

Studies in Gender and Sexuality

(2013). *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 14(1):87-97

A Day at the Zoo Through the Lens of Jessica Benjamin's Bonds of Love

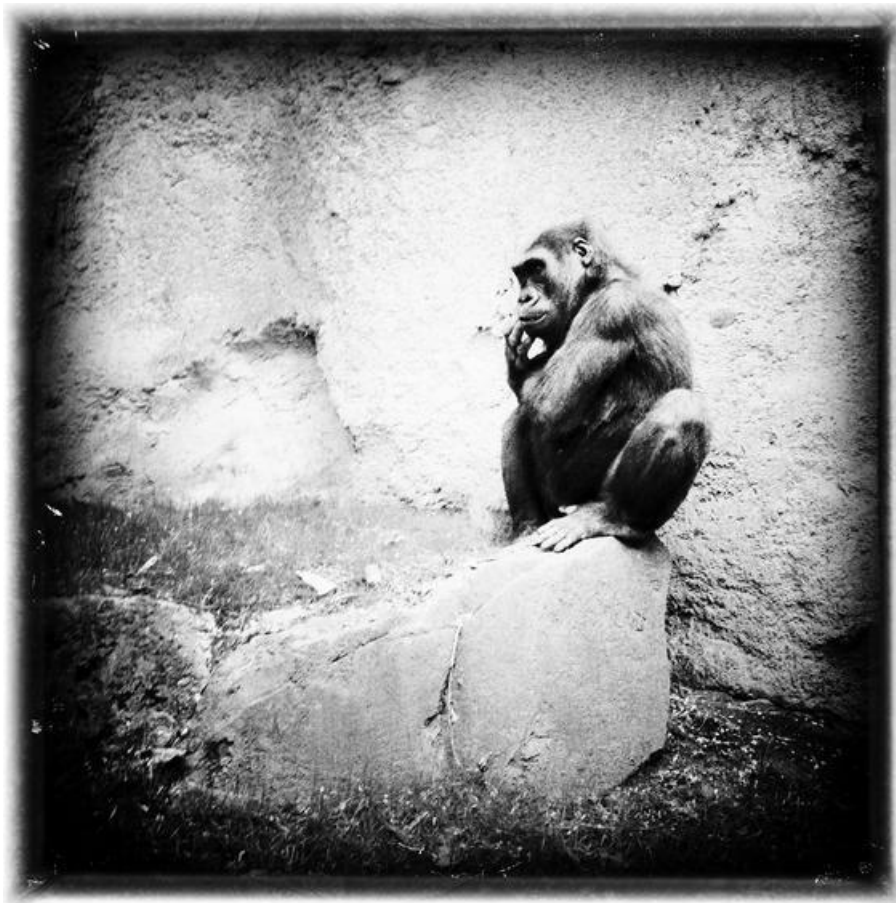
Donna Bassin, Ph.D. 



In this photo-based essay I bring Jessica Benjamin's project of transforming relationships of domination to a day at the zoo. The interrogation of the human/animal dualism illuminates relational moments of mutuality across species. Managing the tension between sameness and difference without collapse into hierarchical configuration, the human-animal connection may take its place in the project of transforming relationships of domination and extending the circle of ethical care.



It is well known that the impact (or imprint) of Jessica Benjamin's work is widespread and visible not only in psychoanalysis or gender studies but also across many disciplines. In my photo-based essay I bring Jessica along as a companion, to think with, as I attempt to understand the nature of our relationship(s) to animals—specifically the creation of psychic structures, which support the destructive cycles of subject-object domination and foreclose new relational moments across species. Work within the field of animal studies has suggested that the interrogation of the human/animal dualism is a necessary condition for all ethical questions.



- 88 -

For much of my life I have related to animals as objects—objects of entertainment, education, food, and clothing—even pets I cared for were essentially objects of my own subjectivity. And as for many of us living in the Western civilized world, other than occasional sightings of rogue animals trespassing human space, or visits to the zoo, animals were a very small part of my social world.

As a mental health consultant to first responders at Ground Zero following 9/11, I had the opportunity to observe encounters between those working in the pits and the therapy dogs we brought to mitigate stress and trauma. Recently, a number of my patients have gotten companion dogs and regularly bring these dogs to their therapy sessions. Thoughts of bringing a therapy dog to my office brought me back to Freud's chow chow, Yofi, who participated in his analytic hours, identifying and comforting anxious patients as well as signaling the end of the hour. Increasing curiosity about the impact of our relationships with animals (or lack thereof) and pressed to connect with animals since the loss of a beloved pet, I have begun to photograph life at the zoo.



Life in progressive zoos for apes and certain monkeys has changed. No longer displayed in cement cages with painted faux replicas of their native habitat and visitors, animals at the Bronx Wildlife Conservation Park are increasingly housed in some recreation of their natural habitat. Gorillas live and freely roam in a 6.5-acre natural lowland rain forest. Built inside and snaking within the gorilla habitat is the human habitat—a mostly glass tunnel-shaped and climate-controlled enclosure, complete with toilets, benches, and educational material.

It is along this meandering glass edge, where animal and human habitats intersect, that Jessica Benjamin's theoretical commitments to the deconstruction of the unethical master-slave dichotomy may be usefully employed and her radical vision of transformed relationships, even across species, might be briefly enjoyed.





- 92 -



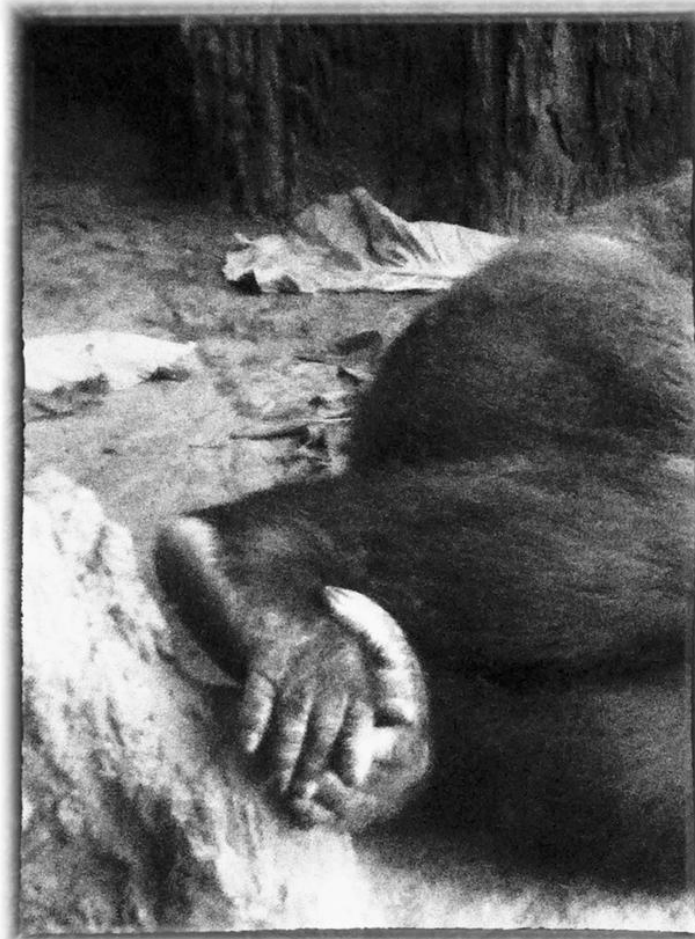


- 94 -

Despite the language barriers between the human visitors and the gorillas, instances of call-and-response through gesture and gaze define cross-species encounters. Gorillas, no longer mere passive captives, become active subjects initiating and responding to attempts of attunement and assertion. These borderlands of relational activity, according to Jessica Benjamin, are opportunities where identity and subjectivity may be negotiated.

Cautionary stories regarding our relationship to apes reflect and fortify the master-slave relationship. Menacing King Kong must be captured, constrained, and killed for transgressive behavior, acting as a subject in love. Or in an instructive flip, apes once slave to humans transform into hyperintelligent master of humans in *Planet of the Apes*.

Animal rights activists, in the service of increased ethical responsibility toward animals, have generally sought to dissolve the boundary between animals and humans, making animals more like humans and thus deserving human treatment. However, and inadvertently in doing so, some animal rights activists might be charged with anthropomorphism, a different form of domination. That is, in their attempt to relate to animals humanely, they call for a destruction of their difference from us. In contrast, Jessica Benjamin's project of recognition, I suggest, may be a useful addition to the efforts of animal studies scholars, who, in resisting the anthropomorphic perspective, seek to open up new spaces of relationships across species. Recognition here, as I understand and extend Jessica's work, requires that we resist the destruction of the unique differences of the other as subject. That is, we must recognize the animal's animality and struggle to manage the oscillating tension between these dichotomies—animality and humanity—in the service of transforming relationships of domination.





- 96 -

Surely, as Jessica Benjamin has argued, transcending tragic repetitions of master-slave enactments in the service of true ethical relationships requires that we manage the tension, without collapse into hierarchical configuration, between sameness and difference, and therefore the human-animal connection must take its place, alongside male-female, subject-object, us-them, as another set of opposites in tension for the project of transforming relationships of domination and extending the circle of ethical care.

Article Citation [\[Who Cited This?\]](#)

Bassin, D. (2013). A Day at the Zoo Through the Lens of Jessica Benjamin's Bonds of Love. *Stud. Gen. Sex.*, 14(1):87-97