

January 2010

Meat My Hero: "I have a Dream" of Living Language in the Work of Donna Haraway, Or, Ride 'Em Cowboy!

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Recommended Citation

Scott, Rebecca. "Meat My Hero: "I have a Dream" of Living Language in the Work of Donna Haraway, Or, Ride 'Em Cowboy!." *Poroi* 6, Iss. 2 (2010): p. 3-14 <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1064>

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Acknowledgements

Thanks are owed to Terry Neiman, Danielle Deveau, Vincent Mosco, Myra Hird, Sergio Sismondo, Catherine Krull, Zoë Druick, and Kirsten McAllister, whose ideas have greatly influenced my thinking in this paper, as well as to the reviewers and editors for their helpful comments. I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the financial support.

Meat My Hero

“I have a Dream” of Living Language in the Work of Donna Haraway, Or, Ride ‘Em Cowboy!

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Poroi 6, 2, January 2010

“Anfonwch Unrhyw Waith i’w Gyfieithu”

Failblog.org is a website that collects pictures and videos that capture what have been deemed, in Internet vernacular, “fails.”ⁱ Fails include any kind of accident or mistake, and they are almost always funny, if only in a dark way. For example, a short preview of failblog.org reveals a video of a child being hit in the face with a soccer ball, a before-and-after ad for weight loss pills depicting a rather rotund “after” figure, a photo of a dictionary whose cover is graced by the word “dicionary,” numerous pictures of “failboats” or sinking ships, an article about a Vicar who showed up to an emergency room with “a potato in his bottom,” and, among my favourites, faulty translations, such as a sign that reads “No entry for heavy vehicles. Residential site only” in English and “Nid wyf yn n swyddfa ar hyn o byrd. Anfonwch unrhyw waith i’w gyfieithu” in Welsh – though this apparently translates as “I am not in the office at the moment. Please send any work to be translated.”

Like many words, the origins of “fail” are forgotten, concealed, or impossible to trace, though it may have originated in a poor English translation from a Japanese video game (Beam 2008: para. 3). Taking on a life of its own, “fail” has now become an internet “meme.” (“Meme” refers to the notion that an idea or cultural phenomenon spreads like a virus through symbolic domains in accord with the principles of natural selection.) “Fail” can be seen everywhere from forums and chat rooms, celebrity gossip sites, online games, and even in the “non-virtual” world – for example, according to Beam (2008: para. 1), a protestor at the Senate Banking Committee’s September meeting on the proposed American “bailout” bill held up a sign that read “fail.”

Three main theories of humour can explain in part why “fails” are so funny (see, for example, a summary by Mulder and Nijholt 2002). The first suggests that the incongruous or the unexpected in

an otherwise banal situation is funny. For example, spelling the word “dictionary” incorrectly on the cover of a dictionary is an ironic incongruence that tickles the funny bones of people accustomed to using these texts to check spelling. This example also reveals the second theory of humour, which centres on feelings of superiority. When someone or something “fails,” such as a spelling error in a dictionary, which by definition serves as an authority on spelling as much as meaning, our sudden sense of superiority in that *we* did not commit the fail is expressed as laughter and joy, a kind of *schadenfreude* at the missteps of another. Finally, fails can be understood as funny within a third theory of humour that draws primarily from psychoanalytic thinking. This theory suggests that what we find funny is an index to repression: the energy released in committing or witnessing taboo acts manifests itself as laughter. The curious Vicar is the best example from those cited above.

A common assumption of these three theories of humour is that there is a latent form of politics in play in humorous situations. Without latent meaning, perhaps humour would not be possible. “Latent” here is understood itself in multiple ways as that which is residual or hidden, the potentiality or delay of something, and even (in Derridian thought) “the other” or *différance*. This can be extended from humorous situations to all forms of language, such that meaning is always the product of dialectical negotiations of competing meanings that have their origins in cultural, subcultural, and idiosyncratic differences. Below obvious, surface, or dominant understandings, latent meanings wait to bubble up. This dynamic process of meaning-making suggests that language is, to a certain degree, uncontainable and very lively.

A central project of social scientific scholarship is to mine latency as a way to understand social, cultural, political, and psychological processes. Donna Haraway, feminist science studies scholar, cultural studies scholar, and much more besides, is well known for her work in exploring the tacit undercurrents of a diverse range of topics, but especially of gender, race, nature, and science. She is especially well known for her literary and creative use of language, though this is perhaps a kind characterization of Haraway’s writings which are notoriously difficult to read and frustrate readers looking for clarity or searching for her main “point.” In an interview, Haraway expressed the problem:

Sometimes people ask me “Why aren’t you clear?” and I always feel puzzled, or hurt, when that happens, thinking “God, I do the best I can! It’s not like I’m being deliberately unclear! I’m really trying to be clear!” But, you know, there is the tyranny of clarity and all these analyses of why clarity is politically correct.

However, I like layered meanings, and I like to write a sentence in such a way that – by the time you get to the end of it – it has at

some level questioned itself. There are ways of blocking the closure of a sentence, or of a whole piece, so that it becomes hard to fix its meanings. I like that, and I am committed politically and epistemologically to stylistic work that makes it relatively harder to fix the bottom line. (2004: 333)

So depending on how you see it Haraway is more than a poet or an erudite snob. In this paper, I argue that her use of language is not merely a way of communicating ideas, but constitutes a methodology, a theory, *and* a praxis all at once. She obtains “data” by mining latency precisely because she theorizes the significance of undercurrents and assumptions in phenomena. Her writing itself performs the very latency she is keen to explore. Here language demonstrates its immensely generative capacity. We come to understand language as being “living” – perhaps it is even a companion species, and not merely dead “meat.”

“Meat My Hero”

Inspired by Haraway’s writings, specifically her collection *The Haraway Reader* (2004), I will demonstrate what I mean by this by analyzing another funny “fail, leading to a summary and explication of Haraway’s work that may make its aims and effects more transparent. I’m trying to be very Harawayan here: the paper is about language, failure, humour, cowboys, hero sandwiches, Martin Luther King Jr., and protein.

Meat My Hero is a delightfully funny and cute fail on failblog.org. In current psychoanalytic thought, language represents the social and the cultural, and is often called the “Name of the Father” since mothers represent the presocial shared body of maternity while fathers represent a complicating factor in that intimate and nondistinct relationship. In order to gain access to the social, the child must detach itself from the maternal body and become a languaged being. *Meat My Hero* is a testament to that process. It captures the innocence of a child not yet sure of the status of meats and meetings in the world.

But let’s try to read *Meat My Hero* as more than just a cute mistake of an innocent child or a trace of a noncultural, presocial space in which infants and children live. Let us take this fail as seriously as Haraway takes her “Teddy Bear Patriarchy” (2004: 176). Let us mine its latent significance.

It may not be clear in this photo, but the child originally wrote “Martin Luther King Jr.” as his or her hero. Something, however, made the child change their mind. The mistake hinges, of course, on the ambiguous meaning of “meat/meet” when spoken. Only in written language or in considering context can the correct “meat/

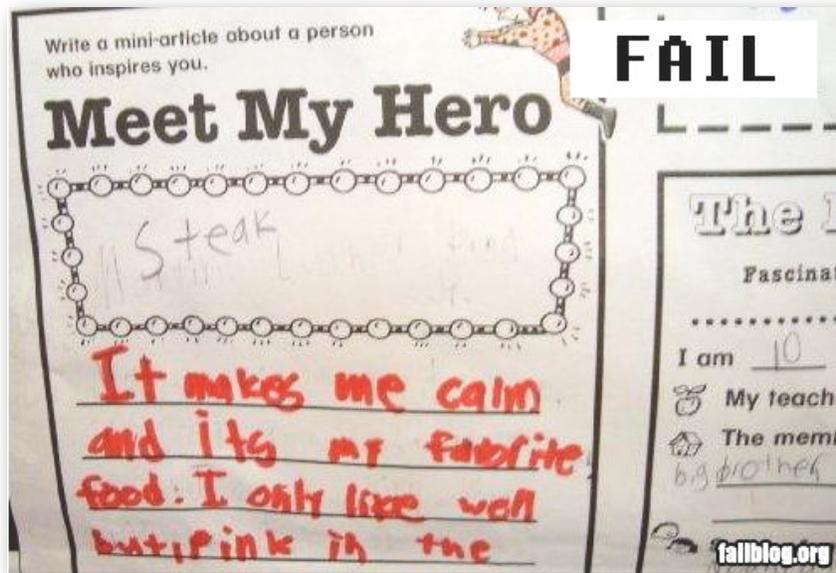


Figure 1: Meat My Hero. Source: Failblog.org, <http://failblog.org/2008/11/13/hero-fail/>

meet” be discerned. Yet the fail reveals, I think, much more than a child who does not know how to spell. That meat heroism resonated with the child says much about North American culture. In fact, it echoes a sentiment about the power of beef as expressed by the Cattleman’s Beef Board and the National Cattleman’s Association: “We know that some days it seems like you have more than enough on your plate. Look to the Beef” (2008a: para. 1).

Heroism, after all, is a rather ambiguous notion. In one episode of the favourite American primetime cartoon *The Simpsons*, after watching a news report about little Timmy O’Toole, a (later found to be fabricated) child who is stuck at the bottom of a well, Homer remarks that the hapless boy is a real hero. Daughter Lisa retorts, “How do you mean, Dad?” Homer replies, “Well he... fell down a well and can’t get out.” Lisa asks, “How does that make him a hero?” Annoyed, Homer shoots back, “Well it’s more than you did.” While perhaps heroism once suggested a strong display of moral excellence and courage, here we read it as nothing more than a little better than mediocrity, or as a newsroom gimmick deployed to take advantage of audience heartstrings. *Meat My Hero* sadly implies that steak, in “calming” the child, seems to do more for him/her than Martin Luther King Jr., suggesting thereby that American culture and education are in a sad state of affairs.

Or, perhaps heroism is a myth that functions hegemonically in this case. Willard argues that meat has a central, if often-ignored, role in North American culture. It is not mere sustenance:

Our food selection is more than just a matter of preferences and choices; it is imbued with social meaning, cultural practice, and

political ideology: “[W]hen we eat, we are not merely consuming nutrients, we also consuming gustatory (i. e., taste-related) experiences, and, in a very real sense, we are also ‘consuming’ *meanings* and *symbols*.” (2003: 105, citing Beardsworth and Keil, emphasis in original)

In other words, meat is contested, functioning symbolically in a number of different and contradictory ways beyond its dominant reading as “food.” For example, Willard suggests that meat consumption in the United States is closely tied to the myth of Manifest Destiny. In the country’s imagined past, rugged American cowboys and cattle ranchers were staunch individualists, both territorializing land with their grazing animals and creating sustenance to conquer and take the West (Willard 2003: 108). In this way, meat-eating was as much nation-building as it was food consumption. The erasure of “Martin Luther King Jr.” takes on a new meaning in this light, since, even today and within racist paradigms some read him a nation-destroyer by virtue of creating political and social upheaval. He is, once more, crossed out.

Today the myth of the heroic cowboy living out Manifest Destiny is expressed in the resourceful business rancher who, according to Willard, is portrayed as an innovative entrepreneur who is not

afraid to use technology to get the job done... He has traded his John Wayne image for that of a technologically savvy businessman. He no longer desires to tame the West; rather he has a strong commitment to safe beef, research, technology, and, as always, old fashioned hard work. (2003: 109)

Thus we see the Cattleman’s Beef Board and the National Cattleman’s Beef Association characterize beef farmers as follows:

For America’s beef producers, the land is their livelihood and their legacy. They carefully follow science-based best management practices to protect our country’s natural resources for future generations. In fact, beef producers have led conservation efforts proving that raising cattle and environmental stewardship go hand-in-hand. (2008b: para. 2)

As this passage suggests, besides Manifest Destiny, meat heroism can be seen in another influential myth – for me, it’s a myth – the Christian Genesis creation story in the bible, in which Man (sic) is given “dominion” over all animals and nature as a “steward.” Some scholars argue that this myth has had dire consequences in justifying environmentally destructive practices such as mining, deforestation, oil drilling and the like (see Lynn White Jr. 1967 for a seminal critique and Merchant 1980; see Harrison 1999 for a rebuttal). In terms of meat production, the environmental costs are high, as grazing causes soil erosion, soil degradation, desertification, water pollution, and air pollution (cattle are notorious for “emitting” a potent mixture of methane

and gaseous ammonia) (Gossard and York 2003: 2). In this case, myth seems to belie “matter” – so powerful is this myth that these very real material consequences are of no consequence. Yet meat heroism is rich with matter. It is, in fact, quite meaty.

Thus meat is a participant or “actor” in influential myths and cultural processes. For example, Willard (2003: 112-113) points to the gendered dimensions of meat consumption, in which meat-rich diets are associated with strength, virility, and stamina – forms of physical power typically associated with masculinity. Certainly, meat is a rich source of protein. Yet it is as if ingesting meat is like consuming “raw animal power.” Within this framework, heroes must definitely be meat-eaters. Perhaps not incidentally, “hero sandwiches” are an extremely popular food in North America. The hero sandwich (or hoagie) is a sub-style sandwich filled with cold cuts of meats. According to Wilton (2003: para. 8), the hero sandwich got its name from a journalist who thought the sandwich so big that only a “hero” could eat it.

Meat My Hero? Why, it’s completely sensible.

Denaturing

Through my analysis of *Meat My Hero*, I have attempted to complicate this fail, getting at the latent meanings behind it that exist by virtue of politics, language and matter. A current that runs through Haraway’s work is this same imperative to complicate. This means that she is careful to both reveal complications behind dominant and well-established narratives, understandings, and ideologies, and to let those complications stand as irresolvable tensions. Haraway is neither solely a cultural critic nor a representationalist. Furthermore, she is neither a social constructionist nor a naïve realist in her ontology. Her work reflects what Karen Barad (2003) has called “onto-epistem-ology,” in which observing, participating, representing, and being are not separate, but open to each other and co-produced.

A strong ethical thread cuts through Haraway’s work. The values of openness, contingency, and alterity are privileged over closure. There is also play. For example, in a footnote of “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936,” Haraway writes, “It is a pleasure to compose a chapter in feminist theory on the subject of stuffed animals” (2004: 191). In this paper, she analyzes the American Natural History Museum, which houses taxidermic and staged animals taken from their habitat and killed, oddly enough, for the purpose of furthering the preservation and stewardship of nature. She reveals the contradictions and hypocrisy of this practice by linking domains

often considered disparate, including natural history museums and taxidermy, popular president Theodore Roosevelt, and a common child's toy. By way of this analysis, she critiques established understandings not just of animals, but of life, nature, politics, science, masculinity, and race, as well as violence against animals, eugenics, and colonialism, under the rubric of what she calls "Teddy Bear Patriarchy" (2004: 176). Haraway writes,

Behind every mounted animal, bronze sculpture, or photograph lies a profusion of objects and social interactions among people and other animals, which can be recomposed to tell a biography embracing major themes for the twentieth-century United States. (2004: 152)

Haraway not only critiques and deconstructs, but often foregrounds alternative figures that, already in their material and imagined constitution, are open, contingent, and irresolvable, including the cyborg, companion species, monsters, oncomouse, and the like. Amongst these figures, there are radical politics. For example, perhaps we can read Haraway's "companion species" (see 2004: 295-320) as an answer to Teddy Bear Patriarchy in terms of the way it envisions "animals." Companion species emerge irreducibly in contacts with other species such that environments, cultures, histories, genomes and bodily boundaries are intimately shared between what we normally consider to be ontologically distinct species. Dogs are Haraway's favourite example, but "rice, bees, tulips, and intestinal flora" also count as companion species for human beings because they "make life for humans what it is" (2004: 302). In this way, not merely the agency and will of humans, but the agency of nonhuman others is expressed in the relationship. Haraway is fond of discussing the various negotiations she has with her dogs on a daily basis and the ways in which they train her as much as she trains them. Thus the companion species figure rejects the anthropocentrism of Teddy Bear Patriarchy in which nature exists for humans to control and "preserve." Companion species are co-produced to the core.

Here those familiar with science studies will see what Haraway has contributed to this field. This is a field that rejects separations between "nature" (studied by scientists) and "culture" (or "society," studied by sociologists). It is critical of the strictly social constructionist explanations of "natural" phenomena and the human-centric modes of inquiry that dominate most social scientific paradigms. Instead, science studies – especially the brands that draw on the prolific work of Bruno Latour (1987, 1988, 1992, 1999, 2005) – holds that phenomena, agents, subjects, humans, nonhumans, and materials all participate in the co-production of the world. Science is one set of practices that

participates in this production. It gives us some of the tools – even if flawed – to approach understanding what the agencies of matter might be. Trained as a biologist, Haraway is perhaps one of the best-known critics of science, pointing to the ways in which science could be reformulated in “feminist, multicultural, antiracist” (Haraway 1994: para. 6) terms. At the same time she is one of science’s most staunch champions within the humanities, forcibly pushing its productive politics to emerge.

Yet how can such a seemingly contradictory project be done? Haraway’s concern for this is expressed with urgency:

How can science studies scholars take seriously the constitutively militarized practice of technoscience and not replicate in our own practice, including the material-semiotic flesh of our language, the worlds we analyze? How can metaphor be kept from collapsing into the thing-in-itself? Must technoscience – with all its parts, actors and actants, human and not – be described relentlessly as an array of interlocking agonistic fields, where practice is modeled as military combat, sexual domination, security maintenance, and market strategy? How not? (1994: para. 4)

Haraway’s body of work suggests that an answer to this concern lies in language. Language presents not merely “the master’s tools,” but also the tools of the master’s undoing (see 2004: 47-62).

Haraway’s imperative to complicate is expressed in her work in both content and form, and as such her language is a form of *praxis*. We can examine one small example from her large body of work to illustrate the productive capacity of language. In “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” (2004: 63-124) Haraway explodes nature, technology, science, and culture in and through one word, “denature,” which carries much latent meaning. She writes,

In the belly of the local/global monster in which I am gestating, often called the postmodern world, global technology appears to *denature* everything, to make everything a malleable matter of strategic decisions and mobile production and reproduction processes. Technological decontextualization is ordinary experience for hundreds of millions if not billions of human beings, as well as other organisms. I suggest that this is not a *denaturing* so much as a *particular production* of nature. (2004: 65-66, emphasis in original)

On one level, “denature” can mean “de-nature,” such that technology is removed from nature and that those who engage and live with technology are in a kind of “de-” or “un-natured” state. This points to another understanding of “denature” which comes from chemistry. Denaturing is a process by which proteins, or amino acids, which comprise proteins, lose their structure when

they come into contact with strong acids, bases, or heat. To suggest that technology “denatures” human beings, then, suggests a prior or ordinary natural form of human beings that is deformed through contacts with technology.

Haraway, of course, rejects this characterization of technology as a humanistic fiction of Western epistemology. Instead, through explorations of kinship (2004: 251-294), origin stories (2004: 47-62), and the figure of the cyborg (2004: 7-46), she suggests that there is no strict ontological distinction between nature and technology. Such a distinction is produced and could be otherwise (as feminists are fond of saying). Rather, technology and nature enjoy a mutual and irreducible co-emergence such that technology is a form of nature and nature a form of technology.

Language as a Companion Species

The multidimensionality of a single word points to the dynamism and generative capacity of language. Haraway reflects on a similar example in the notion of the cyborg: “In a way, you know, I’m doing this analysis of the meanings attached to the cyborg retrospectively. I cannot imagine that I thought all these things back in 1983” (2004: 323). This suggests that the cyborg has latent significances she could not anticipate and that these significances changed over time. Here language has a kind of agency and is not merely a transparent tool for humans to use. The potential to change, the capacity to generate, the possession of agency – all these characteristics are very much starting to suggest that language has “life.” In science studies, the “lives” of both humans and nonhumans are taken seriously. We can even see this implied in the way Haraway describes beings: “What interested me was the way of conceiving of us all as communication systems, whether we are animate or inanimate, whether we are animals or plants, human beings or the planet herself, Gaia, or machines of various kinds” (2004: 322). If life is a communication system, then communication systems must have “life.”

Perhaps it would not be too speculative, given what we have seen, to suggest that, in Haraway’s treatment of it, language is itself a kind of companion species. As noted, language variously cooperates with human will, seems to have its own agencies expressed, in particular, in latent meanings, and changes over time. It then becomes clear that forms of language or writing that enforce dominant power structures such as Teddy Bear Patriarchy assume the nonliving nature of language. Instead of being a companion species which we “meet” (see Haraway’s *When Species Meet*

(2008)), this view suggests that language is “meat.” It is there solely for the sustenance and support of humans.

At minimum it is much more fun to play with living language, to frolic and jump and dance around with it, and enjoy a few giggles. At best, living language provokes, enables and performs the powerful and resounding critiques characteristic of Haraway’s work. What, then, of meat heroism? Its latency points to forms of violence that operate at multiple levels and through multiple sites – human, animal, environmental. It isn’t very companionate.

In this paper, I have tried to mime the infinite recursion in Haraway’s work, adopting her praxis in order to illuminate that praxis to illuminate her method in a way that illuminates her theory. In talking about language, humour, meat, and myths, I hope I have succeeded in helping you to understand Haraway. Since denaturation is a fiction of humanistic, Western science and epistemology, I’ve attempted to make a rather Harawayan move and ask, What about the proteins?

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ⁱ Thanks are owed to Terry Neiman, Danielle Deveau, Vincent Mosco, Myra Hird, Sergio Sismondo, Catherine Krull, Zoë Druick, and Kirsten McAllister, whose ideas have greatly influenced my thinking in this paper, as well as to the reviewers and editors for their helpful comments. I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the financial support.