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Interspecies care and aging in a gorilla 2.0 world

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ABSTRACT

Two key figures analyzed in Donna Haraway's monograph, *Primate Visions: Gender Race and Nature in The World of Modern Science* (1989) warrant further analysis in the emerging cyber politics of environmental conservation. These figures are Koko, a female lowland gorilla born in the San Francisco Zoo and her companion Dr. Francine (Penny) Patterson, a developmental psychologist who taught Koko how to communicate with a modified form of American Sign Language (ASL). Nine years after Haraway's initial analysis, Koko and Patterson became early examples of conservation-related Web 2.0 engagement with their unprecedented inter-species America Online chat room encounter with 7811 member participants. Today, Koko has a Twitter account (@kokotweets), a Facebook page, a YouTube channel and a website where users watch videos of Koko celebrating birthdays and donate to 'distant' conservation projects. One project site is a gorilla reserve in Cameroon and another is a former pineapple plantation turned private nature preserve in Maui, Hawai'i. Inspired by recent analytical work in animal geographies and feminist political ecology, this article explores complex landscapes of caring, aging and conservation in a time of proliferating social media engagement from colonized sites of enduring privilege. The article argues that new media adds layers of violence, disciplinary techniques and co-dependence to the aging bodies, caring practices and landscapes that Koko, Patterson and others inhabit in California and in the proposed physical spaces of a repurposed pineapple field in Maui.

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1. Introduction: (Re)Connecting with Koko and Penny

The story of Dr. Francine (Penny) Patterson and her lowland gorilla companion Koko, initially gained widespread public attention via National Geographic magazine and documentary films (National Geographic, 1998; Schroeder, 1978). Koko was born in the San Francisco Zoo (SFZ) on July 4th, 1971. While researching primate communication as a graduate student in her mid-twenties at Stanford University, Patterson met young Koko in 1972. Patterson's doctoral research involved building an American Sign Language (ASL) vocabulary of about 250 words with Koko, which transitioned into a longitudinal encounter that intimately intertwined their lives. During the project, Patterson shifted Koko's spaces of captivity in phases, from the more publicly visible designated gorilla area of the SFZ to a trailer on the zoo grounds, to a research compound at Stanford University (TGF, 2016b). In order to sustain her relationship and her work with Koko, Patterson established The Gorilla Foundation (TGF) with her partner Dr. Ronald Cohn and Barbara Hiller in 1976: the SFZ had demanded that Patterson return Koko to the zoo or pay them US\$12,500. Patterson managed to purchase Koko and a male gorilla companion, Michael,

in 1977 and Patterson and TGF eventually received grants from National Geographic Society and the Rolex Awards for Enterprise to support later phases of their research and to sustain the day-to-day lives of Koko, Michael, Patterson, Cohn and others. They moved Koko's trailer from Stanford University to a forested area in Woodside, California in 1979 and finished construction of a 676 ft² "outdoor play yard" and 250 ft² "indoor facility addition" in 1981 (TGF, 2016b). The foundation's research program and close engagement with mass media through Cohn's video recordings launched Koko and Patterson into the public eye as an inter-species celebrity duo.

In addition to their engagements with mass media, Koko and Patterson became unprecedented figures in the historical development of what Bram Büscher and Jim Igoe (2013) refer to as "nature 2.0" practices, in which online users consume and co-create nature conservation narratives and actions through new web-based and social media (see also Büscher et al., 2014; Büscher, 2016). Koko and Patterson participated in the first known interspecies online chat hosted by America Online (later AOL Inc.) on April 27th, 1998.¹ This event marked the beginning of what would become

¹ A chat room moderator shared questions from America Online member participants with Patterson, who repeated the questions aloud while signing to Koko, who in turn responded using ASL signing. Patterson shared Koko's responses with the moderator who posted them for participants in the chat room.

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Koko's enduring social media connection with a broader online public long after National Geographic magazines and VHS products gathered dust in homes and libraries. By the time of Koko's second chat room event in 2000, she had a website with instructions for making donations to TGF. Today, Koko has a twitter account (@kokotweets), a Facebook page (Koko & The Gorilla Foundation), a YouTube channel (kokoflix) and a website (www.koko.org) where users watch videos of Koko and Patterson celebrating birthdays, sign up for a Capital One Koko credit card or donate to distant conservation projects.

The 'mass media' of documentaries and National Geographic magazine were initially my only ways of connecting with Koko's story. I did not have the privilege of speaking in person with Koko and Penny, as their celebrity and a closely guarded community of experts ensured and secured their 'private' lives in Woodside, California behind both physical and legal walls. As a young teenager aware of America Online chat rooms in the late 1990s, I was forbidden from exploring these virtual worlds by my protective older family members, who warned of potential violent encounters with lurking predators in these spaces. But I encountered Koko through a much more critical lens later during my graduate studies when reading Donna Haraway's monograph *'Primate Visions: gender, race, and nature in the world of modern science'* (1989). Haraway examined Cold War era primatology and corporate oil-funded media productions made to educate the American public and others about nature, culture, race and coloniality. She paid particular attention to the role of white women scientists such as Dian Fossey, Jane Goodall and Francine (Penny) Patterson in co-producing "natureculture" narratives (1989, 152):

Yet, whiteness must be attended to, if the re-entry of the west into Africa at the moment of decolonization is to be narrated. It is western, scientific, European, and Euro-American "generic" man that is really at issue here, not as he incorporates (white) woman, but as he is represented by her. She is his surrogate. It is he who has been excluded from "nature" by both history and a Greek-Judeo Christian myth system; and more immediately, he is being thrown out of the garden by decolonization and perhaps off the planet by its destruction in ecological devastation and nuclear holocaust. It is time to call in the blond and female mediator to negotiate the discourses of exterminism and extinction in space and the jungle. The animals are (colored) surrogates for all who have been colonized in the name of nature and whose judgment can no longer be repressed.

For Haraway (1989, 141), Koko at the time represented a "species of cyborg, whose communication modalities can be translated and re-synthesized to cross species and machine-organism barriers" while Haraway (1989, 150) saw Patterson as a "National Geographic woman... multiply typed as a scientist... presented to an urban TV audience... Such a scientist does not hold the camera; she is still the one photographed for millions to view." By focusing this article on TGF's engagement with new media and Patterson's planned retirement with Koko in Maui, Hawai'i, I argue that the themes of whiteness and coloniality persist into a post-Cold War context in which Patterson renders Maui as a logical and safe substitute for "Africa," and as an ideal alternative to the noisy, cold and tainted northern California hills.

After reading Haraway's initial analysis of Koko and Patterson, I soon disconnected with their story in order to focus my research efforts on forest politics in Mozambique. Like many consumers of celebrity conservation media, I assumed that Koko had eventually died or succumbed to physical and psychological distress from enduring captivity in the aftermath of many finite research projects. While "surplus" chimpanzees used in "US biomedical and military research" were sent to "retire" in federally-funded sanctuaries after the signing of the Chimpanzee Health, Improvement,

Maintenance, and Protection (CHIMP) Act in 2000, the smaller numbers of primates used in language experiments in the 1970s and 1980s did not receive this broader influx of sanctioned retirement funding (Hua and Ahuja, 2013, 619). Writing about the troubling fates of different apes in primate language experiments—a litany of physical and psychological traumas, displacements and deaths—science writer Eugene Linden (1986) noted that Koko's situation was unique because of the enduring relationship between Koko and Patterson, yet it was also troubling due to Koko's continued captivity. Koko's life mixes relative privilege with precarity. Regarding Koko's living space and relationship with Patterson, Linden (1986, 116) argued:

Of all the apes involved in language studies whom I have encountered over the years, Koko... has suffered the fewest dislocations... Today she lives in the same trailer in which she spent her infancy, although it has moved from San Francisco to Stanford University to Woodside, California... And since the first year of her life, she has had daily contact with Penny Patterson. However, despite this continuity, all is not rosy for Koko. To be sure, Penny Patterson is utterly dedicated to Koko, and I cannot imagine circumstances in which Penny would do anything other than devote all her energies ensuring Koko's well-being. Nevertheless, over the years Penny and her partner Ron Cohen [sic] have gradually alienated themselves from virtually every institution and person that might help them... her future is threatened, not by the prospect of abandonment but rather by the very intensity of Penny's devotion.

Linden (1986, 127) claimed that part of that "intensity" involved expecting assistants and interns to devote their caregiving and data-making labors for little pay and little shared reward: "either consciously or unconsciously Penny and Ron did not seem to want others to develop strong relationships with the gorillas." Potential relationships among other gorillas were also likely curtailed by the relationship between Patterson and Koko.

What kinds of relationships and engagements sustain Koko, Patterson, Cohn and others into old age? Koko recently celebrated her forty-fourth birthday and she continues to live in a newly refurbished facility in California where she maintains an expanded online presence. What kinds of retirement landscapes do Koko and Patterson envision and promote in a context of rapidly changing new media possibilities? In this article, I draw from recent critical scholarship in animal studies (Collard, 2013; Gillespie and Collard, 2015; Haraway, 2003, 2008; Hua and Ahuja, 2013; Parreñas, 2012; Van Dooren, 2014) with research on conservation and new media (Büscher and Igoe, 2013; Büscher, 2014, 2016) to 'reconnect' virtually with Koko and Patterson and to highlight changes in Haraway's own thinking about interspecies relating while aging. Haraway's reflections on aging female bodies inspires curiosity about the organisms within and shaped by aging bodies, while work by scholars such as Joni Seager (2003), Max Liboiron (2013) and S. Lochlann Jain (2013) help to illustrate a wider awareness by feminist/queer scientists of the ubiquity of toxins in our living and working spaces that is coincidental with rising rates of breast and other cancers among family, friends and colleagues.

I examine the discourses of multi-species caring and aging and the landscapes that Patterson and Koko work to transform. My methods involved an extensive and inductive document analysis of TGF's semi-annual newsletter, *Gorilla* (from 1985 through 2007), the foundation's website (2013 and 2015 versions), Facebook posts and Twitter tweets (from their initiation in 2009 and including postings and tweets still available in March 2013 and again in May 2015) as well as videos posted on YouTube, TGF's tax filings and other public cadastral records held by the County of Maui, Hawai'i, in the United States. After searching for emergent

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