

Rewilding White Lions: Conservation through the Eyes of Carnivores?

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Introduction

‘Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?’ asks Donna Haraway¹ in the opening to her book *When species meet*. Is it only the living creature of flesh and blood in that moment, or is it the whole history of domestication, training, breeding, and what else of this critter? Being Donna Haraway, she of course chooses for the complex option and reflects in the rest of her book on what this means for what happens when human and non-human species meet, a kind of multispecies ethnography that ‘centres on how a multitude of organisms’ livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces.’² I love her for that and will try to follow her example in this chapter, although I have to take the ‘touch’ part of her question metaphorically, as my case is about wild white lions that I should better not literally ‘touch’. Nevertheless I tried to connect to them deeply through observations and imagining myself being amongst them. So maybe I should adapt Haraway’s question to my case, that is, ‘what do I see, when I see a lion?’ Another and a related question I want to explore in this chapter in the context of when species meet is inspired by the work of Helen McDonald, and is how ‘(...) encounters with animals are always to some extent encounters with ourselves and with who we think we are’³; ‘biosociality’ as Woodward would probably label it, ‘a sociability across apparently disparate species’ in which ‘animals are subjects who have agency and intentionality’⁴, where in encountering them we are ‘becoming with’

1 D. Haraway, *When species meet* (Minneapolis, 2008), 3.

2 K. Tomaselli, ‘Ethical procedures? A critical intervention: The sacred, the profane, and the planet’, *The Ethnographic Edge*, 1:1 (2017), 3–16.

3 H. MacDonald, *Falcon* (London, 2016), 7.

4 W. Woodward, *The animal gaze. Animal subjectivities in southern African narratives*, (Johannesburg, 2008), 51.

them in Haraway's words⁵. In the process, I hope to be mindful of Woodward's⁶ warning that '(c)onventionally, animals have been read as symbols, rather than as sentient beings with their own individualities and their own contribution to the plot'. I will try to imagine them as my fellow sentient beings, just like humans, where I define 'sentience' following Bekoff and Pierce⁷ as 'the capacity to feel things, to have subjective experiences'. Where Haraway elaborates on her question primarily in relation to dogs and MacDonald in relation to falcons, I will focus in this chapter on the controversial conservation⁸ and re-wilding of white lions in the Timbavati area in South Africa.⁹

Lions speak strongly to the human imagination, from symbolising kingdoms to symbolising human courage and strength.¹⁰ In the case of white lions, this includes being the bringer of heavenly messages¹¹ as well. For many people in the Global North who lump them together with the other animals of the 'Big Five' (elephant, rhino, buffalo, lion and leopard), they simply represent 'the idea of Africa'¹² (Mudimbe 1994). For their symbolic capital, rich, famous, or powerful people throughout history have always loved to have lions as pets, loved to be shown with lions or show off with lions, from pharaoh Ramses II, BCE, through menageries in Europe and the Ottoman empire in the Middle Ages,¹³ right up to contemporary times where nobility,¹⁴ hippies,¹⁵ and an 'ordinary' family household in Germany¹⁶ took lions as pets, or where the super rich of today show off with their lions on Instagram.¹⁷ Despite their huge and globally recognized symbolic capital,¹⁸ on the ground, they have followed the fate of many if

5 In L. Faier, and L. Rofel, 'Ethnographies of encounter', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 43 (2014), 363–377.

6 Woodward, *The animal*, 16.

7 M. Bekoff and J. Pierce, *The animals' agenda. Freedom, compassion, and coexistence in the human age* (Boston, 2017), 11.

8 Bekoff and Pierce, *Agenda*, 142.

9 www.whitelions.org.

10 M. De Cleene and J. P. De Keersmaecker, *Compendium van dieren als dragers van cultuur* (Gent, 2012), 472.

11 L. Tucker, *Mystery of the white lions. Children of the Sun God* (Hoedspruit, 2003); J.Z.M. Hieronimus, *White spirit animals. Prophets of change* (Rochester (Vermont), Toronto, 2017).

12 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The idea of Africa*, (Bloomington, 1994).

13 <http://mad.hypotheses.org/620>, accessed 14 April 2017.

14 P. Cavendish O'Neill, *A lion in my bedroom* (Sydney, 2004).

15 A. Bourke and J. Rendall, *A lion called Christian* (London, 1971, updated version 2009).

16 P. Stiff, *Tommy goes home*, Salisbury (Rhodesia), 1977).

17 <http://uk.complex.com/pop-culture/2014/03/instagram-animals>, accessed 13 April 2017.

18 The value of that 'capital' became particularly clear by the uproar, how appropriate, that erupted around the world when on 1 July 2015, the lion Cecil was shot by Walter Palmer. 'Palmer shot it with with a crossbow powerful enough to fell an elephant. The bolt,