will allow “us” to call those frames, and thus our understanding of a human ethical community, into question.

Food Safety). In the world's oceans, massive overfishing already has led to the disappearance of approximately 90% of large fish stocks worldwide (overfishing.org). Some animals are considered exempt from the summary death sentence that is assigned to most non-human animals – domestic pets are loved and cherished in many North American homes, sometimes to the point of absurdity. Yet in order for humans to profit from these loved objects, enormous numbers of dogs and cats are produced each year by breeders, many of whom die in shelters or puppy mills if they are not chosen soon enough by a prospective owner.

These statistics provide only the briefest of hints at the world of animals today, and do not touch on the practices of animal testing, the lives of zoo animals or animals used in the clothing industry. Neither does this summary investigate the innumerable stories of intentional, purposeless suffering inflicted on animals by humans. As human beings in 2011, we are implicated in the deaths of countless non-human animals every day. Yet this war on animals is rarely mentioned; it ranges from being explicitly censored (through the banning of cameras and reporting in slaughterhouses) to merely unacknowledged. Most of us have developed a thousand mechanisms for ignoring the violence that is directly before us. The perimeters of the war on animals are invisible to those who are waging it.

The idea of a 'war on animals' challenges accepted notions of what 'war' can be. If war is understood as "hostile contention by means of armed forces, carried on between nations, states, or rulers, or between parties in the same nation or state" (OED), the animal clearly has no chance of success. In this context, a "war on animals" quickly becomes an absurdity: how can a war be fought against combatants who have no organization, no weaponry, no rulers? This is why I use the phrasing of a war *on* animals

instead of a war *with* or *against* animals: arguably, the wars *between* humans and animals were over long ago. Reminiscent of the recent wars “*on* drugs” and “*on* terror”, the war on animals is a war of extermination. Like those wars, it is an imperialist attempt to eliminate that which is threatening to the body politic by identifying an external enemy that represents this threat to destroy, and by reinforcing the borders between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of this struggle. Yet just like attempting to fight terror with sophisticated weapons, humans attempting to fight animality are an impossible absurdity, for the combatants and the enemy are one and the same. This is one of the reasons the ‘war on animals’ is only visible at rare moments: the struggle within individual humans to disavow our own animality is, for the most part, invisible to ourselves. Instead, this violent conflict becomes visible at the rare moments when the everyday apathy to the animal is disrupted.

In “Dwelling with the Animal after Levinas”, David Clark examines the unacknowledged investments thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas, after Martin Heidegger, have in maintaining an absolute border between the human being (*Dasein*) and the animal: a border which I suggest all of us are invested in retaining. He asks: “What is effaced or ignored by restricting “warfare” to the systematic violence of humans against humans as something particular to *Dasein*, the sole creature capable of apprehending “the importance of the life of the other”” (60 Clark)? Clark makes explicit the connection between Levinas² inability to see the enormous violence against animals as ‘war’ and the inability to ‘face’ animals in the Levinasian sense: “the being-war of war and the being-human of humanity are here openly, deeply complicit with each other, a complicity we might consider when we think of the denegations of murder once the non-human is

² And, I argue, our own.

decreed not to have a face, the alibis that always put the human somewhere else, doing something else when it comes to killing animals” (62 Clark). It is the intention of this paper to show how coming ‘face-to-face’ with the animal radically reorients the ethical human subject, placing us at the scene of the crime, infinitely responsible.

As Clark makes clear, we will only be able to break the current invisibility of the war on animals by coming face to face with the animal. To do so, we must begin to envisage the animal as it exists with us, in this time and place, and then begin to enact both the response and the responsibility that these faces call for. For resources on ‘envisaging’ the animal in a way that makes visible our responsibilities to them, I look to Emmanuel Levinas in order to grapple with what the ‘face’ is and what it demands. Next, I enter into conversation with other contemporary readers of Levinas within critical animal studies to explore why the face of the animal other needs to be seen. Finally, I examine the work of Canadian poet Don McKay in order to imagine what a “face to face” encounter with the animal might look like. Only by beginning to ‘see’ the animal in this way can we make an attempt to end the war on animals.

Emmanuel Levinas’ critical addition to the history of philosophy he inherited came in the naming of “ethics as first philosophy”: before a stable rational subject exists, he argues, it already has responsibilities towards the other being(s) it encounters. This relation of responsibility comes before the establishment of the “I” or the “same”: “the other absolutely other – the Other – does not limit the freedom of the same, it founds it and justifies it” (197 *Totality and Infinity*). In a 1986 interview, Levinas explains that he links the “notion of the good” to his “analysis of the for-the-other, conducted from the starting point of the phenomenology of the face” (54 *Is it Righteous to Be?*). For Levinas, we confront our responsibility to the other most acutely in a ‘face-to-face’ meeting with

the other. In encountering the absolutely other, we are called to respond by the vulnerability of the other's face: "to encounter a face is straightaway to hear a demand and an order" (48 *Is it Righteous to Be?*). By recognizing the mortality of the other in the defenselessness of their face, one is compelled to respond to it ethically: primarily, the face of the other tells us: "thou shalt not to kill". Crucially, though, the face of Levinasian philosophy need not be the literal eyes, nose and mouth of another human being; to see the face in these terms would be to reduce the absolute alterity that the other's face presents. As a trace of a being's mortality, Levinas "define[s] the face precisely by these traits beyond vision ... the face, behind the countenance that it gives itself, is like a being's exposure unto death; the without-defense, the nudity and the misery of the other" (48 *Is it Righteous to be?*). My response, and the infinite responsibility that comes with it, is called out in recognizing the mortality we share in the other's defenselessness and vulnerability.

It is because animals have for so long been thought in the history of philosophy as the human's "absolute other" that critical animal studies have taken up Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of alterity as a way to rethink the human relationship to the animal. Although the philosopher was insistent that his work dealt with human subject and its others, it also radically broke with traditional philosophical understandings of what an ethical subject is, calling into question what responsibilities this subject has, and to whom it is responsible. These questions are crucial for animal ethicists. Where John Llewelyn concludes his 1991 essay "Am I Obsessed by Bobby?" by arguing that the dog at the edge of the Nazi internment camp does not have a 'face' within the context of Levinasian ethics, David Clark and Matthew Calarco have taken up the question of the animal in Levinas' work with a more critical bent, asking whether in "The Name of the Dog", the

philosopher does not in fact purposefully align the human Holocaust with the violence done to animals in order to call into destabilize our assumed categories of “human” and “animal” (Clark 44-46). Clark teases out the inconsistencies around Levinas’ statements on animals to trouble any absolute statement about Levinas’ alleged disavowal of the animal other. Calarco argues that “Levinas’ ethical philosophy is, or at least should be, committed to a notion of universal ethical consideration” (Calarco 55) that does not from the outset discount the non-human animal from its scope. His chapter “Facing the Other Animal” takes on the implications of “universal consideration” in a body of work that is oriented around the question of where the “human animal break[s] with animality” in order to become ethical – which is to say human (56 Calarco). However, where Calarco ultimately finds fault in Levinas’ anthropocentric perspective, arguing that philosophers of the animal need to push beyond this limited ‘humanistic’ perspective, I argue that such a “move beyond” is impossible. Instead, finding a way to “thoughtfully ... enact” anthropocentrism (*Vis-à-vis* 29) is the only way to begin thinking an ethical relationship to animals. Just as Levinas’ radical ethics were necessary in the wake of the Holocaust, which pushed to the limit the thinking of human responsibility to one another, in the midst of this war on animals, we must push to the limits what our responsibilities to the animal other are.

With the substantial work already done by scholars such as Calarco, Clark and Llewlyn to read Levinas into critical animal studies, what remains to be done in building a Levinasian ethics of the animal? I argue that one difficulty we consistently come up against in this interpretation of his ethics is the question of *how* to see the animal’s ‘face’ in a Levinasian sense; as that which “speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge” (198 *Totality*

and Infinity). If Levinas says “I am not sure if a snake has a face” (49 *The Paradox of Morality*, cited in Calarco 68), must we agree with him, or can we find a way to see the trace of the face in that animal, so overlaid with signification? How can we envisage the animal other in a way that does not erase its alterity by either anthropomorphizing or sentimentalizing? Is there a way to face the animal that allows us to recognize its vulnerability, as well as the call of responsibility that this face illicitly upon us? These questions guide the analysis that follows, and will be returned to in the discussion of the poetry of Don McKay.

In the following section I briefly sketch out the steps I believe need to be taken in order for humans to become conscious of the war being enacted on animals. I argue that this recognition can come, most basically³, from a face-to-face encounter with an individual animal. Levinas has already shown us how to see in the other a primary relationship to being that precedes each of us. As Jacques Derrida posits in *The Animal that Therefore I am*, as humans, we are always coming after, or *following* the animal. Yet there is no way to speak of a “natural” or instinctual relationship to the animal other: every encounter that we have with the animal is so deeply mediated by sociality specific to a time and place. I briefly introduce Judith Butler’s most recent book, *Frames of War*,⁴ as a way to understand why ‘recognizing’ the animal in Levinasian sense is so challenging in this context. The book explores the way media representations work, for

³ Though not by any means exclusively

⁴ Butler rejects the non-human animal from her conception of a “grievable life”. Yet her work itself explains how frames, and that which they exclude, are invisible until they are ruptured: the thinker is herself within the framework that makes invisible the war on animals. Yet there are a number of moments in her text that point to the possibility of this frame’s rupture: she admits that “if ... destructiveness is the problem for the human subject, it would seem that it is also what links the human and the non-human” (46 *Frames of War*), and argues that “there ought to be recognition of precariousness as a shared condition of human life (indeed, as a condition that links human and non-human animals)” (13 *Frames of War*).

political reasons, to ‘frame’ certain lives as worth living, or ‘grievable’, while they censor or render ‘ungrievable’ other lives. Butler speaks of ungrievable lives as those that “cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone” (xix Butler). With animals currently outside the frame of subjectivity, it can be extremely difficult to recognize the death of the individual animal. As Butler explains, “a living figure outside the norms of life not only becomes the problem to be managed, but seems to be that which normativity is bound to reproduce: it is living, but not a life” (8 Butler). If an animal is framed as “living, but not a life”, it becomes perfectly clear why its death cannot be recognizing as such, and why the horror of the war on animals remains largely invisible. Economically, socially and intellectually, most humans have significant investments in maintaining this ‘frame of war’.

Despite the enormous power of this framing, however, there are moments that make clear the fact that “the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable” (9 Butler). This point raises an important question of precedence: can a true face-to-face encounter with an animal happen within our current framing, or must humans first ‘break the frame’ and change our ways of imagining humanity and animality in order to see, and be seen by the animal? I can suggest only a partial answer: there are some humans who have come face-to-face with an animal, and have come to sense the infinite responsibility that accompanies this encounter. This does not mean that they are able to act outside of the frame of war on animals that we are all engaged in, only that they may be able to recognize it as such. For those who have not had this rupturing experience, I would like to lay out two small conceptual shifts whose occurrence may allow us to begin to face the animal: in the most basic sense, these shifts entail asking us

to see an animal life as a life, and an animal's death as a death. Following these short points, I turn to the poetry of Don McKay for a more vivid illustration of these concepts.

Seeing the animal not just as an embodiment of 'life', or vitality itself, but as a singular mortal being is the first step to recognizing its vulnerability and mortality; it is necessary to reject the assumption – not Heidegger's alone – that the animal 'merely perishes'. Reading Levinas against himself, we find a number of resources for thinking of the animal as a singular being who must be responded to. In an interview with Francois Poirie, Levinas was asked to explain how we can move towards the other in practice, particularly when it is the case that in interacting with individuals "we don't love everyone; we prefer, we judge" (52 *Is it Righteous to Be?*). Levinas' response is useful to keep in mind when considering how to envisage the animal: "Everything is modified once the "everyone" is affirmed. There the other is not unique... It is necessary that I rediscover the unique, once I have judged the thing; each time anew, and each time as a living individual and as a unique individual who can find, in his very uniqueness, what a general consideration cannot find" (52, *Is it Righteous to be?*). In facing each animal as unique, the categories of and within animality begin to fall away: "the unique is the other in an eminent way: he doesn't belong to a genus or doesn't remain within his genus" (205 *Entre-Nous*). Only in our singularity, as individual human beings can we come face to face with a singular being, whether that being is human or animal. Retaining an understanding of the singularity allows for openness to hearing the call or demand that the face of the other makes to us.

Response to the face of the other is the beginning of an infinite responsibility towards him. For Levinas, recognizing the other means recognizing the death of the other as a death, and therefore implicating oneself in this death: "Ethically I cannot say that the

other does not concern me ... If one thinks this to the limit, one can say that I am responsible for the death of the other. I cannot leave him alone to die, even if I cannot stop it" (53 *Is it Righteous to Be?*). Thinking of the animal's death in this context brings the significance of the "war on animals" closer to visibility.

In the following pages, I look to Canadian poet Don McKay, who as a reader of Levinas and "a nature poet in a time of ecological crisis" (9 *Vis-a-Vis*) provides a series of models for the possibilities and limitations of coming face-to-face with the animal. In looking to his work, I want to return to questions raised above: How can we envisage the animal other in a way that does not erase its alterity by either anthropomorphizing or sentimentalizing? Is there a way to face the animal that allows us to recognize its vulnerability, as well as the call of responsibility that this face illicitly upon us? Why would I look to poetry as an ideal mode for this task? Emmanuel Levinas' short essay in *Proper Names* on Paul Celan, subtitled "From Being to the Other", gives us the best sense of what Levinas sees as the possibility of poetry with regard to otherness:

the poem thus leaves the real its alterity, which pure imagination tears away from it; the poem "lets otherness's ownmost also speak: the time of the other". The going out toward the other man, is it a going out? "A step outside of man – but into a sphere directed toward the human – excentric". As if humanity were a genus allowing within its logical space (its extension) an absolute break; as if in going towards the other man we transcended the human, toward utopia. And as if utopia were not the dream and the lot of an accursed wandering, but the "clearing" in which man shows himself: 'light of utopia... And man? And the creature? – In such light.' (44 *Proper Names*)

Although this is clearly a quotation that deserves far more interpretation than can be given here, we can read into this statement the idea that for Levinas, poetry is indeed the place where alterity is allowed to speak, and in doing so, can call into question the limits of the human. Poetry, in its most general sense, can be seen as language that interpolates the other while allowing its alterity to remain intact. It may be for this precise reason that

Derrida says that “thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry” (7 Derrida). In the ‘clearing’⁵ of the poem, we are called to come ‘face-to-face’ with the strangeness of the other.

Yet for many of humans, encountering the animal other in this ‘face-to-face’ requires the difficult step of seeing that the animal can have a face at all. This is why I turn to the work of McKay, who presents a variety of encounters with non-human animals that allow the reader to imagine what an ethical relationship with animal alterity might look like. In an essay entitled “The Bushtit’s Nest”, McKay grapples explicitly with the question of the face in Levinas’ philosophy. The poet recognizes the enormous debt he owes to a thinker who allows us to “contemplate the other as a fundamental category, to dislodge our usual assumptions about the primacy of such things as sameness, selfhood, ego, being and totality” (96 *Vis-à-vis*). But he retains, like many of Levinas’ readers who share an investment in the question of the animal, an unwillingness to accept the insistently anthropocentric nature of the philosopher’s ethics. How can a human “truly address” (98 *Vis-à-vis*) those categories of beings which Levinas wants to deny a face?

Unlike Matthew Calarco, for McKay the answer to this question does not lie in attempting to deanthropomorphize human thought. Instead, McKay asks us to recognize that while “anthropocentrism, in Walt Disney films or plans for wildlife management, may be an evil we wish to avoid”; by virtue of our situated nature, “a human perspective is impossible to escape” (98 *Vis-à-vis*). What McKay proposes instead is the act of

⁵ A word used cautiously here, and ‘under erasure’.

‘envisaging’ described in the opening quotation of this paper⁶: giving a Levinasian face to the non-human other in a way that recognizes the limits of the human perspective. In order to understand this ‘envisaging’, McKay proposes the following reading of the face, a reading that I argue is a helpful supplement to animal ethicists who have an interest in the work of Levinas:

it’s an address to the other with an acknowledgement of our human-centredness built in, a salutary and humbling reminder. We can perform artistic acts in such a way that, in ‘giving things a face’ the emphasis falls on the gift, the way, for example, a linguistic community might honour a stranger by conferring upon her a name in their language. Homage is, perhaps, simply appropriation with the current reversed; ‘here’, we say to the thing, ‘is a tribute from our culture, in which having a face is the premier sign of status’ (99 *Vis-à-vis*).

I propose to test this reading by exploring a few instances in which McKay’s “artistic acts” model this homage to the animal. Through his poetry, I argue, we can participate in the double movement that the face-to-face encounter with the animal other demands of us: a motion that includes both ‘grasping’, a reach for comprehension, and ‘letting be’, a relinquishment of the possibility of comprehension.. Alternately, we can think this movement in terms of speaking and listening; thinking about recognition in this way means making an effort that will always involve translation, and a willingness not to understand what we hear. Though these are linguistic questions, in the midst of an imperialist war on animals, the ability to accept incomprehensibility might permit a step towards questioning our absolute right to kill the animal. Judith Butler explains that we

⁶ Reproduced here for convenience: “Envisaging rather than naming: to bring in all that a face presents – character, expressions, imagination, mobility of feature, traces of the past in lines and crowfeet. A face is a face is a face; it is not primarily a linguistic being whose chief virtue is ease of manipulation. And when a lake or a pine marten looks backs, when we are – however momentarily – *vis-à-vis*, the pause is always electric. Are we not right to sense, in such meetings, that envisaging flows both ways?” (101 *Vis-à-vis*)

are conscripted into war efforts through “restrictions” on what can be perceived, which “impose constraints on what can be heard, read, seen, felt and known, and so work to undermine both a sensate understanding of war, and the conditions for a sensate opposition to war” (100 Butler). Both coming to ‘see’ the animal and recognizing its absolute alterity may allow us to question the war on animals.

Though not explicitly a poem, I look first to a “Small Fable” within McKay’s essay “The Bushtit’s Nest” in order to explore how to think otherwise about Derrida’s claim that we are always following the animal⁷. In this parable, McKay reimagines the Biblical scene of Adam naming the animals and destabilizes the naturalized certainty we feel in knowing the name of a creature, as if that linguistic marking could reduce the absolute alterity of the named. In this scene, Adam relaxes after spending the day naming animal after animal, at first feeling an “immense mid-day satisfaction, [a] sense of order inexorably ordering, as though his Father’s gaze had simply entered the creature to gaze back” (89 *Vis-à-vis*)⁸. But in the darkness of the night, Adam hears “the voice of a screech owl he had named at 4:37 that afternoon. *Screech* owl? What had he been thinking?” (90 *Vis-à-vis*), and is immediately dissatisfied with the accuracy of the name, amending it to include the descriptor “the little aluminum ladder of its scream” (92 *Vis-à-vis*). Still later, a screech owl sweeps by Adam in the dark, making him realize that his new name, “much though it improved on ‘screech owl,’ did nothing for that gentle fatal presence on the path, that extra hush he had lived with for a moment” (92 *Vis-à-vis*). The insufficiency of the name – any name – as a categorization is called into question when

⁷ Though there is not space here to compare this scene to Derrida’s reinterpretation of the Biblical moment of the naming of animals, that analysis (found on pages 15-18 of *The Animal that Therefore I am*) and the many unanswerable questions it raises is informing my analysis here.

⁸ This poem, and all the others referenced in this paper, are reproduced in an index at the end of the paper.

the animal literally arrives. The absolute alterity of the animal other surpasses Man's ability to "seal [the animal] up in the prison of his species" (65 Clark) through naming and classification.

Identification expands on the disruptive nature of the encounter with the animal other, and the inadequacy of any attempt to reduce the otherness of the other by naming it. The speaker is "digging ... potatoes" when he spots "a hawkish speck / above the cornfield moving / far too fast" (19 *Field Marks*). Although he does not have time to reach for his binoculars, he chooses to identify the bird as:

Peregrine
 I write it down because
 I write down because of too much sky
 because I might have gone on digging the potatoes
 never looking up because
 I mean to bang this loneliness to speech. (19 *Field Marks*)

Aware of its potential inaccuracy, the poet nevertheless reaches for language in an attempt to connect with the other he cannot reach. Herein lies the double movement that truly facing the non-human animal requires: a grasp for comprehension that is inevitably denied.

Ironically, of course, a sharp-sighted hawk of any kind would easily spot and identify the large figure in the field: once again, the human gaze only belatedly faces the animal. Subtly, this poem shows one way to release the tight grip we have held on the gaze; by relinquishing our insistence on primacy, we can 'see ourselves seen' by the animal. As Derrida describes when he is "seen seen" (13 Derrida) by his cat, there is a disruption involved in this encounter with the animal, when the unexpected alterity of the other is allowed to be seen: Levinas speaks of "the shock of the divine, the rupture of the imminent order, of the order that I can embrace, of the other which I can hold in my

thought, of the order which can become mine, that is the face of the other” (48 *Is it Righteous to be?*). The poet demonstrates the awe that coming “face-to-face” with the animal, however asymmetrically, engenders: “jesus falcon / fix me to my feet and lock me in this / slow sad pocket of awe” (19 *Field Marks*). Here, perhaps, lies the glimpse of infinity that Levinas tells us the other makes visible to us.

Although the other must remain truly strange in order for the ethical injunction of response and responsibility to take place, in *Load* McKay demonstrates how an ethical human relationship with animals will necessarily take many forms. The poem contrasts the physical connection that can take place between mammals – “mute commiseration, load to load” (44 *Field Marks*) – with the restraint required by the poet *not* to touch a bird exhausted from its migration. As Levinas explains, our response to the singularity of the other being must be formed “each time anew”: “It is necessary that I rediscover the unique, once I have judged the thing; ... each time as a living individual and as a unique individual who can find, in his very uniqueness, what a general consideration cannot find” (52 *Is it Righteous to be?*). In the first stanza, the poet speaks of his dog Sam who: “while I was reading” would “bestow one large paw on my foot, / as if to support my body / while its mind was absent” (44 *Field Marks*). This form of interspecies respect and responsibility is contrasted in the second stanza to a “White-throated sparrow” spotted on a Point Pelee beach, the bird “so exhausted from the flight / across Lake Erie it just huddled in itself” (44 *Field Marks*). While the poet observes at close range, he imagines the inner workings of the bird’s body, and the immense effort required to allow the bird’s journey. Thinking of Sam’s paw, the poet ends this reflection as follows: “I wanted / very much to stroke it, and recalling / several terrors of my brief / and trivial existence, didn’t” (44 *Field Marks*). At work in this brief encounter is the “thoughtfully enact[ed]”

anthropocentrism (29 *Vis-a-Vis*) McKay speaks of in *Vis-à-vis*: this sparrow has a face, its suffering is recognized by the poet, and a response is evoked. But while the mammal's reaction – comfort by touch – is elicited by the vulnerability of the other, the human poet is able to recognize himself as a terror to the bird. Pulling back from the 'animal' desire becomes the ethical responsibility demanded by the situation.

In *Chickadee Encounter*, the poet shows how the 'face-to-face' meeting with the animal other can be mediated through language, even if this language must always be translated. It is a simple poem that shows that there are ways to speak to the animal, and more importantly, that there are ways to 'listen' to the animal without attempting to grasp meaning. The poet describes his regular interactions with "the / tidbits, the uppers" that cohabit his environment: "Hi, / I always say, I may be glum or dozy, still / hi, how's it going, every time they zip ... up to check me out" (22 *Field Marks*). For his part, Levinas sees in language the ability not to overcome the difference between the self and the other, but rather the place where this interaction of difference occurs. He asks us to see response as one of primary responsibilities one has towards the other:

should language be thought uniquely as the communication of an idea or as information, and not also – and perhaps above all – as the fact of encountering the other as other, that is to say, already as response to him? Is not the first word *bonjour*? As simple as *bonjour*? Bonjour as benediction and my being available for the other man (47 *Is it Righteous to Be?*).

The poet's simple "hi, how are you" to the chickadees is already in response to being "checked out" by the birds: although the conversation may not be able to progress much further than this, the encounter produces the sensation that "some big machine – domestication maybe — hiccupped" (22 *Field Marks*).

Giorgio Agamben's *The Open* is useful to briefly consider here as an alternative examination of a similar "machine". In this series of essays, Agamben examines the

workings of the ‘anthropological machine’ that has worked throughout the history of philosophy, ceaselessly making divisions and distinctions between man and animal. He wants to put a stop to that machine, and argues that what we can do to “render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man” (92 Agamben) is to “let [the animal] be outside of being” (91 Agamben).⁹ This theoretical move is crucial in developing an ethics that recognizes the absolute alterity of the animal. Yet by looking to Levinas and Butler, we can also see the insufficiency of this directive as a way of modeling an ethics of the animal. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas reminds us that it is response, not “letting be”, which is the truly ethical action towards the other: “speaking, rather than ‘letting be,’ solicits the Other” (195 *Totality and Infinity*). By recognizing, through Butler’s concept of “framing,” the current invisibility of the lives and deaths of animals, we can also see how the real danger in the time of a war on animals does not consist in holding the animal too closely before our sight, but rather in failing completely to see it. Our willed blindness to the horrors of factory farming and the mass extinctions that threaten thousands of species demonstrates that for the most part, we have yet to truly face the animal being. We must therefore not be overly hasty in letting the animal ‘be’ before we have begun to ‘see’ it.

The implications of ‘seeing’ the animal are at play in *Adagio for a Fallen Sparrow*, where McKay demonstrates that although recognizing the death of the animal as a death does not have to be violent or traumatic, it always involves equivocation: again we are faced with the double movement of grasping and letting be that facing the animal

⁹ I do not want to dismiss this idea, particularly because I do not have the space to adequately examine the concept, how it both draws on and critiques Heideggerean philosophy, or what exactly Agamben means by this enigmatic statement. I merely want to suggest that the move towards “letting be” ought to take place only with a full recognition of what our current situation is with regard to the animal.

other demands. The poet finds a dead sparrow on the floor of his garage, “probably one I’ve fed all winter, now / a sort of weightless fact, / an effortless repudiation of the whole shebang” (24 *Camber*). He struggles with how to dispose of the body; unwilling to simply throw it in the garbage, he moves through a series of burial options:

I’d bury it
 but ground is steel
 and hard to find. Cremation?
 Much too big a deal, too rich and bardic
 too much like an ode. Why not simply splurge
 and get it stuffed, perch it proudly on the shelf
 with Keats and Shelley and *The Birds of Canada*? (24 *Camber*)

Finally, though, he buries the body in the snow, with four sticks marking the ‘grave’:
 “one for your fierce heart / one for your bright eye / one for the shit you shat upon my windshield / while exercising squatters’ rights in my garage / and one to tell the turkey vultures where your thawing body lies” (24 *Camber*). To return to a question posed above, I read in this tribute one way to recognize the sparrow’s death as a death without sentimentalizing or anthropomorphizing this loss.

By way of conclusion, I look briefly to McKay’s early poem *I Scream You Scream* in order to ask what it is to truly *feel* the call of the animal, the one that does not come from the anthropomorphized face of the animal-human, but from the animal as it lives, and as it is killed in the war on animals we are engaged in. This jarring poem opens: “Waking JESUS sudden riding a scream like a / train braking metal on metal on metal teeth receiving signals from a dying star sparking/ off involuntarily in terror/in all directions” (15 *Field Marks*). In *Zoographies*, Matthew Calarco points out that the importance of Levinas’ work does not come in drawing firm lines around who or what may be included in ethical considerations. Instead, what Levinas still has to teach us is that “ethical experience occurs precisely where phenomenology is interrupted and that

ethical experience is traumatic and not easily captured by thought” (73 Calarco). That the poet is literally woken by the disruptive nature of the scream before it is “tied down” can be read as a protoethical moment: “it is a pig scream / it is a pig scream from the farm across the road ... perhaps a preview of the pig’s last noise” (15 *Field Marks*). The poem ends with a naturalized return to “sleep” that allows for a connection of recognition between the animal and the poet in their mutual mortality: the poet is alive to his own animality, and to the vulnerability that links animals.

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler argues that, “moral theory has to become social critique if it is to know its object and act upon it” (35 Butler). Therefore, it is not a stretch to think that a revised ethics of the animal would necessarily move towards political transformation. What claim does the pig’s scream, model for the ‘call of the animal other’ make on us? Where do we locate our responsibility to the death of the animal? For Levinas, the encounter with the other’s face means an exposure to infinity that calls into question “my ability for power”¹⁰ (198 *Totality and Infinity*). When we begin to face the animal, the human assumption of absolute dominance is called into question, beginning with the right to kill. The “primordial expression” conveyed by the other’s face “is the first word: ‘You shall not commit murder’” (199 *Totality and Infinity*). To recognize this call in the animal’s face is only the first step in ending the war on animals, but it is a necessary one.

¹⁰ “*Mon pouvoir de pouvoir*”

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. trans. K. Attell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Brooklyn: Verso, 2010.
- Calarco, Matthew. *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Clark, David. "On Being "the Last Kantian in Nazi Germany": Dwelling with Animals after Levinas", 1997.
<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/documents/courses/767/English767.LastKantian.pdf> (Online).
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal that Therefore I am*. Trans. M. Mallet. New York: Fordham University, 2008.
- "Factsheet: What's Wrong with Factory Farming?" Centre for Food Safety, accessed April 16th, 2011.
<http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/pubs/FactoryFarmingFactSheet.pdf> (Online)
- Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. ed. J. Robbins. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*, Version 2010.4. International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources 2010.
 <<http://www.iucnredlist.org>>. Accessed April 10, 2011. (Online).
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*. trans. M. Smith and B. Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- . *Proper Names*. trans. M. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- . *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Llewelyn, John. "Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)" in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi & S. Critchley. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- McKay, Don. *Camber: Selected Poems*. Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2004.
- . *Field Marks: The Poetry of Don McKay*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006.

-----, *Vis-à-vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness*. Wolfville: Gaspereau Press, 2001.

Koster, Pepijn. *Overfishing.org* accessed April 12, 2011. (Online)

“War, n.1”: Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition (1989):
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/225589>. Accessed April 16th, 2011. (Online)

INDEX

Identification

Yesterday a hawkish speck
 above the cornfield moving
 far too fast its where are those
 binoculars sharp wings row row row the air above
 the Campbells' bush it
stooped and
 vanished

Peregrine

I write it down because
 I write down because of too much sky
 because I might have gone on digging the potatoes
 never looking up because
 I mean to bang this loneliness to speech you
 jesus falcon
 fix me to my feet and lock me in this
 slow sad pocket of awe because
 my sinuses, those weary hoses,
 have begun to stretch and grow, become
 a catacomb my voice
 would yodel into stratospheric octaves
and because
 such clarity is rare and inarticulate as you, o dangerous
 endangered species.

(19 *Field Marks*)

Load

We think this
 the fate of mammals – to bear, be born,
 be burden, to carry our own bones
 as far as we can and know the force that earths us
 intimately. Sometimes, while I was reading,
 Sam would bestow one large paw on my foot,
 as if to support my body
 while its mind was absent – mute
 commiseration, load to load, a message
 like the velvet heaviness which comes
 to carry you deliciously
 asleep.

One morning
 on the beach at Point Pelee, I met

a White-throated Sparrow so exhausted from the flight
across Lake Erie it just huddled in itself
as I crouched a few yards off.

I was thinking of the muscles in that grey-white breast,
pectoralis major powering each downstroke,
pectoralis minor with its rope-and-pulley tendon
reaching through the shoulder to the
top side of the humerus to haul it up again;
of sternum with the extra keel it has evolved to
anchor all that effort, of the dark wind
and the white curl on the waves below, the slow dawn
and the thickening shoreline.

I wanted

very much to stroke it, and recalling
several terrors of my brief
and trivial existence, didn't.

(44 Field Marks)

Chickadee Encounter

ok ok ok ok
here they come, the tidbits, the uppers,
animating the bramble,
whetting details. Hi,
I always say, I may be glum or dozy, still
hi, how's it going, every time they zip –
drawing that crisp invisible lilt from point to point — up
to check me out: ok: it's practically pauseless,
but as though some big machine –
domestication maybe — hiccuped,
a glitch through which the oceanic
thirsts of poetry pour: o
zippers, quicklings,
may you inherit the earth, may you
perch at the edge of the shipwreck of state,
on the scragged uneconomical alders,
and chat.

(22 Field Marks)

Adagio for a Fallen Sparrow

*In the bleak midwinter
frosty wind made moan
earth was hard as iron
water like a stone*

as usual, beside the wicker basket in the upstairs hall.

(*Camber*, 24).

I Scream You Scream

Waking JESUS sudden riding a scream like a
 train braking metal on metal on
 metal teeth receiving signals from a dying star sparking
 off involuntarily in terror in all directions in the
 abstract incognito in my
 maidenform bra in an expanding universe in a where's
 my syntax thrasing
 loose like a grab that like a
 look out like a
 live wire in a hurricane until

until I finally tie it down:
 it is a pig scream
 it is a pig scream from the farm across the road
 that tears this throat of noise into the otherwise anonymous dark,
 a noise not oink or grunt
 but a passage blasted through constricted pipes, perhaps
 a preview of the pig's last noise.

Gathering again toward sleep I sense
 earth's claim on the pig.
 Pig grew, polyped out on the earth like a boil
 and broke away.

But earth
 heals all flesh back beginning with her pig,
 filling his throat with silt and sending
 subtle fingers for him like the meshing fingers in a wound
 like roots
 like grass growing on a grave like a snooze
 in the sun like furlined boots that seize
 the feet like his *nostaglie de la boue* like
 having another glass of booze like a necktie like a
 velvet noose like a nurse

like sleep.

(*Field Marks*, 15)