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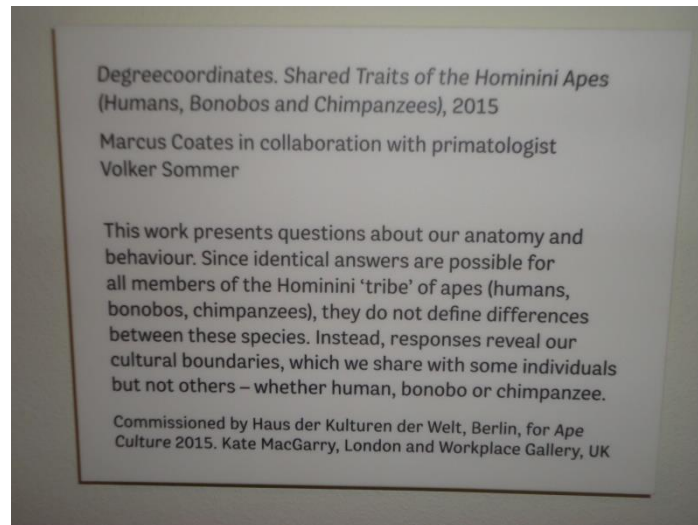
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On Becoming a Human Animal



In Abi Curtis's introductory words about YSJ staff and students' visit to the 'Making Nature' exhibition at the Wellcome Trust in March 2017 she explains that '[t]he exhibition asked us to reconsider our history of relating to animals, but also to think about what it means to be human'. It is the question raised by the latter phrase of this sentence which preoccupied me as I began to process the exhibit 'Degreecoordinates: Shared Traits of the Hominini Apes (Humans, Bonobos and Chimpanzees)', created by artist Marcus Coates and primatologist Volker Sommer in 2015.



Making Nature: How We See Animals, Creative Commons

Part One:

Displayed across the wall before the exhibit's entrance were a number of questions that could be answered positively by three groups of genetically connected mammals: humans, bonobos, and chimpanzees. As I read through the questions I felt my face tingle with heat as my brain, in kaleidoscope fashion, quickly re-calibrated, moving into a radically alternate groove as it re-conceived of itself as ANIMAL. In Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* the writers suggest that '[l]anguage is not life. It gives life orders. Life does not speak. It listens and waits' (1987, p. 89). As I write today, nearly two months after the event, these words help re-access the feelings I had as I stood in front of the exhibit. You see as I read through the questions my sense of identity, my sense of 'Liesl King-ness' (however inconclusive, partial or incoherent this might seem in any given moment) began to feel fuzzy, and I slid into the space that the heuristic invitation opened up – one that called me in through human language, but which insisted too that I leave it behind. The questions included the following:

Do you have a fear of strangers? *I thought back to when my two children were one and three, and I had regular fantasies about stabbing intruders with a kitchen knife should they dare to break into my quiet cave at night.*

Have you ever played ‘rough and tumble’ or ‘king of the mountain’? *My younger brother and I, visiting my Dad every weekend in Sacramento, would often wrestle furiously on the king size bed back in the spare room. When he was eight and I was ten we would clench one another in a satisfying sibling stranglehold, struggling to be the one who concluded the battle right ways up, braving the pain as arms were pinched and squeezed, backs pummeled, and legs attacked in happy warfare.*

Do you spend a lot of time socialising? *I DO. And I picture in my mind’s eye my chimpanzee relatives, grooming each other, plucking at parasites, stroking each other, warming up through hugs and caresses. Simultaneously, in bedrooms and offices, family members and friends are ‘liking’ profile pictures on Facebook, tweeting about the news, attaching love messages to the bottom of my photos on Instagram. WE ARE INTRINSICALLY SOCIAL, we humans, bonobos and chimps.*

Deleuze and Guattari have the following to say about ‘becoming-animal’ in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from humanity, if only for an instant, making one scrape at one’s bread like a rodent or giving one the yellow eyes of a feline? A fearsome involution calling us toward unheard-of becomings. These are not regressions, although fragments of regression, sequences of regression may enter in (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 280).

It strikes me that in responding to ‘Degreecoordinates’ I have answered a call ‘toward unheard-of becomings’. In my mind’s eye I play with the concept of chimpanzee, she who is like me but hanging out in a tree, like me but in regular physical contact with those she loves, like me but acting on impulse, without the imposition of (the same) cultural restrictions. While reading the questions I conjure murderous thoughts (knifing the intruder), instinctual, pleasurable memories (roughhousing with my brother), prohibited possibilities (stroking/grooming/cuddling my loved ones on an hourly basis). Many of the behaviours both the chimps and I might carry out are proscribed by my so-called ‘polite’ society. Deleuze and Guattari’s work suggests that it is not that we wish to become animal, but that we are stimulated by the attributes the animal has that we do not, or perhaps in this case, by what it can do that we cannot; at the heart of the creative becoming that occurs when we consider/rub up against the animal is desire: perhaps I desire to be more free – to express myself more physically, like my cousin the chimpanzee?

Ursula Le Guin, in her essay ‘A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be’ (1989) suggests that in order to counter western culture’s ‘big yang motorcycle trip’ (90), a direction she describes as ‘hot progress’, we should consider ‘moving sideways’, or in ‘reversal’ (95). Considering the questions that bring me into a creative sense-memory with my chimp and bonobo relatives is a step taken backwards (or forwards?); it is a kind of reversal; it is a move in a direction that somehow feels necessary, even urgently so, answering an as-yet unrequited longing in me for an alternative way of living and being.

hair bristle/stand on end are scared or aroused?	Do you form opportunistic coalitions?	Do you kiss?
are affectionate in contact?	Have you ever made someone bear the blame of others?	Do you have sex with more than one partner?
emotional?	Do you vary your sexual positions?	Do you suffer mental and physical pain?
use sponges?	Do you remember things from your past?	Do you have ten fingers :
get polio?	Do you eat insects?	Do you kiss with an oper
hate others?	Do you plan in cooperation with others?	Do you feel sympathy for
seek reassurance often?	Are your parenting techniques different from others?	Do you get ulcers or sore
do you recruit women as partners?	Do you get sexually excited?	Do you use your tongue when you kiss?
operate touchscreen device?	Do you use weapons?	Do cultural differences ca use you to separate from oth er and join different social grou
like colours?	Do you smile?	Are you tender?
have sex with members of your own species?	Have you bitten a penis off?	Are your legs webbed?

Part Two:

At this troubled, precarious juncture in human history I feel oddly nostalgic for and deeply interested in that which I can only imagine: a long-distant past prior to the Anthropocene where my ancestors, existing at a point on the grid somewhere between the great apes we once were and the homo-sapiens we are now, were born, gazed lovingly up into the eyes of their mothers, grew to sure-footed beauty, and swelled into an adulthood similar to my own. I visualise a folding together of two points in history, where present meets past and I am there as an early human, nursing my first-born baby in a cave, looking into her sweet small face, her eyes closed as she takes what she needs from me. She and I, my imaginary, long-dead, doppelganger Mother in spirit, shared sensations of peace, of slowness—of long, slow, still, full, time.

She, my imaginary Mother, answered yes to many more questions from ‘Degreecoordinates’ than I will ever answer. In my creative reconstruction she lived a physically active, emotionally expressive life. By contrast my mind is overactive with the process of analysis—around what just occurred and what next appears on my list. Can I not permit myself to live spontaneously for more time each day? But I live in the late-capital, technologically advanced west, in the year 2017... American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau said he ‘came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad’ (1993 (1849), p.8). My mind stretches to orderliness, which demands action, but it is called to quietness too. Like Thoreau’s, my thoughts turn to balance. Long stretches of three of the happiest years of my life were spent breastfeeding—not thinking, just admiring; not doing, just being.

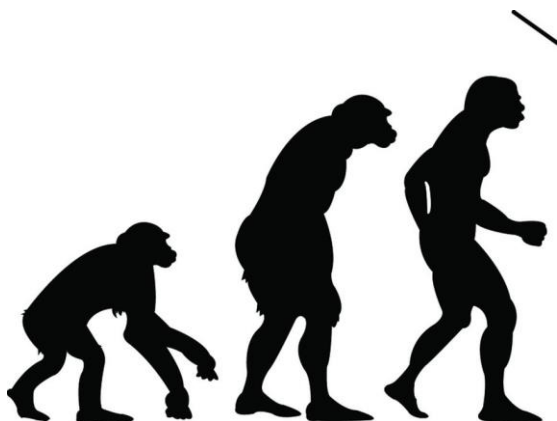
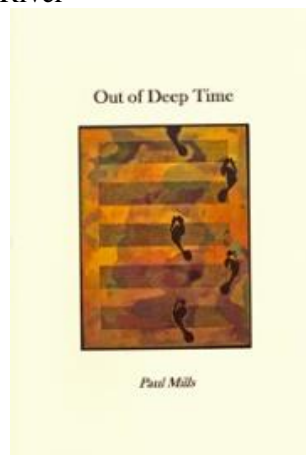


Image from Creative Commons/Bryan Wright

Poet Paul Mills reflects on ancient history through his collection *Out of Deep Time* (2016). In one poem, 'In the sky with diamonds', he takes his reader back 3.2 million years, to a period so remote my imagination can barely touch it. It finishes with the following stanza:

I'm flying home trying to locate her
austalopithecus not yet *habilis*
Tracking invisible points of shift
Like cello music on my cassette
Each passage of notes a slow legato
As we approach the glittering East River

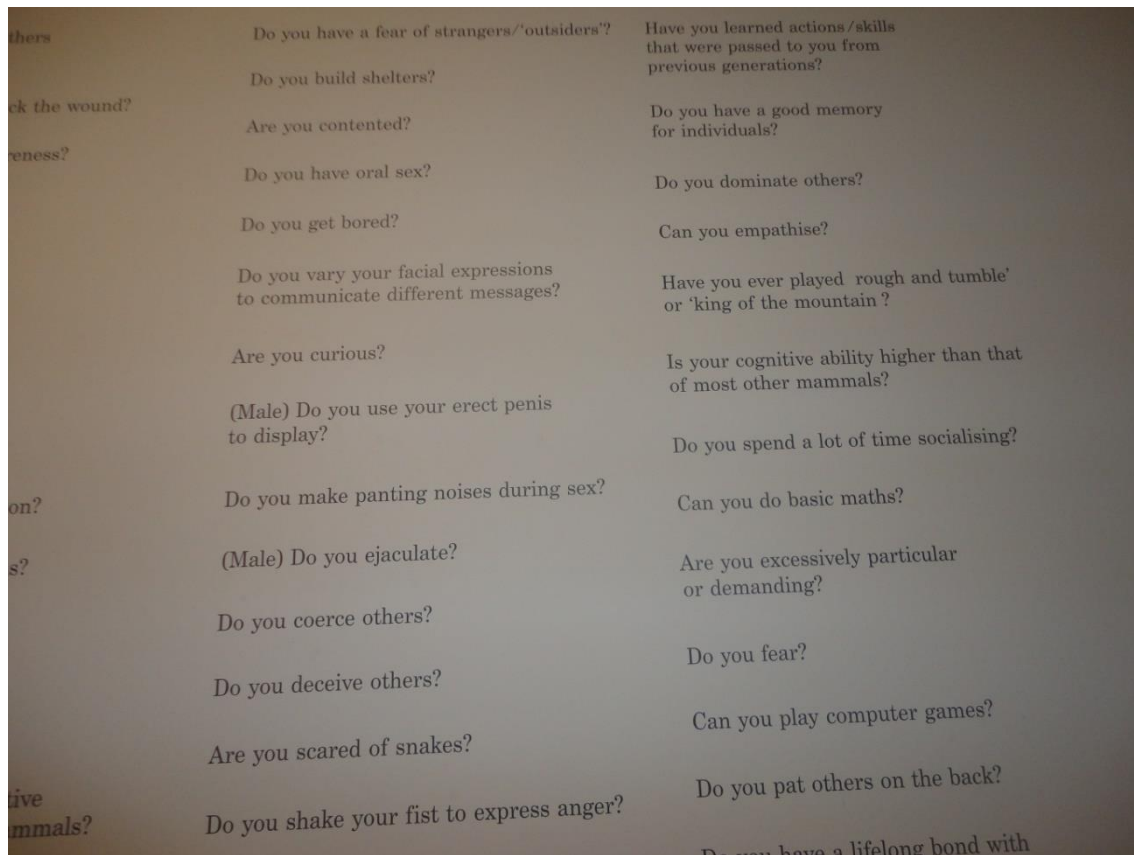


Becoming a Human Animal:

Reading Paul Mills' poem, I wonder about the tiny shifts in evolution that bridge the distance between me and my Paleolithic Mother, the same shifts which have perhaps frustrated communication between me and my cousin, the chimpanzee (who even as I write is resting in the jungle, victorious after a wrestling match with her brother!). These changes, as I reflect on the exhibition, as well as on the fragments of texts it inspired me to sew together, can be marked as the exhibit's title suggests by coordinates on a vast and interconnected grid across Earth-time. If I move in any direction to the side or just behind me, I can see a reflection of an earlier version of my present self: one perhaps less knowing, but undoubtedly more wise.



Image: Irish Wildcat / [Creative Commons](#)



Photographed section of 'Degreecoordinates', by Marcus Coates and Volker Sommer, taken at The Wellcome Trust's 'Making Nature' exhibit, March 2017.

Liesl King 26/5/17

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Thoreau, Henry David. *Civil Disobedience and other Essays*. New York: Dover, 1993.