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Becoming Animal, Becoming Others: What We Make with
Art and Literature

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Abstract

What is poetry for? How does *poiesis* or making – the Greek root of the words poetry and poetics – succeed in moving us, in getting under our skins? “Becoming Animal” argues that art and literature are crucial zones of play, transformative modes that work by mixing up self and other, inside and out, human, animal and other matter. The essay moves from a consideration of D.W. Winnicott’s psychoanalytic discussion of the relationship between play and creativity, self and other, to Howard Searles’ investigation of transference and counter-transference as possible models for engaged and sensuously attuned critical stances. The last section of the essay offers an account of the “transgenic” work of Eduardo Kac, which literally mixes genetic material as art. The essay concludes by arguing that art, as *poiesis*, works by engaging us in constant contact with what is not ourselves as a process of becoming ourselves; it argues that such ‘self-estrangement’ is the way we sort out how to live an ontologically rich and ethically meaningful life.

Keywords: art, becoming animal, Kac, Milner, play, poiesis, Searles, Stein, Winnicott, transference, counter-transference, transgenesis

*To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend,
singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods.*
Martin Heideggerⁱ

Every age must ask itself what poets are for. Our age is no different; we have clearly sidelined poetic to market considerations. When we ask now, “what are poets for? What is poetry for?” we mean, “of what use are poets or poetry?” How can poetry have value, aside from the rather nebulous

and arcane virtues of cultural acquisition and appreciation? (Such an old-fashioned beauty, this business of reciting lines together!) Just what sorts of exchanges does poetry permit, if not of money? (For surely, it rarely does that.) What of the “fugitive” character of poetic work that Heidegger mentions, this resonant echo chasing the footprints of fleeting gods? Isn’t that part of the problem with poetry – that it tends to run away with us, take us on little flights of fancy, flutter off into the atmosphere? Nice to have around perhaps, we say – just like the birds – but of what use is it to the hard business of living?

Perhaps we will find that, like the birds, poetry is somehow profoundly necessary to us.

For *poiesis* is not simply verse, but, at its root, making: it *is* creation; it *is* production, and perhaps not simply restricted to the domain of the human. Without *poiesis*, perhaps, nothing happens, not even economic activity. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Let us begin with a simpler question or two: just what kinds of things are poetic or imaginative makings – let us call them “art” and “literature” – and how and why do they matter so much to us, even while we sometimes dismiss them as trivial, unproductive, even a waste of time? What is the point of thinking about them critically?

Suppose we start with the way they tend to carry us away into alternate imaginative states or spaces – getting caught up in such distractions or apparent unrealities is not usually understood these days to be a critical point of departure. Here, however, I want to insist that developing a capacity for being or getting carried imaginatively away might be, of all of our activities, among the most serious, important and productive. Ethics begins here. Likewise, as certain philosophers and scientists increasingly argue, so does ecological concern: with an affect that has everything to do with losing one’s grip on oneself, or getting lost.ⁱⁱ

Tumbling down the rabbit hole

We have all had the experience of getting lost within the dreamscape of a film, a novel or a drama, of mouthing lines from a poem or becoming

somehow imaginarily a part of a dance or a photograph or a drawing, of feeling, even without touching it, the contour of a pot or the slope or texture of a sculptural surface, a weaving, a textile. It is as if what is outside of you is somehow also deeply within you, sometimes so much so that it seems difficult to tell, as when waking from a particularly vivid dream, what portion of what you are feeling is something you have imagined and what portion is something you've lived. At such moments, it is as if you have tumbled into a hole in the fabric of the everyday, tumbled, like Alice, into the rabbit-hole of another world or worlds where the sorts of distinctions that usually matter in our world, (like knowing the difference between inside and outside or me and you or dream and memory), might not quite obtain. You can get lost in such a space; you can, as my mother would often claim of me, when she found me buried in a book, "lose sight of reality," whatever that might be.

It is easy to feel dismayed or even guilty about getting caught in such a space. For the most part, despite the proliferation of multimedia devices and dreamscapes invented by the culture industries, we are encouraged, as we grow, to leave such childish "intermediate" or in-between dream states behind, to "get real," be utilitarian, focused on external events and activities, to "get with the program" and join what can seem like the "rest of the world's" shared dream of empirical reality and economic necessity. Likewise, many of the "critical" interpretive tools deployed by literary critics and other scholars in the humanities have tended to require that we check at the door any "excessive" emotional or sensory involvement with the materials we are analyzing. The insights of quantum physics notwithstanding, above all the contention that there is no "objective" purely external observer position, we are often (especially in high school and undergraduate classes) instructed to restrain our affects and to simply look or read dispassionately, neutrally, critically, as if we are not touched by the aesthetic, sensuous, evocative aspects of the things we are looking at. Since the advent of New Criticism, with its program for teaching literature and interpretive skills to the uninitiated, or to working class or colonial subjects and youths, we teachers of English have tended to foster an image of the ideal critic as one who is nothing more (or less) than a serious, hardhat-wearing miner, scouring the surface and then

descending to the depths to wrest truthful nuggets of “culturally meaningful” treasure from stubborn rock.ⁱⁱⁱ

But what if, right away, we were to deploy other ways to read, to think critically, aside from such “values extraction”? What novel kinds of critical languages might we fashion to give an account of the range of what is really happening in our encounters with the creative imaginings and productions of others? How, for example, might we give critical weight to the *bewilderment* we sometimes feel before something – an object, an idea, a line – so unexpected or painful or beautiful that we are not sure how to receive it? What if we developed, and then taught, a criticism that was tolerant, even generous towards such muddled, intermediate receptions, a criticism that took the confusion of inner and outer states as the material with which we might think, rather than what we must set aside?

Indeed grounds for such a criticism already exist.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, British psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, began to argue that our experience of culture always happens in such intermediate spaces between self and not self, and inner and outer realities. As he puts it, in his most famous collection of essays, *Playing and Reality*,

The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment.... The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play. (100)^{iv}

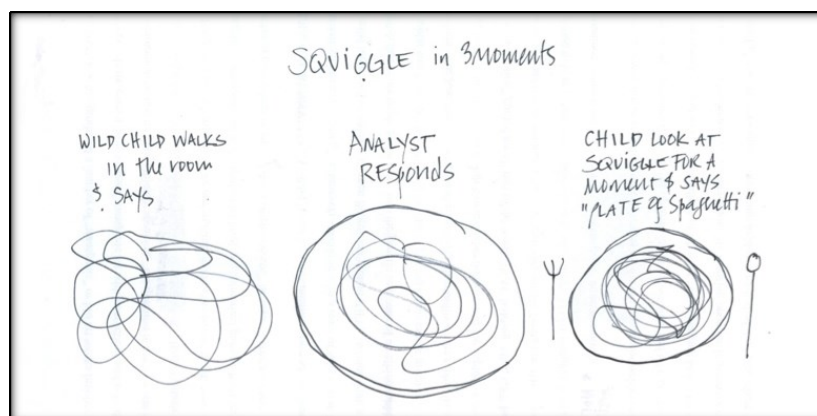
In other words, for Winnicott, the place where we experience, engage with, make and make use of “culture” – let us say “art” and “literature” – is more or less the same place where we also make stuff up and play. This is no doubt why artists and poets are often accused of taking a non-serious or inadequately serious attitude towards life; why, as Plato so famously argued, the arts can be politically dangerous – for Plato, as adept and moving copies of ideal forms, the arts have real potential to lead the unwary or inexperienced astray, to meddle with the clarity of their judgment; why, above all today, we tend to treat the arts as “unreal” and impractical approaches to a stable economic future. Playing, in this

context, is much more essential than “seriousness” or refusal to play, both of which Winnicott takes to be signs of very dire mental illness indeed. “Respect for illusory experience” (3), the capacity to play, to mix up and tolerate an uncertainty or permeability of boundary between inner and outer, self and other, made-up or found: these are all important determinants of mental health and the capacity to “enjoy living” according to Winnicott. Indeed, he goes further, arguing that “creative apperception more than anything else... makes the individual feel that life is worth living” (65), whereas “compliance [with] external reality [alone], the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation...carries a sense of futility” (65), even deadliness. I suspect he is describing something here we all feel we intuitively recognize. But how might we make use of it, critically speaking?

Winnicott has some suggestions for the critical use of play that emerge from the development of play therapy in Britain by Freud’s near contemporary, protégé and sometime-antagonist, child analyst Melanie Klein. Prior to Klein’s elaboration of techniques for thinking about the meaningfulness of play in an analytic setting, analysis had largely been understood to work because the processes of the “talking cure” enabled patients to find the words to name discrete aspects of their troubled (and often previously unthought or silenced) emotional histories. Winnicott trained with Klein; by the end of the Second World War, Winnicott, his friend and associate, Marion Milner (who was also a painter), and a handful of other analysts who became known in the UK as the “Independent Group,” had become very interested in play and play therapy. In particular they wanted to try to get at, and make use of, nonverbal, pre-verbal and gestural interactions in a clinical (i.e. therapeutic) setting. Winnicott, for example, developed a therapeutic game that he called “the squiggle,” in which analyst and analysand drew together and “completed” one another’s drawings, sometimes with quite surprising results.^v

For example, in one exchange, a child might come into the room and draw a swirl and tangle of lines, a scribble. The analyst might respond by drawing a circle around that tangle of lines, containing it in some

fashion. The child then might look at it and begin to laugh, might draw a fork and a spoon on either side of the circle and say, “oh, a plate of spaghetti!”



What has happened here? If the child comes into the room and draws a sort of mess (“static in the head” say, or confused emotions, stuff people say and do that s/he can’t make sense of), the analyst responds with a gesture that suggests that the “mess” can be contained and transformed into something else. Whatever it is, the contained mess doesn’t have to take over the world. The child, perhaps reassured by this, suddenly acts out another transformation: turn that contained mess into a plate full of spaghetti and you can play with it; then you can eat it up!

Not all squiggle-game results are so humorous or reassuring; some open up frightening material; some are quite complex and require many more steps and days of drawings and conversation. Still, the principle remains, that together, by taking turns and acting collaboratively and imaginatively, analyst and analysand can transform one sort of situation into another.

Both Milner and Winnicott suggest that what they call “healthy play,” or “creative experiencing,” emerge from relationships that take place in specific or framed environments: in the safe space of the playroom, between mother or father and child, in the therapeutic consulting room – or between the covers of a book, in an auditorium, on the stage, or within the space of a gallery or studio. Winnicott explains

that, as he sees it, the therapeutic relationship is not a version of an encounter between one who knows and “corrects” or “interprets” – the doctor, and one who submits or symptomatizes or “emits” helplessly – the patient. On the contrary, Winnicott argues,

*Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play. (Winnicott, *Playing* 38, italics in original)*

Might critical practice not likewise be re-imagined? Within the delimited “arts” spaces of a book or poem or performance or encounter with an object, don’t our senses and memories and associations meet those of others and overlap, “complete” and change one another? A critic, too, is a resonating body, not a bodiless entity. What if we allowed our senses, our resonating bodies, to inform our criticism? What might such an effort look like?

How the dog gets into it

Here is one story about what such an effort might look like. Several years ago, while in the midst of trying to write a book about the difficult, often boringly repetitive work of Gertrude Stein, I had a strange – and, in one way, entirely banal – experience with a dog that utterly changed my approach to reading and writing about Stein, her work, and what I understood to be my own critical enterprise:

Perhaps you’ve heard that peculiar claim that Stein makes in *How to Write*: “Sentences are not emotional, paragraphs are”? She explains this insight by saying she understood it when she listened to her dog drinking. This made no sense to me for years...[L]ike so many things about Stein, it...annoyed me. I mean, really, what kind of explanation is that? Then one day I was...sitting there, and the dog came in and began lapping at her bowl. And so I thought of Stein’s phrase, and said it, and all of a sudden I understood it. For there was the sound of the dog’s lapping, a kind of rise and fall, very punctual, and there was great exuberance in the repetition of the sound of her tongue hitting the water and scooping a tongueful back

into her mouth, a kind of kew-lup, kew-lup, kew-lup sound, and I realized that if you took only one of those laps then, well the whole thing would mean nothing to you, it would be sort of incomplete, emotionless. Never mind that the dog would not get any water, you yourself would not be able to figure out what was going on, you would develop some thirst in relation to this lapping. (Cope 189)

Now you have to know that the book that finally emerged from this experience became a strange book; much of it is written in the form of a philosophical dialogue more Leopardian (ironic, romantic, at times almost an internal monologue) than Socratic. At this point then, another speaker breaks in and says, “*Yes, yes that makes sense now.*” S/he tries to puzzle out why the insight occurs as it does, and suggests that such a moment of understanding couldn’t happen, “on the paper” alone:

[I]n order to read Stein, you also have to...[pay] attention to little things, very ordinary things, the sound of a dog's drinking or the whisper of rain on the roof....It's as if you needed the dog as some kind of support, you needed the dog in your world in order to be able to think... (Cope 190)

I think it is no accident that this moment of aesthetic insight involved an animal, more precisely a dog: “You needed the dog in your world in order to think” (Cope 190). But as Donna Haraway argues, dogs don’t simply show up in our lives and stories because they are somehow good to “think with.” Dogs have been companion species with humans for more than 100,000 years now; as Haraway is fond of saying, it is not clear who domesticated whom. Indeed, as she argues, our very genetic material is bound up together; we are not such independent bodies as we like to think: our habits and our senses of self are marked, one way or another, by both the possibilities of and the historical aspects of this deep ongoing relationship, which is, in the end, not simply or strictly between humans and dogs.^{vi} Nevertheless, (or perhaps thanks to such biologically rooted experiences), policing the boundaries of what we take to be human is often very important to us, especially around culture. That is why we get such ferocious arguments around whether animals have language (I believe many do) or can invent tools (many animals do) or, indeed if they have culture, as more and more researchers argue they do. Once I ceased throwing my sensory and bodily experiences out of the sphere of the play

of my critical endeavours, should it be surprising that other “rules of engagement” for critics of human culture (keep the animals out of it; keep your body to yourself!) might fall too? What could be next?

Prepare yourself. Just about anything, it turns out. For we are changed by and in encounters with even small things. We are undone, transformed, remade.^{vii} The moment of insight that arrived, between listening to the dog and reading Winnicott and Milner, was not simply a shift in my understanding of the meaning of a line, but a slide in my apprehension of the world and of the difference that a different kind of criticism could make. Without the dog, without living in the world of the dog, living with the dog, becoming as fully attuned to her hungers as my own – more perhaps – I’d never have been able to understand what Stein meant.

This is because finding meaning or making meaning is not a matter of mining for precious metals; it is not a discrete transfer, like picking up a ring or a stack of bills slipped into a safety deposit drawer at the bank, retrievable if you have the correct credentials and the right combination or a singular key. It shifts; it is a flexible, living thing, something that we engage, co-create and activate, each time we bump up against others and their works in the world. It belongs to everyone and to no one. This is part of its danger... and part of its thrill.

What are some of the consequences of such a co-creative view of how and where meaning making happens? What kind of a difference might it make? By way of an answer, let me tell you another story about a startling insight. This one comes from a book entitled *The Non-Human Environment*, a psychoanalytic-environmental manifesto by a very important, unorthodox and not nearly widely enough known mid-twentieth-century American clinical psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Howard Searles, a man who had the patience and conviction to treat severely mentally ill patients over a period of many years with variations of “talk,” “sit” and “walk” therapy.^{viii} Towards the end of his book, Searles recounts a moment when he suddenly understands that, for the schizophrenic man in the room with him, he, the analyst, *is* a broken down Cape Cod house: as Searles tells it, he is “old, worn out, abandoned, useless” (362). This is not a moment of figural transformation – where the

analyst becomes, for the patient, *like* a dilapidated house for a moment or an hour. Rather, Searles argues, this is a matter of literal instantiation: the interactions of minds, bodies, emotions and memories here in this moment – *transferences* in psychoanalytic parlance – mean that he, Searles, experiences the feeling of being an actual, abandoned wreck, the wreck that, it must also be said, the patient actually *is*, too.

Searles discusses the occurrence of other such transferential “non-human” or extra-human phenomena he and other doctors have observed in deeply schizophrenic patients: for example, he gives an account of a patient who thinks of him as a horse (359) or another who says to him, more or less describing her hospital environment, “There’s a weird doctor around here that doesn’t make sense to me. He’s metal” (352). It is as if, for this patient, the doctor, too, is a part of the hospital furnishings, like a cabinet or a bedstead. One of the qualities that distinguishes Searle’s practice is his sensitivity to both sides of the “transfer” of attributes or characteristics, fantasies and feelings. Freud had paid particular attention to a narrow band of one side of this equation – the “transfer” or “transference” of feelings of love and hate derived from one’s earliest familial experiences to the physician, thereby making those feelings available for examination and work in the clinical session. But Searles also noticed, worked with and discussed the ways that therapists relate to their patients, frequently admitting to his own difficult affects and weaknesses. Indeed it was thanks to his attempts to understand experiences like feeling himself to be a dilapidated house of a very precise description, that Searles began to develop a theory and an ethics of “counter-transference” – which is to say, an account of how an analyst should and could monitor and use the registration of her own affects in a clinical setting as a diagnostic tool.

For us, the consequences of such a view suggest that, at the ontological level – that is to say, at the level of being – we regularly experience a mixing and merging of the boundaries between ourselves and others. Sometimes we court such disorientation and remaking of ourselves by entering liminal or altered states – drug-use, extreme wakefulness or various physical deprivations are among the avenues individuals and cultures use to develop rites of passage or re-fashionings of the self.^{ix}

Indeed, trans-historically and trans-culturally, we human beings seem to find this process of discovering and losing ourselves in others, dangerous, attractive and deeply important, and we routinely develop technologies both of “dehumanization” and “rehabilitation,” treating some among us as persons and others as objects or other sorts of creatures. Given more time – perhaps in another paper – I could sketch out some of the cultural anthropological and historical contours of such an argument, and their consequences for an ethical postcolonial inquiry.

For now, it is enough to say that most significant insights or discoveries about the work of the imagination argue that: 1) phantasies are not simply wishes or ideas, they are not “merely” imaginary, not simply metaphoric, but modes of engagement with the world that have real force and reality; and 2) identity is a permeable state, not just in developmental terms (i.e. the child incorporates facets of others as s/he matures), but as a routine aspect and consequence of interpersonal engagement and biological life, thus the disorientating effects of works of art, dreams, memories and transference relations, not to mention the life, body and mind-altering experiences of falling in love, of profound illness, or of adopting or creating, whether *in vivo* or *in vitro*, new life.

In fact, such experiences comprise, in a word, our “reality,” more significantly and profoundly than the “reasonable” bounds taken to describe the self as a rational unified subject, which split one from another, wish from feeling and sense from body, imagination from truth, and art-making from reason.

How can it be that we create and co-create and imagine and become other than we are in order to become ourselves? In fact, we have done so as a part of our living and breathing. Well before the internet, well before virtual worlds and interactive sites or games involving players from all over the world morphed into a host of different forms, who or what we are is built with, of and from transferences with other beings, animals, objects, materials, ideas and fantasies – which is also how we can get into touch with these things in other people, or activate them when we encounter them on our computer screens, onstage, between the covers of a book or hanging on the wall. As Donna Haraway aptly notes, in an interview entitled “Cyborgs, Coyotes and Dogs”: “Humans are congeries

of things that are not us” (328).^x She means this as I do; not simply metaphorically, but literally, in the flesh, we are composed of multitudes of things that we do not think of as ourselves.

Transgenesis, or Writing Poetry in the Flesh

*Because –ema, in Greek, means blood, and because po-ema must mean
after:
blood,
blood after.*

Let us first make poem, with blood.

Antonin Artaud, “To Henri Parisot (Letter also known as ‘Coleridge the Traitor’),” 17 November 1946. (476)^{xi}

I am going to close this meditation on the importance of the experiences of alterity we have and make for ourselves in and with art and literature, by looking briefly at some key works by an artist who has provocatively explored the biological and ethical implications of human/non-human transference and counter-transference in his work, in skin and bone and electronic pulse, in tissue, genetic sequence and capacity for altered environmental interaction. Born in 1962, Brazilian-American Eduardo Kac was, for example, the first person to have an animal tracking microchip implanted beneath his skin.

At an event staged in 1997 in São Paulo, he placed a transponder by his ankle, where the slaves brought from Africa to work the plantations of Brazil were manacled, then registered himself, online, as both owner and tracked being. There were other important aspects to this performance, which was entitled *Time Capsule*. It included a simultaneous webcast, a documentary broadcast, and a display of family photos, which, it could be argued, testify to a certain kind of genetic memory. All of these elements were designed to scatter the sense of Kac as a unitary subject, as well as to proliferate the record and story of his act. They were, in effect, not simply elements in the *Time Capsule*, but a part of how that “biotelematic” work (a work involving biological and remote communicational aspects) would live on.^{xii}

As a new media and “bio-artist,” Kac is profoundly interested in the social and ethical networks that “new technologies” of transfer and control

like cybernetics and gene therapy open to and between beings. As his exercise with the microchip makes clear, he is profoundly interested in tracking specific, marked histories of the body, frequently with or within his own body – not for him the generalized, disembodied cyber-network, nor the now dated “post-human” sense of the future of bodies as unfleshed cyber-entities. For example, in 1995, he invented a helmet and an awkward bit of clothing that he called a “telepresence garment” that allowed a remote operator to control the movements of the artist’s body when Kac was inside the garment; he describes this as a very frightening experience, even when the remote operator made strenuous efforts to take care of and with him. On the basis of this experience with the “telepresence garment,” Kac coined a new word, “telempathy,” to describe concern for another with whom one is interacting across a distance. (Note that this is more than a decade before Facebook makes collecting the concerns of others an everyday remote operation.) Presciently describing the force and social effects of the internet – even in its early stages, before photo-sharing, Instagram, YouTube, e-divorce, total surveillance and the omnipresence of wireless devices – Kac argued in 1996, “We are undergoing cultural and perceptual shifts due to the remote projection of our corporeal sense of presence.” (Why, for example, can you feel more present to someone on the internet than someone in the room with you?) “Art,” he insisted,

can contribute to a larger cultural debate by appropriating tools employed in other social sectors (eg. business, medicine, military); exposing the fissures within standard approaches to these developments, and proposing new models that foreground alternative ways of thinking. (Kac 193)

His most infamous, fascinating and disturbing work involves “making visible the invisible” impact of new technologies in and under our skins. Arguing that “the digital manipulation of the appearance of the body” through avatars and other forms of self-representation via changeable “skins,” “clearly expresses the plasticity of the new identity of the physical body,” and that new medical procedures and technologies have “allowed us to expand this immaterial plasticity to actual bodies” (Kac 236), Kac devised a new art form that he calls “bio” or “transgenic

art.” It is, in essence, art as genetic engineering, designed to enable us to “see” and thereby become aware of and discuss the very real changes that genetic modification enacts, elsewhere, far more invisibly. More precisely, Kac defined “transgenic art” as “a new art form based on the use of genetic engineering techniques to transfer synthetic genes to an organism or to transfer natural genetic material from one species to another, to create unique living beings” (qtd. in Daubner n. pag.).

Since 2000, Kac has produced a number of “transgenic” or bio art works involving DNA exchange, plants, even a do-it-yourself transgenic kit with instructions and petri dishes. About these biological works, he says, ethically speaking, “the question is not how one is brought into the world, but what happens afterwards” (Eikmeyer n. pag.). For Kac, genetic mixing, cyborgs and various hybridities are not novel; they are everywhere that life or art appears, and utterly ordinary. What matters is not the identity or “parentage” of a creation or entity, but the ways that our co-creations enter and change us, change our thoughts, our actions, relations to, and conceptions of both self and other. Kac’s focus is on the relationship of care, the ethical and ecological dimensions engaged by our interactions and co-creations. His goal is to challenge us to see and to think about, even in and as art, “evolutionary principles,...manipulation at the molecular level, the chimerical passage from legend to life, the creation of new beings in art.” “I don’t create objects,” he says. “I create subjects” (Eikmeyer n. pag.).

By far his most infamous project involves “a materialized imaginary being” (Eikmeyer, n. pag.). Working with a team of scientists in France in 2000, the artist implanted an enhanced green fluorescent protein (GFP), isolated from a North Pacific jellyfish that emits bright green light, into the genetic sequence of an albino rabbit. When, Alba, the rabbit was born, like the jellyfish, the bunny glowed a fluorescent green when exposed to blue light. For Kac, the tenderness and enormous vulnerability of the rabbit, its ability to make a close, bodily and affective link with him and other humans, and the explosive controversy that his “visualization” ignited, are all part of the work. Care for the rabbit was paramount; clearly the artist felt responsible for its life. (He was not ultimately permitted to keep it however, because among other things, very

complex laws govern the international movements of “imperfect” or genetically unusual animals.)

As a visualization of the sorts of changes we are enacting on ourselves and our environment, the bunny, as Kac calls his creation, offers us the opportunity to reflect upon and take greater responsibility for our attitudes about and understandings of a host of body-changing topics, from genetic manipulation to interspecies communication; it demands that we understand these activities as bearers of real effects and affects, not mere metaphors, but as a poetry in and of the flesh. By insisting upon the importance of wresting scientific and technological topics into aesthetic, embodied domains, where their creative aspirations and political, environmental and social dimensions may be more broadly discussed, Kac argues that “transgenic art can...[open] up [a] new symbolic and pragmatic dimension of art as the literal creation of and responsibility for life” (Kac 276).

In this way, transgenic art – perhaps as a sort of ultimate *poiesis*, a making at the level of genetic matter – reveals that art has been, all along, bound up with the creation of and responsibility for the possibilities of life. In other words, we might say, as Heidegger does – rather like Winnicott – “the poetic is the basic capacity for human dwelling”; it is bound up with being able to be in the world at all (Heidegger 228). We must keep in mind that this capacity for making and for dwelling is also always a matter of dwelling-with; it is forever an ethical undertaking. For to be, to make, to dwell in the world is also always to be bound in relationships with strangers and estrangement, with others and otherness, and to have to engage that otherness responsibly, both within and without. We might say then, paraphrasing Artaud, no *poiesis* without “a little red blood”; no *poiesis* without infection; no *poiesis* that doesn’t overrun every discrete body or container.

In part transgenic art can awaken us to such reflections, whether we know anything at the outset about genetic manipulation or not, because art already engages us in constant contact with what is not ourselves in the process of every sort of (self) becoming, of thinking and making and doing, of singing, while attending to the traces of fugitive gods. Or as Kac puts it in an interview with Rodrigo Restrepo Ángel in Bogotá, Colombia,

“*si Alba es un monstruo, también lo somos nosotros* / If Alba is a monster, so are we” (Ángel n. pag.). This is not because we are like the animals or partly animal (although both are true), but because we are never really, ever ourselves, above all when we most want to be. This is, perhaps, our most cutting, fugitive truth. We are not just strangers from ourselves: to live ontologically rich and ethically meaningful lives, we must “slough the human” (Baker 147); in order to lay claim to what we have considered our most glorious human attributes, we must imagine that they – and we – might not only not be *ours*, they might not be human at all.

What is poetry for? It is after all, not nothing, even if, in the market, rather like us, the animals, and those fugitive gods (if not beings all, all at least concerned with being,) it counts, these days, hardly at all. Still, as *poiesis*, it accounts for almost everything in our world, whether we think that matters or not.

Notes:

ⁱ Here Heidegger quotes Hölderlin’s poem “Bread and Wine” verse VII (1799-1801), in “What Are Poets For?,” a lecture given on December 29, 1926, to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Rilke’s death (94).

ⁱⁱ See works by Searles, Davis, Abrams, Haraway, Grosz and Lingis.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Viswanathan for a provocative argument about the colonial and working class origins of the study of English in universities.

^{iv} Winnicott tentatively suggests that gender confusion and play are a regular part of such “creative” spaces, but he’s not quite sure, in the late 1960s, how to follow up on these insights. See “Creativity and its Origins,” in *Playing and Reality*. I believe he’s right, and I also think that we are beginning to be able to explain why – but that’s work for another part of this project, and not this paper.

^v Paper and pencil squiggle games are detailed in Winnicott, *Therapeutic Consultations in Child Psychiatry*. Marion Milner also frequently uses drawings in her work. For a succinct meditation on creativity – and her relationship with Winnicott, see “1972: Winnicott and the Two-way Journey,” in *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men*, 246-52.

^{vi} See Donna Haraway, “Cyborgs to Companion Species: Reconfiguring Kinship in Technoscience,” 295-320, and Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

^{vii} In *Becoming Undone*, “undone” is a word that philosopher Elizabeth Grosz uses to describe the impact various Darwinian insights have on many contemporary notions of the “human.” “Darwin has helped to multiply, pluralize, proliferate all kinds of becomings.... In the process, he has engendered a concept of man as a being as much at the mercy of the random forces of becoming and

self-overcoming, of natural selection, as any other form of life” (24). Grosz argues, in a vein that resonates strongly with what I want to suggest here, that “[the] capacity for self-overcoming is the condition for the emergence of art, for the eruption of collective life, and for the creation of new forms of politics, new modes of living” (8).

^{viii} See Searles, *The Non-Human Environment* (1960), *Collected Papers on Schizophrenia and Related Subjects* (1965), and *Countertransference and Related Subjects* (1979). For a short account of Searles’ influence and character, see Robert Young (n. pag.).

^{ix} I am thinking of work by Wade Davis, Alphonso Lingis, David Abrams, and the collection edited by David Young and Jean-Guy Goulet, *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters*, among other examples.

^x Vilém Flusser makes a similar point – “What we call ‘I’ is a knot of relations” (“On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise)” cited in Kac, *Telepresence and Bio Art*, 113). Of course, both are drawing upon the thinking and legacy of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* here.

^{xi} When Artaud argues that *poiesis* does not happen without “a little blood,” he is making a playful – poetic – link between the expenditure of a life lived for poetry and a blood price – *poine* in ancient Greek, *poena* in Latin. The difference one letter makes is at once nothing and everything.

^{xii} A documentary record of this event may still be found on Kac’s website at <http://www.ekac.org/figs.html>. Kac’s account of his action is available here: <http://wearcam.org/kac.html>. In fact, documents pertaining to Kac’s projects and all of his writings can be found online at <http://www.ekac.org>.

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