

Marie Lathers¹

Toward an Excremental Posthumanism: Primatology, Women, and Waste

ABSTRACT

This essay assesses the use of excrement as a cultural trope in a posthumanist era. Drawing on insights from feminist, postcolonial, and animal theory, it proposes that Fossey (1983) and the film *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) are popularized versions of a recurring narrative that posits feces as a sign of the both material and symbolic fluid boundaries between human and nonhuman animals, colonizers and natives, men and women, and science and nature. Specifically, *Gorillas in the Mist* transposes Fossey's study of gorilla "dung" in the jungle, the essay demonstrates, as a repetition of the enunciation "shit." In both written and spoken form, excrement mediates between, and ultimately merges, the identities of Fossey and the mountain gorillas. In the conclusion, the essay raises some problems in theorizing the relationship between postcolonial and posthumanist theory.

French cultural theorist Barthes (1971/1976) famously asserted "Language has this property of denying, ignoring, dissociating reality: [W]hen written, shit does not have an odor" (p. 147). Certain writers in the Western tradition—most notably François Rabelais, Jonathan Swift, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett—have excelled at ridding culture of the odor of feces by writing it into their narratives, by inscribing excrement as Word (Bakhtin, 1984; Lee, 1971). In

filtering excrement through language, these writers confirm Freud's (1930/1961): famous realignment of the human senses. They have replaced the nose with the eye as register of culture (Freud, pp. 99, 100). During the colonial period (sixteenth to twentieth centuries), colonizers also endeavored to eliminate fecal stench by displacing it onto native peoples. A review of two recent essays that conjoin some variation of the terms "(post) colonial" and "excrement" demonstrates that the burden of waste in the colonial era was typically assigned to "natives," thus freeing white colonialists from (even their own) excrement.

By contrast, in the post-colonial state, human excrement becomes a sign of friction in the unsettled relationship between locals and their new, independent nations. One may extend this discussion by demonstrating how in a third period—that I will call posthumanist—nonhuman primate feces are implicated in a politics and poetics of excrement, ones that make of waste a privileged sign of fracture in the distinction between human and nonhuman animal.² It is useful to read the ascription of excrement to the nonhuman primate in the context of animal theory, which posits the inclusion of humans and higher apes in the same broad grouping. Although nonhuman, primate excrement were certainly of scientific interest in the colonial era, recent theories of species endow it with new symbolic importance. Carnophallogocentrism, a term used by Derrida (1991) to describe the legacies of Western humanism and metaphysics, promotes the eating of nonhuman animals, the phallus as transcendental signifier, and the spoken word as bearer of truth. This essay follows Derrida's philosophical trajectory by reading excremental exchange and consumption as steps in the development of a constitutive relationship between humans—with women as a particular example—and nonhuman animals—with mountain gorillas as a particular example—in a postcolonial and posthumanist moment. In particular, I propose that both *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) and Fossey (1983) are popularized versions of a narrative of emerging complicities between human and nonhuman animals in the 1970s and 1980s.

Waste: Colonial and Postcolonial

In an important essay, Anderson (1995) describes how American medical workers in the Philippines in the early twentieth century repeatedly raised

the issue of the “promiscuous defecation” (p. 642) of the locals. Outbreaks in army barracks of malaria, cholera, typhoid, and dysentery led public health officials to characterize the closed space of colonizers as consumption and writing, as opposed to the open and dangerous space of the native. “Americans on these occasions are reduced to consumers of food and writers of reports (and all of course transcend their excreta), while Filipinos, even when ‘proven’ otherwise, are open, threatening, excreting animals” (Anderson, p. 651). In the scientific laboratory, exemplary of the colonial project, native shit was smeared onto microscope slides and written up in reports. This abstraction of feces was fundamental to the creation of a boundary between colonizers and locals: “the decent, delibidinized, closed space of the modern laboratory had conferred on shit the ‘epistemological clarity’ of just one more specimen among many (p. 669).” By smearing, observing, and writing up feces—by making feces an object of language and of science—Western colonizers developed a discourse of “excremental colonialism” that saw the colonial project as the medical management of the abject.

Following Anderson (1995), Esty (1999) proposed the term “excremental post-colonialism” to refer to a seemingly pathological proliferation of fecal references in the literary texts of authors who wrote under and, most significantly, just following colonial rule in Africa and Ireland, including Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Samuel Beckett, and James Joyce. The “shared excremental vision” (p. 23) of these writers reveals, Esty argues, the failure of postcolonialism, a failure prompted by its ultimately irreconcilable insistence on both individualism and nationalism. The presence of native or local shit—an object that represents the slippery boundary between the corporeal inside and outside—in these writers’ texts underscores the divided self of the protagonist as well as the problematic boundary between this figure and the new, post- or neo-colonial, state.

Esty’s (1999) analysis reveals the ambiguity of texts produced in the 1960s and 1970s by African writers who displaced shit onto either the white ex-colonizer or the black African who sought to imitate the European. Esty explains the difference between colonial and postcolonial excrement in the following way: In the colonial era, native shit was identified by colonialists as a problem to be solved (or deflected back upon the indigenous); in the postcolonial era, native shit reveals the failures of the new nationalism:

“Excremental satire, in other words, expresses the partial misconception (or anal birth) of postcolonial nationalism” (Esty, p. 47). Excrement calls up a contested border between individual and nation, private and public, in an era that saw the emergence of postcolonial nation-states and the attempted adoption of Western individualism.³

The present essay builds on this work by assessing posthumanist excrement in the light of two discourses: feminist theory, on the one hand, and animal theory (work on species as a category) on the other. What happens, this essay asks, when excrement is produced, not by humans, but by nonhuman animals? Laporte (2000, p. 37) has asserted that the West allows only human shit to perform a purifying function. Does this remain true in a posthumanist and global era? Must excrement be human to be remolded, through writing, into an object “in place,” as opposed to “matter out of place” as Douglas (1968, p. 338) called it? The status of nonhuman primates, who have been made by Western thought to walk the divide between nature and culture, nonhuman animal and human, is particularly intriguing in this respect: Is their excrement able to rise to the level of signifier—may it be written—and, if so, under what conditions? Can their shit be labeled “postcolonial excrement” or should the new term “posthumanist excrement” be proposed? To be specific, what happens in the case of nonhuman primates such as mountain gorillas who inhabit not only a specific geographical place (Central Africa) but also the cultural space of the contestable “odd boundaries” (Haraway, 1991, p. 2) of humanism and colonialism which include the following:

1. boundaries between nature and science;
2. the private (the individual) and the public (nation-state);
3. the inside and outside of the body;
4. women and men; and
5. nonhuman and human animals.

Central to Esty’s (1999) essay are novels by Africans in which the excremental agent is an African male. However, what might we conclude differently when the signifier is nonhuman primate dung and when this dung operates as an object to be passed between the figures of the white Western woman and the African mountain gorilla, primates who collaborate in the marking of space in the postcolonial Francophone African nation? Might these figures be read as substitutes for the figure of the male human African as embodying the abject?

Anderson (1995) pointed out that two main groups aimed to contain, discipline, and civilize the excreting bodies of Filipinos during the colonial period: male public health officers and white women in general. “Americans at all levels of colonial society (but especially women and public health officers) set out to train childlike Filipinos in the correct technique of the body, ‘under the watchword of *civilité*,’ rationalised as hygiene” (Anderson, p. 668). Riley (1988) explains the seemingly contradictory role of women as both guardians of private, family domesticity and symbols of public, civic purity in nineteenth-century Europe. Riley posits a cultural space, “the Social,” wherein women are burdened with the duty of representing (the good in) society at the same time that they are limited to specific roles as social benefactors: nurses, teachers, social workers, and philanthropists.

One of the peculiarities of “women” in its proximity to the social is a doubled feminization. In so far as the concerns of the social are familial standards—health, education, hygiene, fertility, demography, chastity, and fecundity—and the heart of the family is inexorably the woman, then the woman is also solidly inside of that which has to some degree already been feminized. (Riley, p. 50)

In early twentieth-century Europe, the public problem that middle and upper-class women were assigned to solve was that of the working-class woman and mother, who made of the family a “site of social pathology” (Riley, 1988, p. 59). Women assigned to “clean up” these families were in essence the same women who took the notion of the Social to the Philippines and other colonies. When seen through this lens, the work of “public health officers” referred to by Anderson is work that is feminized, just as women are feminized by their “nature.” Both Western women and health officers were made to serve the function of disciplining the bodies of others and, in this case, of purifying their excrement.

I want to propose that in the postcolonial era, an addition to Riley’s (1988) list of feminized occupations should be that of the primatologist in the field and that nonhuman primates should be added to the list of women’s social concerns. Since the 1960s, female primatologists from, especially, Great Britain and North America—the commonly cited trio is that of Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas—have participated in transporting the Western space of the Social, as defined by Riley to the nonhuman primates of Africa

and Asia. This postcolonialist move aims to socialize and naturalize (render familiar) great apes. In the case of Fossey, I would propose, there is a clear shift from postcolonial to posthumanist excrement. Haraway (1989) specifically cites the 1970s and early 1980s as a period in which the white woman primatologist materialized as a player in nature/culture discourse:

Time has been “other” in western primatology. The past, the animal, the female, nature: These are the contested zones in the allochronic discourse of primatology. However, by the middle of the 1970s, that sense of time and place, which had been dependent on western hegemony for its maintenance, showed signs of cracking open to allow a different scientific narrative structure. (Haraway, 1989, p. 288)

As the bodies of nonhuman primates are subjected to the work of the Social, their dung becomes an object of study for the female naturalist who has supplanted the male health officer. Woman’s work in the wild is no longer to attend to the toilet habits of (animalized) humans but to attend to nonhuman primate science; her work is to “place” this example of excrement in the social order or to adjust the social order to accept it. The emphasis in Fossey (1983) on recording dung as a sign of the gorilla and the emphasis in the subsequent film on a fictionalized Fossey’s use of the spoken term “shit” provide us with the opportunity to explore the particular meanings of excrement during the 1980s. This was a decade of transformation from the early, post-independence years of African nations to a contemporary period in which the postcolonial is joined by interest in nonhuman primates as constitutive of humanity.

Woman in the Mist

Born in 1932, the American Dian Fossey first went to Africa in 1963 on safari and then returned in late 1966 to establish the Karisoke Research Center. This center had the dual goal of studying and conserving the mountain gorilla of Rwanda, a small nation that had recently won independence from Belgium. Until her still unsolved murder in 1985, Fossey spent 18 years—off and on—in Karisoke. One of the anecdotes Fossey recorded in her journal during a visiting stint at Cornell University in 1980 concerned her personal hygienic practices: “At least I’ve learned to remember to flush the toilet and how to

turn on the lights—a remarkable achievement after only three weeks in this country” (Mowat, 1989, p. 247). As Esty (1999) points out: “The toilet . . . is a powerful symbol of technological and developmental superiority—one that has the corollary effect of intensifying, via a newly potent scientific language, the negative valence of shit” (p. 29). Upon returning to so-called civilization, Fossey had to relearn the “scientific language” of waste disposal. Yet, while in Rwanda, Fossey participated in recasting scientific language to accommodate the production of postcolonial excrement as sign of a revised relation of humans not merely to (gender and race specific) individuals or to nations, but to species.

In Fossey (1983) and *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988), excrement is respectively, recurring matter put in its place and repeated verbal enunciation. In her written document, Fossey analyzes gorilla dung; in the film, the character Fossey utters the word “shit.” In the written text—part memoir, part scientific record—“dung” is a sign of the behavior of the nonhuman primate: Gorilla waste allows Fossey to track gorillas, identify their patterns of movement and eating, and suggest causes of death. In the film, “shit” characterizes the white woman’s appropriation of language from both the ex-colonizer and the African who participates in neo-colonialism. Its privileged use as a cinematic shifter between scenes—the utterance of the term signals transition to a new scene—suggests that it has significance in the (Western and popular) narrative of a white woman in the mountains of Africa, that it marks a breakdown of humanism’s border between human and nonhuman animal. The transformation of excrement into a rhetorical trope endeavors, I want to argue, to cleanse gorilla shit of its stench: Dung is cleansed through its recording in the scientific record; shit is cleansed as it passes through the voice of the white woman. Yet, this cleansing is not effective, as it arguably had been during the colonial period. Rather than distinguishing Fossey from the gorillas, it brings them together as members of the same species as well as occupants of the same terrain.

Clough (1992) has interpreted the Fossey of *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) as a nostalgic or romantic version of the (colonial) scientist. Feminized science is a science in its twilight years: “Fossey’s failures finally suggest that a version of science characterized by the heroic independence of the lone researcher can now only be treated as ‘womanly,’ an utterly romantic passage in a

nostalgic history of science, Africa, and the ape" (p. 59). Clough refers only to the Hollywood film, neglecting the written memoir. Although memoirs can be read in some sense as nostalgic or romanticized, Fossey (1983) purposefully chooses to refuse the nostalgic by erasing humans from her story as much as possible. "This book is about *gorillas*, not people," Fossey wrote in her journal, on which her book was based, "It is not even about me . . . I would prefer there be no people in at all, good or bad, but I guess that's too much to ask [of the editors]" (Mowat, 1987, p. 281). Fossey's story has repeatedly been interpreted as a romanticized meeting of white woman and African gorilla, in part because critics have attended neither to the written record she produced nor to the importance of Fossey's work in developing a new conception of the proximity of human and nonhuman animal categories.

Although it is true that a comparative reading of the book and film reveals a romancing of science on the part of the film in contrast to the rather impersonal written record which—although recounted in the first person, aims for detachment—this is not all that is revealed. Fossey's (1983) renunciation of the special subjecthood of humans in an effort to have the gorillas tell their own story is intriguing. However, this denial of the human subject was, in turn, denied Fossey by her editors and then was completely rejected by the film's creators. The very "subjectivized," "Hollywoodized," and even "hysterized" translation of the written version into the celluloid version, with its emphasis on the human heroine, makes the book read as a landscape devoid of humans and their intrigues—and thus it reads as scientific. Thus, the film effectively killed the denial of emphasis on human animals sought by Fossey in her written record. Although it ends with her death and thus the erasure of human subjecthood, it has succeeded at resurrecting her by placing her very much in the thick of things and animals. Taken together, the text and film reveal that the narrative of Dian Fossey elicits ambiguity in regard to the nostalgic and the modern, an ambiguity expressed through the rhetorical figure of excrement.

Waste: Written and Spoken

As inscription in the book, "dung" stands in for the scientific, the statistical, the nonhuman animal, the trace of the primate tracked by Fossey. One goal of Fossey (1983) appears to be the cleansing of the postcolonial/posthumanist

state by focusing on the author's beloved animals, rather than on humans ("This book is about *gorillas*, not people"); she would rid the landscape not of "promiscuous defecation" but of the presence of humans; thus, gorilla dung may be said to represent even her own absence. As uttered in the film, the term evokes the difficult situation of the very present white woman in the jungle following a colonialist master narrative. Instead of presenting her foremost as a primatologist, the film presents her as a beautiful—but foul-mouthed—woman with guts who rejects human social conventions: In addition to cursing, she smokes, drinks, and sleeps with a married man. The film's use of the term "shit" thus evokes not only the individual called Fossey but also her status as a (sometimes failing) member of the Social. To accomplish this, *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) insists on coupling Fossey with a human: a white, male photographer who, in large part due to photography's proximity to the genre of documentation, stands in for the public health officer while he facilitates Fossey's merging with the nonhuman primate. The film rids Fossey's story of dung and compensates with the addition to the story of "people," in particular, Robert Campbell and Fossey. In the film, however, excrement crops up elsewhere, as the enunciation, "shit." Excrement is not cycled in and out of the gorilla's body but voiced through the body of the white woman. Thus, postcolonialism and posthumanism in the 1980s continue the trope of excrement by transferring it from male natives and male neo-colonizers to categories of identity historically labeled nonhuman: women (in the film) and apes (in the written text).

The reader of Fossey (1983) learns that gorilla excrement is useful in determining the sex and age of gorillas (p. 158). It is also useful in the tracking of the animals.

. . . chains of gorilla dung deposits provide [other] clues as to the direction of the animals' passage. . . I found it helpful during the early days of the study to return to camp with fresh dung specimens and vegetation discards and then record their aging process under various weather conditions. Repetition of this simple procedure soon improved my ability to gauge the age of trails accurately. (pp. 43, 45, 46)

The collection of night nest dung may also solve the mystery of an infant gorilla's disappearance: "Only after a week of dung washing did we begin to find minute slivers of bone and teeth that were definitely known to come

from the night nests of Effie and her eight-year-old daughter, Puck” (Fossey, 1983, p. 77). Fossey thus suspected infanticide and cannibalism on the part of Puck and Effie. In addition, excrement in diarrhea form is a sign of fear: “When numerous animals of a group leave diarrhetic dung along a trail, it is an indication that the gorillas have been alarmed by another group or, more likely, by poachers” (Fossey, p. 46).

The practice of coprophagy, or dung-eating, seems not uncommon among gorillas, and Fossey explains it as a sometime response to nutritional need: The silverback then reached back to catch two lobes of his dung before they hit the ground and sat down to eat both with lip-smacking gusto. To young Kweli, this seemed far more interesting than all the frenzied sexual behavior taking place nearby. (Coprophagy allows the absorption of nutrients not available in plant matter). (Fossey, 1983, p. 198) Coprophagy would appear to be a familial habit:

The dung of lactating females is often covered with a whitish sheath, possibly a result of the tendency gorilla mothers have to eat the feces of their offspring during the infant’s first four to six months of life. . . . All age and sex classes of gorillas have been observed eating their own dung and, to a lesser extent, that of other gorillas. Coprophagy is most likely to occur after prolonged day-resting periods during the rainy season, when both feeding and travel time are minimized. The animals simply shift their buttocks slightly to catch the dung lobe in one hand before it contacts the earth. They then bite into the lobe and while chewing smack their lips with apparent relish. (Fossey, 1983, p. 46)

Fossey (1983) also remarks that gorilla mothers generally consume their offspring’s placentas and feces (p. 175). In addition, coprophagy allows exchanges of parasites between gorillas and is thus helpful in the establishment of a newborn’s “gut” fauna (Fossey pp. 275-286). Finally, coprophagy as a mutual practice of human and nonhuman primates indicates a fluid boundary between gorilla and human—both may at times eat feces: “The eating of excrement occurs among most vertebrates, including humans, who have certain nutritional deficiencies” (Fossey, p. 46). As these examples demonstrate, the scientific record is peppered with dung, a sign not only of the nonhuman primate’s place in nature and the primatologist’s access to this place but also

of a very real exchange among gorillas (parasites) and a politics of consumption (coprophagy) not unknown to humans. The actual uses of excrement by Fossey the woman, that is, the place of shit in the material life of the woman who represents the conjoining of nonhuman animals and humans, primatology and posthumanism, should also be considered. Some of these may be termed “written” in that they are material uses of excrement; others are “verbal.”

Krasner (1997) has noted that popularizations of Fossey’s story often present her “very scientific activities (her isolation, her physical deprivations, her administrative authoritarianism, her physical interaction with the gorillas) [as] representations of antiscientific, irrational behavior, evocative of witchcraft, obsessiveness, madness” (p. 245). Some of this emphasis in narratives about Fossey on her supposed madness has inevitably included references to excrement. One of the techniques used by Fossey to punish African animal poachers—a type of pseudo-lynching—was to smear their bodies with gorilla dung (Hayes, 1990, p. 33); at times Fossey shouted obscenities in English, French, German, and Swahili while doing so (Hayes, p. 297). One of Fossey’s graduate student researchers remembered that she “injected” poachers with gorilla dung, or that she at least claimed to have done so (Montgomery, 1991, p. 223). Moreover, while caring for the young Coco and Pucker, Fossey slept with them and sometimes awoke covered in their diarrhea (Hayes, p. 209). Fossey’s own failing body is an example of a body characterized by shit: While in Rwanda she treated her rotting teeth with “an African concoction called dawa, which [she said] looked like a mixture of *merde* and vacuum-cleaner fillings” (Hayes, pp. 190, 191). Finally, as noted earlier in this paper, Fossey feared that she would forget to flush the toilet in the States—that she would forget how to dispose of, and thus distinguish herself from, her own excrement.

In the film, shit is not analyzed scientifically but is spoken as a sign of history—the history of colonialism and the attempt to revise this history during the postcolonial era. In a simplistic scenario, it would occupy the space of culture, whereas dung would occupy that of nature, remolded as science, or conservation. Fossey utters “shit” in four scenes of the film and “merde” in one. The first two utterances parallel to some extent the use of “dung” in the book by establishing Fossey as a scientist: “Shit” is an effect of the

tracking of gorillas, Fossey's first task. Fossey exclaims "Shit!" when her African tracker Sembagare (a merging of the trackers of the book) reveals that he knows nothing about tracking gorillas. Soon thereafter, she falls down on a trail and then utters, passing from annoyance to delight: "Shit! . . . Shit! . . . I sat in shit . . . oh, my God, it's gorilla spoor!" Sembagare chimes in, "And it's fresh!" to which Fossey replies jubilantly, "It most certainly is!" The discovery of gorilla shit by the white woman allows her to begin to track gorillas; it also allows her to pass this knowledge on to the native tracker, who learns from Fossey how to appreciate the directional significance of gorilla excrement.

The third utterance—"oh, shit!"—occurs when the Batwa, an indigenous ethnic group, discovers Fossey and Sembagare in Batwa burial grounds. Here the term is Fossey's acknowledgment of the danger of crossing sacred, cultural, boundaries. In the fourth scene, when she and Sembagare find traps set by the Batwa, Fossey switches to the French, uttering "merde!" The use of French signals that Fossey can curse in the language of the Belgian colonizers. Her sudden bilingualism is quite odd, however. Although the viewer learns early in the film that Fossey knows some Swahili and we know from her book that she also learned some of the native language, Kinyarwanda (Swahili and Kinyarwanda are Eastern Bantu languages)—as well as gorilla language, or vocalizations—there is no indication beyond this utterance that she speaks French. That "merde" is the only French term used by Fossey in the film is extremely telling. On the one hand, it is quite "natural" for Fossey to use the French term—she is in a Francophone country and surely had to know some French in order to navigate the murky waters of postcolonial conservation. However, since the utterance of "merde" is the sole indicator of Fossey's knowledge of French, it draws attention to the heightened significance of excrement as a postcolonial and posthumanist trope.⁴

In the last excremental utterance in *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988), a strong connection is developed between the human neo-colonizer and shit. This is the only example in the film of the term "shit" not used by Fossey as an exclamation to express surprise or frustration. Fossey learns that Claude Van Vecten, a German zoo representative, has absconded with a baby gorilla after killing the baby's family members. (Before Belgian rule, Rwanda was a part of German East Africa, although this connection is not made explicit in the

film.) Fossey rushes to town, finds the sorely mistreated baby Pucker in a van, and in a fit of rage storms into a European restaurant. When she finds Van Vecten—who speaks fluent French in addition to German and English—she screams at him: “You piece of shit! Bastard!” “Shit” here is not a scientific term that indicates the daily wanderings of the gorillas, nor is it used as a swear word to express frustration. Van Vecten is a piece of (human) shit because he is a colonizer of gorillas in a supposedly post-colonial moment. This scene is an indication that in the late 1960s and 1970s, when colonialism was supposedly winding down, remnants of colonialism were still vigorous, including that of the drive to house African animals in European zoos. The association among animal dung, the nests or homes of the gorillas, the colonial languages of French and German, and the European procurer of zoo animals is voiced through the white female primatologist’s body. As Haraway (1989) reminds us, the “body is nature to the mind of culture; in primate narratives, white women negotiate the chasm” (p. 154).

Finally, the most famous scene in the film, the “big love scene with a gorilla” (Modleski, 1999, p. 326) between Fossey and Digit, may be interpreted as a posthumanist touch that relies on feces to merge human and gorilla skin. In this scene, the written and the cinematic narratives of excrement come together. Writing, with excrement as ink, is at issue. Shit is not spoken but written—and this onto Fossey’s hand itself, the instrument of writing. Fossey does not utter the word “shit” here; instead, dung serves to silently erase the boundary between human and nonhuman animal.

For this scene, the film combines two real moments in Fossey’s life. In Fossey’s written text, the encounter occurs in 1970 between Fossey and a male gorilla named Peanuts, the first gorilla who touched her. As Fossey pretends to eat vegetation, and as Campbell, the *National Geographic* photographer, observes from behind a camera, Peanuts approaches:

Since he appeared totally relaxed, I lay back in the foliage, slowly extended my hand, palm upward, then rested it on the leaves. After looking intently at my hand, Peanuts stood up and extended his hand to touch his fingers against my own for a brief instant. Thrilled at his own daring, he gave vent to his excitement by a quick chestbeat before going off to rejoin his group. Since that day, the spot has been called Fasi Ya Mkoni, ‘the Place of the

Hands.' The contact was among the most memorable of my life among the gorillas. (Fossey, 1983, pp. 141-42)

Although some of Campbell's photos of the scene have become quite famous, none captures the actual moment of contact. Then, National Geographic produced the film *Search for the Great Apes* (1975), a 60-minute introduction to the work of Fossey and Galdikas (Campbell provided footage of Fossey). Peanuts is absent from the film; Digit—who was to become the most famous of Fossey's primates due to the media hype following his decapitation in 1977—replaces him in these scenes recorded in the early 1970s. Digit plays with Fossey and they touch numerous times, although their touching does not acquire the significance of a "big love scene." It is in part to these documentary film scenes that Haraway (1989) refers when she presents her much-cited "touch across Difference" (p. 149) discussion of ape-human physical contact:

In the post-World War II *National Geographic* versions, in the jungles of Africa and Indonesia, white women undergo the trials and rigors of the questing hero to receive a particular grace: the spontaneous touch of the other, the bridge between 'animal' and 'man' built *by the animal* as a spontaneous and supremely meaningful gift. (p. 148)

The film *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) collapses Fossey's written account and the National Geographic cinematic one by replacing Peanuts with Digit in the field. Fossey lies back before Campbell's camera; Digit approaches, offers his finger and nuzzles the woman's hand with it. In a reference to the real-life photographer's failure to record the moment of touch with Peanuts, Campbell is overcome in this scene with voyeuristic passion and is unable to keep the film camera rolling, although he has prompted the touch by directing Fossey's movements. *Gorillas in the Mist* invents a telling finale for this moment—and I do not mean the bedroom scene between Fossey and Campbell that follows. I mean, rather, the memento left by Digit for Fossey to ponder after he leaves: a brown marking on her hand, which Fossey guardedly closes within her fingers. Although a silent Fossey does not utter "shit" while gazing at the mark, the residue must be interpreted as Digit's excrement, most likely wiped from his behind and indicating an invitation to join him in coprophagy (and thus share parasites and nutritional elements). Here the film provides

a “touch across Difference” that is mediated by postcolonial excrement.⁵ This is, I would propose, the film’s way of incorporating writing not as an act that would purify offensive waste but as an act that recognizes the nonhuman animal’s will (“the bridge . . . *built by the animal*”) to include humans and gorillas in an animal subjecthood.

Excremental Posthumanism

An assumption of humanism as a philosophical and political project is that humans and nonhuman animals—people and gorillas—are inhabitants of separate categories of identity. Humans shared, but disavowed, investment in excrement has played a significant role in grounding that difference. The border between apes and humans historically is a situated border, one whose disintegration in Western cultural theory accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s, during the same era in which other categories of identity—including women and indigenous peoples—fought to gain civil or human rights. At the same time, animal rights activists wished to extend humanity to animals, while early posthumanists questioned the usefulness of ascribing “human” rights to animals. Along with other theorists of posthumanism, Mitchell, in Wolfe (2003) prefers to foreground the “constitutive” nature of the human/nonhuman animal relationship: The animal is “the figure that is not merely below or beside ‘the human’ but actively constitutive of the human” (p. xiv).

Nonhuman animals are not “like us” and therefore deserving of rights; rather, humans and apes are part of a larger, multiple, and mutually constitutive grouping.⁶ The female primatologist played a crucial role in an understanding of the ways in which sexism and racism were used as means of denying entrance to the status “human” and to the more recent focus on posthumanism (with the corresponding acknowledgment of speciesism) as building a constitutive relation between human and nonhuman animals. This is a cultural turn from a touch across difference to a touch that elicits sameness. Fossey’s own goals were very clearly entangled in the contradictions of the decades during which she worked: She wished to evict people from her discussion of gorillas, seeing humans and nonhuman animals as distinguishable; she longed to walk with the apes, in an identificatory process that renders human and gorilla indistinct.

In the colonial period, Western scientists, public health officials, and women sought to purify colonial areas of native, human excrement by building toilets, teaching the need to wash hands after using the toilet, and reading excrement on laboratory slides. Subsequently, early indigenous post-independence writers in Africa charged Europeans and complicitous Africans (neo-colonialists) with having, so to speak, dirty hands. Following soon upon this moment, white women re-immersed themselves in the (now post) colonial landscape, not as promoters of native hygiene but as primatologists working toward a posthumanist future: the establishment of a Social that would include humans and nonhuman animals as constitutive members. In this scenario, nonhuman primate excrement is welcomed as a privileged sign of a possible future. Fossey does not push gorillas to clean up their act, nor does she project the abject onto them. Rather, she alternately reads their dung under the microscope, appropriates the dirty language of former colonizers, and accepts the excremental gesture of a gorilla. Her dirty hands are a sign that she was on the road to “becoming gorilla,” to adapt Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) phrase.

In her discussion of the rise of the discourse of field primatology, Haraway (1989) reminds us that “The field organized by and around these mobile, dynamic, productive axes [of nature/culture and sex/gender] is a discursive field; i.e., it is about language, especially writing and other forms of signification, such as filmmaking and museum display” (p. 289). The excrement that was passed—in a cycle of consumption—between gorillas, Fossey, native poachers, conservation officers, and graduate students took on various meanings; in these symbolic and material exchanges, the beginnings of a constitutive view of humans and nonhuman animals can be gleaned. For many years, animals and women have been included in narratives in discursive fields, both written and cinematic, of excremental colonialism and postcolonialism, from Adamson (1960) and the film, *Born Free* (1966) to publicity for the recent establishment of the Center for Captive Chimpanzee Care in Florida by Carole Noon, by way of Goodall, Fossey, and Galdikas. Fossey’s particular mergings with the nonhuman animal predicted a twenty-first century realignment of species, one in which waste is no longer marked for purification by a social imperative that relies on a strict opposition of animal and human, scientist and object of study, colonizer and native, man and woman.

In the colonial period, excrement was focused on as a waste product to be purified under the controlling gaze of the Western scientist or health official. With postcolonialism, in the 1960s and 1970s, native writers took up the cause of native excrement, so to speak, but by drawing attention to it as a sign of failure, rather than by purifying it—excusing it—with the written word. The world continues to stink of colonialism even after independence, they argue.

During this time, primatology began to be more and more characterized by work in the field, and Western women played a key role in this work, as an extension of the Social. The beginnings of an animal rights movement was also in the making, a movement that sought, in its simplistic form, to promote the rights of the nonhuman animal along the lines of a “rights of man” approach. In the 1990s, as postcolonial theorists debated the continued usefulness of the category of the postcolonial itself and the seemingly endless possible meanings of the term, a posthumanist approach became more acknowledged. This approach sought not to extend humanity to animals but to pass beyond the philosophical barrier of the subject—as always already human and only human—to posit a posthuman subjecthood that encompasses humans and nonhuman animals.⁷ Fossey’s work and the way her work was popularized are indications of these mutations and provide a way of reading the emergence of the woman primatologist as a critical historical figure in posthumanism.

* Marie Lathers, Case Western University

Notes

- 1 Correspondence should be addressed to Marie Lathers, Department of Modern Languages and Literature, Case Western Reserve University, 10900 Euclid Ave., Cleveland OH 44106-7118. E-mail: marie.lathers@case.edu.
- 2 Postcolonialism does not neatly replace colonialism with the independence of African colonies circa 1960; the use of the term neo-colonialism implies as much. Neither does posthumanism follow strictly upon postcolonialism, although it is useful for the purposes of this essay to recognize that some recent theorists seem to prefer the term posthumanism to the term postcolonialism. One may argue that the two are not comparable as discourses; I want to raise in this essay the possibility

of their relatedness. On postcolonial theory, the trio of Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and Franz Fanon is often cited. Major thinkers of “post”humanism, although not necessarily in terms of speciesism, include Zygmunt Bauman, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard. A related branch of posthumanism deals not with human-nonhuman animal sameness but with human-machine (cyborg) sameness (Donna Haraway and Katherine N. Hayles).

- 3 As concerns African literature, Esty (1999) draws on Appiah’s (1992) distinction between “realist legitimations of nationalism,” produced by black authors in the 1950s and early 1960s, and later novels that “delegitimize the forms of the realist African novel, in part, surely, because what it sought to naturalize was a nationalism that, by 1968, had plainly failed” (p. 150). On “postcolonial excrement,” see Shankar (2001).
- 4 The *Bulletin Agricole du Rwanda* published two brief articles by Fossey (1970, 1968) that were translated into French.
- 5 I thank R. Nash (personal communication, 2006) for his suggestion of the connection between this scene and excrement. See his study of Peanuts as a “gay wild gorilla” (1996, p. 125), whom Hollywood replaced by the more acceptable Digit.
- 6 As Wolfe (2003) has demonstrated, part of what characterizes most work on animal rights is the assumption of the “humanity” of the nonhuman animal, especially of high-order primates, as opposed to the opposition of the human and the non-human animal since the Enlightenment: “the reopening of the ethical question of the animal is an event whose importance is named but not really captured by the term ‘animal rights’ . . . one of the central ironies of animal rights philosophy is that its philosophical frame remains essentially humanist in its most important philosophers (utilitarianism in Peter Singer, neo-Kantianism in Tom Regan), thus effacing the very difference of the animal other that it sought to respect” (p. 8).
- 7 The relationship between animal theory and postcolonialism is beginning to be theorized (Ashcroft et al., 2002, pp. 213-216).

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