CHAPTER SIX

BECOMING-WITH-COMPANIONS: SHARING AND RESPONSE IN EXPERIMENTAL LABORATORIES

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Reading the young-adult novel *A Girl Named Disaster* by Nancy Farmer, I was arrested by a relationship between an old African *Vapostori* man, who cared for guinea pigs used for sleeping sickness research in a little scientific outpost in Zimbabwe around 1980, and the tsetse flies, trypanosomes, cattle, and experimental lab rodents. In their working hours, their skin shaved and painted with poisons that might sicken the offending insects with their protozoan parasites, the guinea pigs were held in tight little baskets while wire cages filled with biting flies were placed over them. The flies gorged themselves on the guinea pigs' blood. A young Shona adolescent girl, Nhamo, new to the practices of science, watched.

“It’s cruel,” agreed Baba Joseph, “But one day the things we learn will keep our cattle from dying.” He stuck his own arm into a tsetse cage. Nhamo covered her mouth to keep from crying out. The flies settled all over the old man’s skin and began swelling up. “I do this to learn what the guinea pigs are suffering,” he explained. “It’s wicked to cause pain, but if I share it, God may forgive me.” (Farmer 1996, p. 239)

Baba Joseph seems to me to offer a deep insight about how to think about the labor of animals and their people in scientific practices, especially in experimental labs. The experimental animal science inhabited in this chapter is largely medical and veterinary research in which animals bear diseases of interest to people. A great deal of animal experimental science is not of this type; and for me the most interesting biological research, in and out of labs, does not have the human species much in mind. The notion that ‘the proper study of man is mankind’ is risible among most of the biologists I know, whose curiosity is actually for and about other critters. Curiosity, not just functional benefit, may warrant the risk of “wicked action.” Baba Joseph, however, is worried about sick cattle, coerced guinea pigs, and their people.
The animal caretaker is not engaged in the heroics of self-experimentation—common trope in tropical medicine histories (Herzig 2005)—but in the practical and moral obligations to mitigate suffering among mortals where that is possible and to share the conditions of work, including the suffering of the most vulnerable lab actors. Baba Joseph’s bitten arm is not the fruit of a heroic fantasy of ending all suffering, or not causing suffering, but the result of remaining at risk and in solidarity in instrumental relationships that one does not disavow. Using a model organism in an experiment is a common necessity in research. The necessity and the justifications, no matter how strong, do not obviate the obligations of care and of sharing pain. How else could necessity and justice (justification) be evaluated in a mortal world where getting knowledge is never innocent? There are, of course, more standards for evaluation than this one; but forgetting the criterion of sharing pain to learn what animals’ suffering is and what to do about it is not tolerable anymore, if it ever was.

It is important that the ‘shared conditions of work’ in an experimental lab make us get it that entities with fully secured boundaries called possessive individuals (imagined as human or animal) are the wrong units for considering what is going on. That does not mean that a particular animal does not matter, but that mattering is always inside connections that demand and enable response, not bare calculation or ranking. Response, of course, grows with the capacity to respond; i.e., responsibility. Such a capacity can only be shaped in and for multi-directional relationships, in which there is always more than one responsive entity in the processes of becoming. That means that human beings are not uniquely obligated to and gifted with responsibility; animals as workers in labs, animals in all their worlds, are response-able in the same sense as people; i.e., responsibility is a relationship crafted in intra-action through which entities, subjects and objects, come into being (Barad 2007). “Intra-acting, people and animals in labs are becoming with each other in a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters. If this structure of material-semiotic relating breaks down, or is not permitted to be born, then nothing but objectification and oppression remain. The parties in intra-action do not admit of pre-set taxonomic calculation; responders are themselves co-constituted in the responding and do not have in advance a proper check list of properties. Further, the capacity to respond, and so responsibility, should not be expected to take on symmetrical shapes and textures for all the parties. Response cannot emerge within relationships of self-similarity.