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SCHOLARLY DIALOGUE
ON KALPANA SESHADRI'S
*HUMANIMAL: RACE, LAW,
LANGUAGE*



Border Crossing

ELLEN T. ARMOUR

AS A PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGIAN deeply formed by a long apprenticeship in continental philosophy, I find more points of entry into Kalpana Seshadri's *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* than I can possibly pass through in the space available to me here. Inevitably, whichever point of entry I take will violate what I take to be a core responsibility of a respondent: to hew closely to the text in question, to trace in one's own words its outline in order to open it up to those who have not had the privilege to devote time and attention (those most valuable of assets for academics, it seems) to the project in question. Such a model of a responsible response itself bespeaks the central problematic of the project: the relationship between speech and silence, language and law, ethics and politics.

And so I begin with a de-cision that is, simultaneously, an in-cision; I enter this text through *this* opening, not that, and in doing so, I relegate to a spectral silence of not-saying what other (in/de)cisions would bring to speech and/or to the invisibility of not-writing what other (in/de)cisions would render legible. In the spirit of a Derridean *supplément*, I hope to productively open and extend for you, if not precisely retrace, Seshadri's project.

HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language (Seshadri 2012) is a brave book in many respects, but particularly in its attempt not just to delineate but to map out certain contested yet liminal spaces. In addition to those I've already mentioned,

let me add those between literature and philosophy, theology and philosophy, work and play, Agamben and Derrida, deconstruction and biopolitics, human and animal. (Any one of these alone would have been plenty for one book.) I take my mark from the site where these last two (or perhaps three) liminal spaces meet. First, allow me to indulge in a bit of intellectual autobiography: I began my career as a Derridean (and may yet end it that way . . . that remains to be seen), but have in the last few years, taken a decidedly more Foucauldian turn. Reading *HumAnimal* made me keenly aware of how profound a reorientation I have undergone in the process. And yet I entered into that process of reorientation (perhaps quite naively) sensing that, for all that separated Derrida from Foucault, deconstruction from biopolitics, they were not unconnected (please note the double negative). Thus, I found myself in deep sympathy with Seshadri's project in many ways. Whatever separates projects that foreground the machinations of power (as constitutive of knowledge, and vice versa) as object of analysis and those that foreground language (as constitutive of knowledge, and vice versa) as object of analysis,¹ Seshadri's detailed readings suggest they share important points of overlap (which is not to say sameness). To a degree, then, *HumAnimal* undoes the very delineation between these kinds of projects that I just articulated. To be sure, Seshadri is aided a great deal in this by the fact that Agamben's own work invokes (though not uncritically) both Derridean and Foucauldian antecedents framed largely though not exclusively in and through the relationship between sovereignty and (bare) life.

The book's title, *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language*, names both the stakes of and framework for Seshadri's incision into this shared but contested space. Her neologism *humAnimal* marks a boundary integral to sovereignty's exercise, that between human and animal. The subtitle marks the forces at play in sovereignty's construction and its deployment. Race has often figured as the border demarcating those served by the law and those served up by it; those granted access to language and those denied it. Consignment to the nether side of law and language entails as well consignment to the nether side of the human/animal divide. The American practice of chattel slavery serves as one constitutive exemplar of a biopolitical and legal/linguistic regime in *HumAnimal*, as it will in my comments. But Seshadri seeks out the possibilities for resistance from this nether side; of possibilities opened up by and in silence, the suspension of law, and even in the reduction of *bios* to *zoe* (bare life). Seshadri pursues these possibilities in several locations: in fiction, in the late-nineteenth-century phenomenon of the wild child, in certain disruptive bodily practices such as those of the outlaw high wire walker Philippe Petit, in child's play, and even yoga.

At the conclusion of my response I will offer some reflections on the relationship between Seshadri's neologism *humAnimal* and Derrida's neologism

l'animot (Derrida 2008 [1999]) and thus these two projects. But first, I pursue Seshadri's claims about the suspension of the law, the interplay of silence(s) and speech, the relation of master and slave, and embodied subjection in chattel slavery, specifically through the deployment of Christian theology in that context. It seems to me that one of the more interesting (and perhaps game-changing) examples of resistance is what historian Albert Raboteau calls "slave religion" (Raboteau 2004 [1978]). It's a good test, I think, of the suppleness of Seshadri's framework as a tool for discerning and accounting for resistance. I situate slave religion against a spatiotemporal backdrop that clearly aligns with that framework as articulating the reduction/production of bare life, Hortense Spiller's (2003) description of the Middle Passage as a primal trauma that stripped African captives of everything (language, culture, family, gender, religion, the rudiments of bodily dignity, sanity), reducing them to mere flesh (bare life, to be sure): bodies as cargo laid end to end. Their flesh became a blank slate upon which—into which—subjection could be inscribed and installed. After purchase, this raw flesh was consigned to the plantation where the process of subject(ivat)ion began; of the molding of proto-slave flesh (and through flesh, the mind and soul), if you will, into the enslaved subject (or the subjected slave). Converting the slaves to Christianity, Raboteau tells us, came to be central to this process of subjection: to civilize and humanize them (a perverse justification for enslavement), but particularly to render them docile. Yet here again we have a complex interplay of speech and silence, law and language. The narrative of the Exodus—of Israel's miraculous exit from Egyptian oppression—you might imagine would resonate quite differently in the ears of those enslaved than in those of the slave masters. Add as well the words of Jesus in Luke 4.18 (KJV): "The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised." (I quote the King James Version to get as close as possible to the words the slaves might have heard.) As Jesus occasionally remarked, "Those who have ears, let them hear" (Matthew 11.15, Mark 4.9). Slaves would steal away to the "hush harbors," the brush arbors where such meetings were often held (Raboteau, 215), to speak, enact, and celebrate this other Christianity (mixed, Raboteau argues, with dimly recalled elements of indigenous African traditions) with one another. And in this time/space/language of freedom-in-subjection they found resources for survival, resistance, and sometimes revolt; resources that persist and were mined productively in and by the modern civil rights movement.

I tarry with the hush harbors to highlight the (im)possible task of cleanly delineating the inside and outside of law and language, of the law of language, of the language of law; an insight central to *HumAnimal*.

Mastery (of language, of others) is always accompanied and marked by its limit, speech by silence (here as that of the hush harbors *and* as a kind of deafness on the part of [certain] masters). And all of this, I want to suggest, is the milieu in and through which subjectivation as subjection is achieved and maintained by and for both master and slave. I want to highlight, as well, the labor involved in subjectivation. While it generally involves the practice of darker arts than those detailed by Foucault as “the care of the self” (referenced by Seshadri), subjectivation is for us—and was, for slaves and masters, as well as for the ancient Greeks and Romans—arguably a form of *askesis*; an exercise in self-making through disciplined submission and/or submission to discipline—willing or unwilling. I am not placing slave and master in positions of parity, mind you. These are asymmetrical positions not only in relationship to law and language (and therefore power), but also in the forms of discipline involved in their making (relatively gentle and benign versus mostly brutal and malignant). But their relationship to law and language, speech and silence are equally complex. Slave masters were indeed a form of sovereign law unto themselves on the plantation,² as Seshadri argues, but only up to a point, I think. Slave master sovereignty was, after all, literally and figuratively underwritten by the laws of state, economy, and property, no?³ If so, it is conditioned—undergirded and undercut—by a greater sovereign power. Thus, both master and slave operate under the suspension of the law. Seshadri focuses on the suspension of the (unwritten?) law that grants status as human (with the rights and responsibilities thereto appertaining), including access to speech and to a proper hearing.⁴ Its suspension renders possible the appropriation of certain (racialized) embodied minds and souls for enslavement. But space for slave master sovereignty is also cleared by state sovereignty’s self-suspension at the plantation’s border. Within these dual borders, the slave master works out this form of sovereignty in, on and through the (most often brutal) practices of enslavement. The time and space of the “hush harbors” enacted its own (temporary, to be sure) suspension of those laws—and the forms of sovereign appropriation they underwrote—in the name of a (putatively) higher sovereign law (God’s). An important clarification is needed here. Suspension, recall, carries a double meaning: to suspend is both to hold back and to hold over (someone’s head). All of the suspensions I just named are suspensions in both senses of the word.

Placing it next to Derrida’s neologism, *l’animot*⁵ illuminates the plasticity—and limits—of Seshadri’s neologism, *humAnimal*. First, note that both *l’animot* and *humAnimal*, like Derrida’s better-known neologism *différance*, signify fully only in writing; they literally cannot be heard. Both neologisms thus mark the border between human and animal as constituted by speech and silence, language and law. Man, Derrida says, uses this one term “animal” to “corral a large number of living beings within a single concept” (Derrida 2008, 32

[1999, 282]) through claiming the power to name (God-given, as Seshadri notes, according to Genesis 2.19–20). More fundamentally, man lays claim to language as his and his alone. Derrida goes on, “Men [*sic*] would be first and foremost those living creatures who have given themselves the word that enables them to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond” (Derrida 2008, 32 [1999, 283]).

If *l’animot* names this *episteme*, Seshadri’s neologism, *humAnimal*, limns *l’animot’s* outer (which is to say inner) edge; where the line between human and animal (dis)appears. One might think, then, that we’d find humans on one side and animals on the other, but not (quite) so—and for good reason. Functionally, the line serves to divide a certain “us” from a certain “them;” those who claim title to “human” from those who could, but are denied it. In its proscriptive force, animality primarily separates (and thereby links) two forms of uniquely human life from one another: man from beast.⁶ Thus, *humAnimal* also names the site of (or is implicated in) what Derrida would call an autoimmune response (a concept Seshadri discusses at some length). This autoimmune response pits one form of human life against another in the name of preserving the human. It manifests in and as biopolitics conducted through its racialized taxonomies. (Thus, one could productively trace *humAnimal’s* effects beyond sovereignty and bare life into the machinations of biopower, itself a racialized regime exercised in and through making live and allowing to die, though that is beyond the scope of Seshadri’s book.)

What, then, of the animals? Where do they figure in Seshadri’s project? On the one hand, Seshadri finds recuperative and resistive possibilities in what *humAnimal* might mark as shared territory: places where humanity is in question (in the wild child for example) and in certain ateleological bodily practices (play, for example). But this project doesn’t *quite* cross the putative line between humans and animals *as such*. And this is, I want to suggest, a good and productive thing, though it may disappoint some readers. Those readers who know the text will recall that *The Animal That Therefore I Am* opens with Derrida musing over the experience of being stared at—naked in his bathroom—by his cat. He writes: “The gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the border crossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself” (Derrida 2008, 12 [1999, 263]). “Abyssal limit” here is key. This citation highlights man’s position at this abyssal limit, but the essay also attends to the consequences for those we call animals. The epistemic corral *l’animot* covers over the abyssal differences not only between me and my cat Leo or me and the deer I sometimes encountered while walking my (late lamented) greyhound Otto, but also the abyssal borders between

Leo, the deer, Otto, and the countless (individual) lions and tigers and bears (oh, my!)—not to mention wrens, dolphins, shrimp, and lizards—that populate our world. I am not speaking of differences of species and genus here, but of a kind of abyssal mystery in the face of otherness that we may think we can bridge, but that in some fundamental sense is beyond us. Take, for example, advances in the scientific research on animals. We know now that linguisticity (in some form, anyway) is not solely the preserve of human beings. Current research on nonhuman animals as diverse as birds, primates, and dolphins has established varying capacities for language—and the fact that the learning of language is a social process—in various species. Some animals have even been trained in human language (well beyond the capacities of most domesticated animals). While linguisticity in some form may be a capacity more widely distributed among living beings than we human beings suspected a few decades ago, how language functions among dolphins versus humans is not necessarily “the same.” The greater complexity of human language is not the only or even most salient form of difference, depending on what one might need language to do.

Do these insights mean that we have moved beyond *l'animot*, that we have crossed over the *humAnimal* boundary? I do not think so. It seems to me, at least, that we remain within its confines. However well founded in careful observation and scientific theorizing our conjectures about animal behavior and capacity, we cannot know what it is like for a *dog* to be (a dog), for example. My awkward phrasing here indicates our inability to even frame such a caveat on a dog's behalf. For this reason, I am not sure how to take this claim Seshadri makes late in the book: “That [Petit] understands the language of birds could not possibly be doubted” (Seshadri 2012, 259). How would we know—really know? Even here, I would argue, where Seshadri seems to mark a successful border crossing, animals figure as silent and spectral shadows gazing at us across the *humAnimal* divide. This is entirely appropriate for, as Seshadri demonstrates, we have a great deal of work (diagnostic, reparative, and disruptive) to do on *our* side(s) of that abyssal limit. And yet that limit is permeable; we inevitably attempt to cross it and our responsibilities necessarily extend beyond it. *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* is not a guidebook to the other side; such a thing does not exist. But it is a helpful *askesis* in its own right—an exercise in reading and thinking through that takes us to that border, exposes its liminality, and encourages us to imagine what might lie beyond it. Seshadri holds open for us multiple points of decision, of incision that, while not without risk (of violence and violation to self as well as other), *may* help make possible other—more responsive and responsible—border crossings.

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NOTES

1. Notice that I am deliberately not associating these projects with one philosopher or another, though this is often done in the name of (a certain reading of) Foucault and (a certain reading of) Derrida.
2. That power is analogous to *patria potestas*—in which the Roman *paterfamilias* held the power of life and death over all in his household, a form of sovereign power that Seshadri discusses.
3. Here I supplement Seshadri's insightful analysis of Charles Chesnut's "The Dumb Witness" in ch. 3 of *HumAnimal*.
4. I place a question mark after "unwritten" simply to remind us of the extensive *written* laws that dehumanized slaves. Among the most notable is the so-called Three-fifths Compromise, which established that a slave counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of apportioning congressional representation. Also, as legal property, slave women weren't considered legally rapeable.
5. *L'animot* plays on *animaux* ("animals" in French) and *mot* ("word" in French). Cf. Marie-Louise Mallet's explanation in the Foreword to Derrida 2008, x.
6. Cf. Derrida's description of the central problematics of his last seminar at the *École des Hautes Études* before his death in Derrida 2009, 14.

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