

“Squirming in Circles Like Fumigated Bugs”: Jim Carroll and Eco-poetics

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“The shiny surfaces have not been kind to this century”

—Jim Carroll “Ecology”

Best known for the film adaptation of his novel *The Basketball Diaries*, Jim Carroll composed several other books of prose as well as multiple books of poetry. As a sort of anti-Gary Snyder, Jim Carroll most closely associated himself with the cityscape of New York and writes about urban conditions and situations. However, significant portions of his work also focus on eco-poetical and ecocritical concerns. In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty explains that “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Like many theories, there are multiple methods, but “All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (xix). Drawing from a variety of approaches, “Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (xix).

Texts by Carroll such as *Forced Entries* and other work reveal an uneasy and sometimes disturbing, but always complex, relationship with the natural environment. For example, “Tiny Tortures” recounts teenage Carroll’s performance piece in New York in the early 1970s (58). In the title essay of *Marmalade Me*, Jill Johnston identifies the venue as the Longview Country Club (7). Ostensibly, the piece is not about ecocritical concerns and is instead about art,

performance, poetry, audience reception, and critical (mis)interpretation. Carroll complains about poems “butchered en route from the poet’s mouth,” “the words dropping in front onto the liturgical red carpet, squirming in circles like fumigated bugs,” (the image of the bugs providing foreshadowing, prolepsis, and connective tissue to the later events of the narrative) (Carroll 58). He summarizes that he is “pretty much held captive, a prisoner of mumblings, poor phrasing” (59).

Explaining the context of the event, Carroll writes that “lately, they’ve also been inviting these ‘performance artists’ to do their acts. This is just another name for the same folks who did ‘Happenings’ in the sixties,” which he later identifies as “Conceptual” art (59, 63). Carroll explains that he tried this once and “the event called for about twenty painters, musicians and artists to each do a ‘piece’ no longer than three minutes” (60). On the morning of the event, Carroll wakes up disheveled and disordered from the preceding night. Unprepared for his appearance, Carroll brainstorms. While wiping vomit from his chin, he recounts that he “saw the answer: “a hearty-sized cockroach, trying in vain to scale the slick sides of the tub” (60). Carroll now has the foundation for his performance piece, which, in essence, will be a captive animal performance.

Here we note Carroll creating a tension between instrumental and intrinsic value. Greg Garrard defines instrumental value as “possessing value only in relation to human interests” (207). “Usually,” the interest—we might even say, ironically, the *nature* of the interest—is “narrowly economic” as it often is in animal performance. However, economics do not seem to play a part in Carroll’s interest as the currency circulating in his world is aesthetic capital based on somewhat arbitrary notions of artistic legitimacy and validity. Garrard defines intrinsic value

as “possessing value in its own right, without reference to human interests”¹ (207). Thus, the text opens up this division of values and Carroll consistently privileges the instrumental value of the roach.

This difference opens a rupture, hyperseparation, an “insistence upon radical separation of terms . . . which in fact may be interdependent,” between the categories of human and animal or human and non-human (207). Garrard points out that “such dualistic constructions are almost invariably hierarchical, so that one term is more highly valued than the other” (207).

Remembering that Garrard offers “male and female” as an example of hyperseparation, readers can see this hyperseparation reproduced again when Carroll refers to the roach as “he (or she . . . though I think it was a *bull* roach),” by which he means a male roach (61). The method he uses to make this determination this remains unknown. One is almost tempted to give Carroll some credit for not automatically assuming the roach is male. However, in the next sentence Carroll reduces the roach to an object by saying “*it* seemed to be holding up” (61; emphasis added).

Throughout the rest of the story, the narrator alternates between *he* and *it*.

After Carroll arrives at the event, he considers leaving before his performance and “justifying an escape because of my stage fright. My theory was no more than an inverted elitism” (62). These passages are ironic for several reasons. First, Carroll recognizes his own discomfort and desire to escape but not the roach’s possible discomfort or desire to escape. Next, he identifies his theory as an inverted elitism. He seems to think that this elitism is based on his ideas, theories, and definitions of art. However, we can identify a parallel elitism based on his

¹ Cockroaches play important roles in the ecosystem. Besides serving as food for various creatures, cockroach breakdown plant material that is indigestible to other lifeforms, and help replenish nitrogen to nourish plants. More relevant to the urban environment of New York City, cockroaches are also excellent consumers of garbage that would otherwise become uncollected refuse or take up space in landfills.

assumptions and constructions of a hierarchical framework in which humans are always already presumed superior to animals. This framework we may identify as anthropocentrism, “a system of beliefs and practices that favours humans over other organisms” (Garrard 206).

Carroll begins his performance piece and shakes the roach out of the bag. At first, the roach does not move and Carroll says that “if the little fucker had croaked on me I was up shit’s creek” (62). Again, this passage emphasizes that Carroll’s concern is for the instrumental value of the roach instead of the intrinsic value. Carroll says that “then to my great relief he flipped over and spun around as if the whole thing had been purposefully done for dramatic effect” (62). Once the roach begins to move, Carroll assaults him or her with combinations of blasts with Raid insecticide until the roach dies “just under the three-minute mark” (63). Carroll describes “the crowd, whose mood and gestures had suddenly shifted from that of hip supporters of the arts into crazed rednecks in the heat of a cockfight” (62-63). Apparently, then, the crowd and Carroll are equally compassionless.

After the roach dies, Carroll writes, “of course I felt compassion for the little vermin, but as far as the event went, things couldn’t have gone better (63). Clearly this is speciesism, “prejudice in favor of one’s own species” (Garrard 208). So Carroll extends a dash of token compassion to the deceased roach and then points out that the performance staged for Carroll and the other human onlookers went very well. As if to bolster his claim, he says, “the audience loved it” (63). Reviewers loved it too, as evidenced by local publications such as *The Village Voice* that say Carroll’s piece is commentary on “urban decay” and “a non-verbal demonstration on the horrors of Vietnam” (63). Carroll adds sarcastically, “I agree. All that was exactly what flashed through my head as I bagged the insect” and “there was a large dose of *negative capability* as well” (63).

Perhaps the intention of the piece is to expose how communities (over)interpret or create meaning based solely on context. After all, Carroll threw the piece together last minute and had no real intention informing it other than to fill his three minutes and was as surprised by the depth and positivity of the reviews as anyone else. Although Carroll quotes the ““a non-verbal demonstration on the horrors of Vietnam”” passage as an example of and a poke at critics finding meaning where none is meant, of imparting content where there is only vacuum, we can discern the connection between a nameless soldier and the cockroach, between the herbicide/defoliant Agent Orange and Raid if we find more of a closeness between the two than what Carroll identifies (63). Carroll concludes by writing, “fact is, the only point I was making is the point you get . . . then as now” (63). However, Carroll never explicitly states that point and leaves us to infer it. Presumably, the point is something about the critical absurdities of the artistic community and the ways in which they/we will locate meaning where is it unintended—as if intention, meaning, and interpretation are all identical. Carroll seems unaware that his own piece is, in a sense, a piece of art criticism criticizing art criticism—meta-criticism.

In any event, although Carroll steers us to and assumes we will discern his intended meaning, he does leave us to puzzle it out for ourselves. Logically, just as the crowd and reviewers misunderstand the intent of the piece, we can also deliberately misunderstand it and see it as piercing commentary on captive animal performance. Although eco-Marxists may focus on “systems of domination or exploitation of humans by other humans,” we also apply eco-Marxism to “Tiny Tortures” since the roach is a free source of labor dominated and exploited by Carroll (Garrard (31)).² Additionally, the piece has chronological complications and contradictions since Carroll identifies himself as “about seventeen,” *Forced Entries*’ subtitle is

² The same exploitative entertainment occurs in “A Day at the Races” with other insects.

The Downtown Diaries: 1971-1973, and Carroll himself was born in 1949, which places the text circa 1966. However, perhaps we can explain, if not excuse, Carroll's uninformed and incomplete sense of ecocritical concerns due to his immaturity.

In selected later work, Carroll elevates his use—it is still a *use*—of insectoid lifeforms. For example, the section “New Work 1989-1993” from his selected poems contains a poem titled “Praying Mantis.” Half a lifetime later, Carroll presents a deeper view of insects, in this case the titular praying mantis. Of the mantis, the narrator says, “it teaches me my true name” (269). Additionally, “It instructs me on the ways when need be to hide,” “It pulls the serpent from my ear,” and “it whispers, whispers, whispers a last word / What seems the last vapors of a long dream” (269). In comparing the act of whispering to “Like Baraka wrote, like James Brown sings,” the narrator anthropomorphizes the mantis who whispers, “please, please, please” (269). What the significance is, if any, that the two artists referenced by the poem are African American males the reader may determine. In any event, the insect becomes a sage, a teacher, operating at the high level of Amiri Baraka or James Brown.

Finally, “I Shot a Deer” published in 2002 reveals an even more mature Carroll reacting to a deer impaled on a fence and reluctantly but sensitively performing a mercy killing. The narrator says that “My girlfriend and I were spending the weekend at her house, on a back road in Connecticut, asleep in an upstairs room. It was about 6 A.M., just barely light and misty, when we heard the sound: a high-pitched, aberrant whining” (113/114). He wakes and reports that “All I could see from the window was two deer in the front yard” (113/114). He heads outside to find the source of the disturbance and says, “Now I could see what was causing the hideous sound, and it was dreadful” (113/114). He recalls that “There was a third, smaller deer impaled on the fence. Apparently, the mother and a sibling had jumped the fence, easily clearing

its four-foot height. The smallest tried and failed. It must have taken off too soon” (113/114). Carroll confronts the “dreadful” sight “in which the deer’s “landing drove the splintered thin pickets right through its belly and out the brown-and-white fur of its back” (113/114).

Judith, Carroll’s girlfriend, comes to the deer and “held its chin in one hand and caressed its head with the other” (113/114). Realizing nothing can be done to save the deer, she says, “we have to get my gun” (113/114). The narrator locates both the gun and single bullet left within it. Carroll hurries “over to the fence” and reports that the fawn’s “breathing was heavier now, labored, desperate” (113/114). He prepares to euthanize the deer and says that “As I raised the gun, its eyes locked with mine. Doe eyes: There was still a wet elegance in them, at once a rueful defiance and a desperate need for life. I saw my own reflection as well.” Garrard summarizes John Berger’s 1980 essay “Why Look at Animals?” which claims that when we look at animals, they may return our gaze, and in that moment we are aware of both likeness and difference” (152). Garrard points out that “TV wildlife,” for example, “is powerless to makes its gaze register at all against our imperial eye” (153). Thus, unlike the animals of books, films, and TV, this deer has the capability to gaze back. But what is this “wet elegance,” “this rueful defiance and a desperate need for life” that Carroll spies? Are these qualities located by Carroll or invented, imagined, placed by Carroll? In any event, Carroll “poked the muzzle against the short stiff hairs above the fawn's ear and, recalling Judith's gesture, put my other hand on its chin. So I was touching it gently as I pulled the trigger, and the weight of its head collapsed into my palm. I had killed my first deer.” We must give Carroll some credit. Whereas the earlier Carroll briefly noted the death of the roach, the later Carroll describes in-depth, perhaps even agonizes, over the condition and death of the deer and attempts, but perhaps does not succeed at, an ecomimetic response, a “direct, unmediated representation of nature” (Garrard 207).

When we look at the lines of thought running through all three works, “Tiny Tortures,” “Praying Mantis,” and “I Shot a Deer,” several provoking ideas emerge. First, there are parallels among all three works in regard to the concept of Disnification (also called Disneyfication or Disneyization), a term originated by Steve Baker, in which something is rendered childish or stupid. In short, consider the deer from “I Shot a Deer” as Bambi and the talking praying mantis, as a version of Jiminy Cricket the talking cricket, or Manny Wise the praying Mantis of *A Bug’s Life*. Also, Disney’s representation of roaches is complicated. Jimmy the Cockroach is a helpful pet in *Lilo & Stitch*; *Wall-E* has a roach named Hal named after Hal Roach, the film’s producer; there are the trio of cockroaches from *Oggy & the Cockroaches*; and, most notably, “Roach Motel” the 32nd episode of *The Lion King’s Timon and Pumbaa* ending with Timon and Pumbaa eating roaches. One must wonder how the audience’s reaction might have changed had Timon and Pumbaa feasted on the remains of Bambi’s mother.

Furthermore, in the wake of post-911 enhanced interrogation tactics, *torture* has become a word laden and abundant with meaning. Although the point of this paper is not the study of those particular practices, it is interesting to note that like animal performers, prisoners of war are also frequently kept in inhumane conditions and their treatment considered a necessary condition of their service to a higher function, in this case the performance of war. We recall the connections various reviews drew between Carroll’s “Tiny Tortures” performance and the predicament of soldiers caught in the Vietnam War. “Tiny Tortures” creates a false binary between the human and non-human world. Some people feel that injustices of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and Abu Gharib are irrelevant because the prisoners there have been rendered in the non-human field, no better than animals by the very fact of their detainment/confinement/imprisonment. Such a view follows fundamentalist Christian doctrine

and assumes that only humans have rights. Finally, what “Tiny Tortures” demonstrates is that while there are most definitely tortures, there are absolutely no tiny tortures.

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