Editor's Introduction

Writing companions: Toward a critical entanglement with the more-than-human world

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Lors moy, Cristine, oyant les series voix de mes tres venerables maistresses,
remplie de joye en tressaillant tost me dreçay, & agenouillee devant elles
m'offry a l'obeissance de leurs dignes vouloirs ; et adonc je receuz d'elles
tel commandement: « Prens ta plume & escripts. »

[Then I, Christine, hearing the sweet voices of my honored mistresses,
joyful and trembling, got up and knelt down in front of them, offering
myself in obedience to their worthy wishes. Then I received the following
command from them: 'Take your pen and write.']

– *Le livre des trois vertus*, Christine de Pizan (Boston Public Library MS
1528, fol. 4r [Paris, 1405])¹

¹ Edited by Willard
and Hicks (de
Pizan, 1989, 9);
translated by
Blumenfeld-
Kosinski (de Pizan,
1997, 157).

Writing with dogs

Take your pen and write. This directive of the three virtues – Reason, Droicture, and Justice [Reason, Rectitude, Justice] – to Christine de Pizan suggests that composition requires only a writer, a writing implement, and the will to create. It recalls spartan medieval depictions of the Evangelists, for whom divine inspiration – plus parchment and quill – seemed sufficient to translate their Gospels to the page. Unlike these men, however, images of Christine show a poetess surrounded not only with the accoutrements of late medieval scribal work but also those of contemporary nobility, femininity, and fashion (Figure 1).

Christine's conventional evocation of poetic inspiration by the three virtues in Book I of *Le livre des trois vertus* belies the numerous miniatures that embed her literary life within its material environs. Codices, crisp white wimples, simple Marian blue gowns, luscious garden views framed by Gothic arches, and a tiny dog populate at least 29 distinct manuscript illuminations that depict Christine de Pizan in her study.² The above illumination clearly establishes her embodied writing praxis, with all its material entanglements, as evidence of her authority, but why must it? Why surround Christine de Pizan with so much *stuff* in stark contradistinction to depictions of the Evangelists? How does each item in her material entourage imbue this work environment with authorial power? Does this miniature point symbolically to her literary authority or stage her actual embodied writing life? Considering Christine's supervision of this manuscript's

2 For more on depictions of Christine at work, see Bell (2008).

Figure 1: Christine de Pizan writes in her study, accompanied by a small white dog. The illumination precedes the incipit of Queen Isabeau of Bavaria's 1410–1414 copy of the *Cent ballades*. © British Library MS. Harley 4431, fol. 4r.

production, should we understand this illustration as a realistic representation of her creative process? If so, why write with a dog?

I have often asked myself why anyone writes with a dog over the nearly 12 years during which a rat terrier runt known to most as LuLu has been my writing (and life) companion. However she may resemble Christine's diminutive partner, she does *not* sit demurely by my side while I channel inspiration into text. No, she burrows furiously into the lap and blankets I provide her, kneading textile and thighs alike into submission. When they submit, as they always do, she flops all her eight pounds down and wiggles determinedly into her desired position, emitting a muffled groan when she succeeds (Figure 2).

While I have often smiled at her reminders of my entanglement with subjectivities outside my own, her constant interruptions have frustrated my work. Rather than singlehandedly provide LuLu with all the social interaction (and, frankly, emotional support) she might need, I decided she needed a companion.

We adopted Spanky based solely on a blurry cell phone photo on the PAWS of Southwest Virginia website. In the photo, he stands next to the woman – here, in blush pink dressing gown and quilted house slippers – who had days earlier found him sniffing around her trash in a holler off Route 23. Unfortunately, when we brought him to meet LuLu at our home in The Pound, Virginia, she answered his goodwill with total contempt. His smell – fresh cedar mixed with Betadine scrub from his neuter just hours before – seemed to repulse her, and it was weeks before she accepted his presence and, still later, his friendship.

I, on the other hand, became and remain totally devoted to Spanky. I fall asleep each night with my nose buried in his scruff, inhaling deeply until I drift to sleep. As I write this piece, he dreams beside me, paws paddling as he relives

Figure 2: LuLu keeps vigil; I write. © Matthew Lockaby.

Figure 3: Spanky rests comfortably at my side; I write. © Matthew Lockaby.

the Appalachian squirrel hunts of his youth. Even LuLu eventually warmed to our new companion. Her erstwhile frenemy has become her brother, and balance is restored both in my writing praxis and among the companions who help enact it (Figure 3).

Now I write with two companions, in peaceful coexistence and material entanglement. Whenever I must stop, close my laptop, and leave the house, I carry bits of their fur along with me. I deposit this evidence of LuLu and Spanky on my route, in library books, on the office chairs of colleagues, and in hotel rooms at academic conferences hundreds of miles away from our home. They could no more be disentangled from my writing than from my physical environment or my emotional life.

So, what of the tiny companion beside Christine in the *Cent ballades*? Did this tiny white dog merely exemplify the courtly fashion for companion animals, or did Christine indeed have a series of canine writing companions over her literary career? Would Christine allow their mirthful eruptions to interrupt her writing? Or did they, like my slumbering boy, rest easily at her side while she toiled away at her work? Might she have relished their little dog exuberance or laughed as she picked bits of fur from her bodice before welcoming a visitor to her home? Did Christine cherish her pet? Which ones? How? Why?

LuLu, Spanky, and Christine de Pizan's canine writing companion(s) speak to the imbrication of our lives and identities with those of animals. In the *Cent ballades* illumination, the dog at Christine's feet links her with her environment, spurring the viewer's curiosity about the many materials, structures, and things in her midst. Though separated by 600 years, LuLu and Spanky enact a similar connection: all three awaken us to our embeddedness within our more-than-human environs. Each dog inspires, in their own way, our openness to

encounters not just with animals, but with the environments, materials, and objects that populate our world. Eschewing the general in favor of the intimate specificity of the particular, these nonhuman agents are not types – not merely ‘dog’ or ‘companion animal’ – but individuals in dynamic, iterative relation within networks of agency, subjectivity, and performance. In this special issue, each contributor seeks out elements of this world: the medieval animals, environments, materials, and objects existing in – following Jane Bennett’s idiom – ‘vibrant’ co-presence with people (Bennett, 2010). We ask what stories medieval literature, art, artifacts, archives, and myths tell about the contact zones between human beings and the nonhuman agencies that influence, affirm, and challenge human embodiment, subjectivity, and identity.

Thinking things through

The studies of entanglement in this issue find their root in the material turn dating to the mid-1990s. Motivated by a rejection of anthropocentric criticism, new materialist fields of inquiry like posthumanism, human-animal studies, object-oriented ontologies, and ecomaterialism have sought to unmake rigid Cartesian distinctions erected between humanity, on one hand, and animals, environments, and objects, on the other. Rather than elevate the human as a monolithic figure with monumental impacts on its environs yet impenetrable by their reciprocal influences, new materialists and posthumanists inscribe humanity within a web of influences generated by forces to which humanists have long refused to attribute agency. Instead, pluralities of influence unlimited by category, species, or type define new materialist views of identity and community.

Over the last decade, scholars of medieval studies have taken up the mantle of the material turn by seeking the material-semiotic entanglements that define human identity in the global Middle Ages. A 2010 issue of *Exemplaria* deploys ‘thing theory’ to read premodern culture (Ingham, 2010). For Karl Steel, violence against animals is a manifestation of medieval human exceptionalism (Steel, 2011). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues for the primal liveliness of stone, whose geological unboundedness underscores human ephemerality (Cohen, 2015). Julian Yates constructs a multispecies mangle in which sheep, oranges, and yeast support and subvert human objectives (Yates, 2017). Deborah Deliyannis, Hendrik Dey, and Paolo Squatriti lay bare the social, religious, economic, political, and cultural impacts of everyday and extravagant objects from the postclassical period (Deliyannis, et al., 2019). These texts explore how people use animals, materials, and objects to serve their own objectives.

Building on this work, ‘Contact Zones: Fur, Minerals, Milk, and Other Things’ explores the possibility of reciprocal entanglement and influence between people and the more-than-human world. The essays in this issue

examine individual objects, animals, and environments that possess agency and wield immense identitary capital. Here, the *stuff* so often considered peripheral to human existence comes to influence and even converge with the bodies of medieval people. This issue moves out from flesh and inward from environments to interrogate how the items that accompany, enhance, protect, or hide human bodies constitute human identity. Inspired by new materialist modes of critique, these essays take up three of its critical touchstones to read the more-than-human agents that become inextricably linked with notions of medieval human identity: Donna Haraway's contact zones, Karen Barad's agential realism, and Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality.

Haraway builds interspecies contact zones upon the intercultural contact zones established by Mary Louise Pratt, for whom they signify the 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths' (Pratt, 1991, 34). Haraway uncovers new meeting, clashing, and grappling while training for canine agility competitions. Unlike Pratt's socio-economic power differentials, contact zones between humans and dogs in training reside in their shared language and in the 'flesh of [their] world making entanglements' (Haraway, 2007, 4). Trainer and pupil communicate across their difference, not as 'autopoietic wholes,' but as subjects shaped by their co-becoming, as 'sticky dynamic openings and closures in finite, mortal, world-making, ontological play' (Haraway, 2007, 88). The iterative becoming inherent in these material-semiotic partnerships expands the borders of subjectivity and endows contact zones with an ethical engagement in which trust and respect thrive.

Barad likewise tackles the perennial question of how matter comes to matter, how the intra-action of bodies with disparate power comes to wield world-making potential. 'Agential realism' is Barad's answer. This onto-epistemological framework establishes the performative web of forces and practices through which our world comes into being and meaning in an intra-active flurry of ontologically inseparable agents (Barad, 2007, 127). Her post-structuralist performativity prioritizes not the simulacrum of the real (chased by representationalists) but the multifactorial, material-discursive practices ('apparatuses') by which subjects and objects alike intra-act, come into being/meaning, and iteratively produce representations of themselves. Indeed, matter's dynamism guides Barad to establish agency not as an attribute of matter but as the process of open-ended becoming through which material-discursive exchanges bring meaning into the world. Nor do Baradian agencies reproduce the anthropocentric limitations of much technoscientific critique. On the contrary, the intra-actions between human, nonhuman, technical, natural, cultural forces endow each with the ethical responsibility to '[take] account of the entangled phenomena that are intrinsic to the world's vitality and [be] responsive to the possibilities that might help us and it flourish' (Barad, 2007, 396).

By asserting the inseparability of human bodies from the infinite agencies of the more-than-human world, Alaimo redirects new materialism toward the question of human embodiment and identity. Yet rather than reprise the anthropocentrism against which new materialists and posthumanists define their work, her ‘trans-corporeality’ overthrows any notion of human determinacy. Like Barad and Haraway, Alaimo uses ‘the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors’ as inspiration for ‘more capacious epistemologies’ (Alaimo, 2010, 2). Indeed, if “the environment” is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves’ (Alaimo, 2010, 4), the entwined fates of humanity and nature make our political engagement on behalf of both an ethical imperative.

Consider LuLu, who fills our writerly contact zone with embodied semes, whining at and nudging me for attention even as I type these lines. Recall the PAWS of Southwest Virginia volunteer who, by photographing Spanky, co-created an apparatus in which our desire to support animal welfare, the Silicon Valley-produced smartphone, and Spanky’s stocky, opinionated namesake on ‘Our Gang’ and ‘The Little Rascals’ from 1931 to 1942 intra-act and produce the phenomenon of his image and its meaning. Imagine the allergenic trespass I facilitate when my clothing transports their dander to every public or private space I enter.³ The tangled amity and enmity of such interconnectedness points to what Timothy Morton calls the ‘strange strangers’ that proliferate in the enmeshed environments he names ‘dark ecologies’ (Morton, 2010, 15–8). When Morton asks, ‘Is the strange stranger a person? What is a person? Are *we* people?’ (Morton, 2010, 60, *italics mine*), he challenges us to see the strangeness that surrounds us not as separate from us, but within us, for even ‘[p]ersonhood is strange strangeness’ (Morton, 2010, 70). In this special issue, entanglement with strange strangers through contact zones, intra-active becomings, or trans-corporeal relationships is part and parcel of humanity.

While each essay imagines its strange strangers in distinct relation to human embodiment and identity, their intertextual references forge new resonances between and across disparate objects, animals, and environments. Both Melanie Holcomb and Julie Singer, for example, call upon the *stella maris* to imagine material relationships. For Holcomb it is a hymn on the lips of Bernard of Clairvaux, who exults in the intra-active maternal nourishment he receives from a lactating statue of the Virgin Mother. For Singer, the *stella maris* recalls the metal magnetism of a compass that ‘will revive past Christian comity.’ Others find evidence of liminality in objects: the wine cups that deliver oblivion to Chinese poets for Elizabeth Harper, furs whose workers bring the drowned back from death for Sarah-Grace Heller, and Mughal shasts that convey imperial power even to wearers of lower castes for Krista Gulbranson. These objects shift human consciousness, foil death, and raise social capital by their presence on bodies. Finally, subjectivity interjects throughout the issue – a fact befitting its

3 I nod here to Alaimo’s ‘chemical trespass,’ which points to the porosity of human bodies to (toxic) chemicals in our environment (2010, 83).

inspiration from Haraway's interspecies contact zones – to remind us of the semes produced by material enmeshments. Pastoral relationships between St Francis and animals in Brandon Alakas and Day Bulger's essay reject any hagiographic thaumaturgy that associates his control over nature with divinely vested authority, while the rumination of codicological material by bookworms in Emma Maggie Solberg's essay mirrors the reading praxis of the monks and bibliophiles who likewise inhabit libraries. In Alan Montroso's essay and my own, women's subjectivity transgresses material and social convention. For Montroso, the toxic cave ecology of Sybil of Cumae brings her racialized embodiment into conversation with her verbal authority. In my essay, a husband's increasing incapacity (objectness) obliges his wife to speak and act to restore him to chivalric wholeness. Together, the essays offer disanthropocentric readings of materiality that center the more-than-human agencies that impact human identities and embodiments across the medieval world.

Most broadly, 'Contact Zones: Fur, Minerals, Milk, and Other Things' offers strategies for writing the companions of our humanity. Just as the issue entails contact zones between scholars working across languages, periods, regions, and disciplines, we each envision contact zones between materials, bodies, and identities as multidirectional agentic exchanges that define and enact material-semiotic entanglements. Even as the Anthropocene grinds on, this issue rejects the singular substantive of 'the human,' that unitary, universal individual, whole in and of itself. Instead, these essays center human interconnectedness with the companions that populate our environs, our stories, and our past. By thinking things through, by understanding *stuff* in dynamic relations of dependency on, challenge to, and care for human life, by imagining a humanity not just embedded within but constituted by its more-than-human surroundings, we do more than honor the companions upon whom our species relies: *we become companions ourselves*.

About the Author

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