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Derrida à l'œuvre: Deconstruction at Large



### Derrida and the Limit of the Human/non-Human Other in African Indigenous Beliefs

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## **Derrida and the Limit of the Human/non-Human Other in African Indigenous Beliefs**

Georgia Mandelou

### **Abstract**

The article examines the ways African indigenous ideologies, belief systems, and mythologies, as these are expressed in native art and storytelling, challenge dominant frames of conceptualizing and perceiving the human and rearticulate the being-with with the non-human Other, through Derrida's limitrophic understanding of the dividing line between human and animal. Derrida's pliable neologism of *limitrophy* expresses the disobedience towards the rigidly drawn limits between the human and the non-human Other. The article discusses the African indigenous beliefs of *ubuntu* and *ukama* and their formulation of human/animal connections in conjunction with the Derridean limitrophic approach to the division between human/non-human Other. It then proceeds to consider the manifestation of these beliefs in indigenous art and storytelling of the San peoples of southern Africa, discussing the ties of affinity between Derrida's reflections on the limits of the animal/human binary in Western thought as these are expressed in his intellectual ruminations on the nature of the division between the beast and the sovereign, and the cultural expressions of the San that manifest the animal/human ontological convergence.

### **Introduction: Derrida, *Limitrophy*, and Indigenous African Thought**

In the light of the reconfiguration of the human as the "rational, political subject, Man" as this was consolidated during the epistemic shift that took place

during the Renaissance, Sylvia Wynter identified a delinking of knowledge of the physical cosmos from “the adaptive, order-maintaining terms” (313). This determined the dissociation of a view of the world at large from those socio-genic frameworks of the indigenous, native and other oppressed and marginalised groups that generated the knowledge and practices that contributed to their endurance, resilience, and transformation. In their place, the pervasive framework of determining rational and irrational nature, as this was developed in the West and subsequently imposed outside its borders, was “mapped onto a projected Chain of Being of organic forms of life, organized about a line drawn between, on the one hand, divinely created-to-be-rational humans, and on the other, no less divinely created-to-be-irrational animals...” (313). The broader category of the animal came to stand for everything that was perceived as pertaining to the exterior of this archetype of the enlightened Man that was based on the Judaeo-Christian Western conception of the human. This metaphysical formation of the ontological differentiation between human/non-human, disseminated and forcefully prescribed through years of colonial occupation, land expropriation, and widespread indigenous epistemicide, evolved into a ubiquitous norm and established the animal as “the site of an originary difference,” creating a prevalent conceptual schema where “[t]he very difference of life itself appears to open up across the divide of human and animal being” (Lippit 102). This seemingly rigid limit between human and the non-human Other has been repeatedly challenged in Derrida’s oeuvre. Indeed, he critiques the unquestionably accepted “oppositional limits between what is called nature and culture, nature/law, *physis/nomos*, God, man, and animal or concerning what is ‘proper to man’” (*Beast* 15). For Derrida, the deconstruction of oppositional limits is the basis for a nuanced examination of points of convergence and divergence that have the potential to redefine their structural foundations of thought and rearticulate long-established conventions. *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (2008), the completed text of his ten-hour address to the 1997 Crispy conference titled “The Autobiographical Animal,” constitutes another testament to his commitment to meticulously unravelling the cautiously woven semantic threads of dominant discourses as these are often expressed in prominent philosophical discussions. During the seminar, he delves into an extended, insightful investigation that questions the rigid limits drawn between human and all other species that, as he argues, remain trapped to the restrictive, and therefore oversimplified in its reductionism, category of the animal. This extended examination of the conjectural distinction between the human and the non-human animal as this unfolds in the works of prominent thinkers like Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan, and

Levinas, institutes a reconceptualization of the ways one's humanness is evaluated.

Derrida's reflections on how one is to question what is considered as proper to man, and how to apprehend oneself in connection to and in being-with the other-than-human, also constitute a critical consideration of the ways the contrived superiority of the human-self over the inferior animal/Other left its mark in the form of perpetually deteriorating ecosystems, species facing ongoing extinction, and ever-disenfranchised native populations. As a case in point, African countries have for years borne the colonial and neocolonial apparatuses' arbitrary power in misrepresenting their diverse indigenous populations as being in-lack-of what consolidates the human, and having their belief and knowledge systems, and sociopolitical structures disregarded or obliterated in the process of a coerced surrender to the forces of what asserted itself as civilized.

The question of the human approached in light of the exterior to an arbitrary construction of humanness, then, is a double layered intellectual endeavour, in the sense that it extends to both what is literally and figuratively perceived as the animal/Other. In understanding the animal as a sentient organism that feeds on organic matter, has a sensory perception of the world, and lives alongside the human without it being human itself, the vertical relationship of human and the other-than-human animal maintained by imperial ideologies of Western expansionism, has led to the rampant exploitation and extraction practices that have been plundering the continent in the name of economic profit, and has caused an extensive ecological destruction that includes the annihilation of entire ecosystems, species and indigenous flora and fauna. This is associated then to the second level which considers the animal figuratively as a representational sign of the marginalized minorities, colonized and native peoples that were Othered, branded inferior, and then brutally exploited in targeting the utter erasure of their human condition. The association between racial otherness and its subjection to an animalization that justifies nationalist agendas of control, disenfranchisement, or extermination has been asserted by postcolonial thinkers. Aimé Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism* affirms that "the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal," while Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* declares that "[the] white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast" (41; 131). As Maneesha Deckha maintains, any retrospection in the history of colonization will soon determine how "reified notions of race and outsider subjects were part of national projects to shape human nature and who counted as



human,” how “[as] such, concepts of race and culture depended on ideas about animality and humanity” (538). In Africa, in particular, as Deckha states, “colonial control grew out of a reliance on an animal-human spectrum” as “Black Africans were animalized through comparisons with apes and monkeys (Price and Shildrick 1999,23) or situated as ‘pests’ to be exterminated (Mavhunga 2011)” (539).

This eco-ontological destruction that arises from the rigid limits between human as self, and animal as other or other as animal, accentuates the need to excavate those modes of thinking and being-with that promote a relational rather than a hierarchical understanding of the world around us. The urgency of the act of unearthing what has been repressed has been accentuated by Mina Karavanta, who recognizes in Wynter’s ceremony<sup>1</sup> a call for an “excavation of other ontologies and philosophies of being” that ultimately “reveal other cosmogenic and sociogenic codes of the human, counter the structured and performed oppositions, and, hence, symptomatically represent the shared ground of the epistemologies and ontologies of all humans” (158). Engaging with this intellectual trajectory, I intend to explore how African indigenous ideologies, belief systems, and mythologies, as these are expressed in native art and storytelling, challenge dominant frames of conceptualizing and perceiving the human, and rearticulate the being-with with the non-human Other. In the long history of capitalism and (neo)colonial occupation, as Karavanta affirms, “the ontological and political frames of the human become tentative and even shatter at the moment when the humans that constitute the non-sovereign bodies and have been represented as beasts, animals, and biologically inferior humans return as persevering and ontologically and politically developing beings” (164). Considering Derrida’s determination to dismantle any and every set of beliefs that demands to be established as dogma, and his commitment to challenge the rigidity of the limit between human/animal, I believe that exploring African indigenous beliefs and their formulation of human/animal connections in tandem with his intricate deliberations will further contribute to the deflation of anthropocentric notions of human superiority as commended by colonial ideologies.

In the 2020 publication *Derrida and Africa: Jacques Derrida as a Figure of African Thought*, the editor Grant Farred, states that it comes as no surprise that, although never extensively discussing the tumultuous and diverse sociopolitical conditions that shaped the course of the continent’s nation-states, especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jacques Derrida was a philosopher of the postcolonial long before the term “gained either currency...or its current conceptual denotations” (xiii). Derrida’s deconstruction

as a method of philosophical consideration challenges, questions, and often undermines fundamental theoretical distinctions in Western philosophy, thus accentuating their arbitrary nature and destabilizing their dominance to the detriment of philosophies and knowledge systems that were produced outside the “civilized” world of the West. Indeed, in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, he asserts that the deconstruction that he strives to achieve is in fact one to “promote itself in the name of another history, another concept of history, and of the history *of* the human as well as that of reason. An immense history, a macro- and microhistory” (*Animal*, 105). For Derrida, “the simplisticness, misunderstanding, and violent disavowal” of the violence against both animals and dehumanized humans seem like “betrayals of repressed human possibilities, of other powers of reason, of a more comprehensive logic of argument, of a more demanding responsibility concerning the power of questioning and response, concerning science as well, and, for example—but this is only an example—as regards the most open and critical forms of zoological or ethological knowledge” (105). His deconstructive method opts to offer a more nuanced insight into the elaborate workings of history and its diverse, expanding, overlapping, and intertwined extensions that encompass the oppressed, the obscure, and the seemingly contrasting elements of an ontological otherwise. This includes the confrontation with the human/animal binary which is reduced to the one-dimensional understanding of a rift by virtue of the fact that, in Nicole Anderson’s words, “[t]he human has been conceived as the potential acquisition of ipseity, and the animal as that which lacks ipseity” (29).

Derrida’s pliable neologism of *limitrophy*, expresses the disobedience towards the rigidly drawn limits between the human and the non-human Other; while not contending the existence of a border in the oppositional philosophical understanding of human and animal, the term underlines its porous nature and complexity and the intermediate implications in the contact between self and that one brands as the animal/Other. Limitrophy, for Derrida, allows for a semantic overlap in the sense that it permits both a broad and an exact sense of what is contiguous to the limit and “what feeds, is fed, is cared for, raised, and trained, what is cultivated on the edges of a limit” (*Animal*, 29). If the limit between humans and animals has been defined and is anchored in scientific, philosophical, and analytical principals, its existence can be reconstellated, examined, questioned, and complicated. It is not a rigid border that separates what is self and what is exterior to self, but a porous line that entails that which it divides and all else that grows in both its edges. As Derrida asserts:

The discussion is worth undertaking once it is a matter of determining the number, form, sense, or structure, the foliated consistency, of this abyssal limit, these edges, this plural and repeatedly folded frontier. The discussion becomes interesting once, instead of asking whether or not there is a limit that produces a discontinuity, one attempts to think what a limit becomes once it is abyssal, once the frontier no longer forms a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line; once, as a result, it can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible (30-31).

This limitrophic understanding of the dividing line between human and animal establishes a basis for constant negotiations between what constitutes the self and what the Other, and how in the contact between one's own understanding of humanness, and what one considers the animal/Other, there is a merging that generates a space of interrelatedness, a formation of interlaced links that destabilizes and complicates the separation. Derridean thought and the limitrophic understanding of this division, thus, offers a space for the re-evaluation of animal/human contacts. It also calls into question imperial ideologies that place *Anthropos* at the centre of the known universe. As Makoto Katsumori asserts, "a critical engagement with humanist metaphysics was from the outset an integral part of Derridean deconstruction," as, "[in] Derrida's view, the Western philosophical tradition—stretching from Aristotle through Descartes to Heidegger and Levinas, among others—has generally set 'a simple and oppositional limit between Man and the Animal' (60; 61). Western anthropocentrism and its rigid limits sharply contrast with various indigenous ideologies that were marginalized and regarded as inferior during the periods of colonial and neocolonial expansion.

Considering the above as my broader theoretical frame of reference, in the sections that follow I engage a closer reading of this limitrophic approach to the division between human/non-human Other as manifested in Derrida's oeuvre, in relation to African indigenous ideologies and mythologies. Limitrophy, as I understand it, promotes a consideration of self/Other, animal/human as more than just singular entities that cohabit the same space, either harmoniously or not. It instead offers the ground for a reconsideration of the boundaries as porous, and thus urges for a relatedness that encounters the very limits of humanness, animality, otherness only to confront and expand them. I argue that the African philosophies of *ubuntu* and *ukama* resonate with Derrida's limitrophic understanding not only in their conception of the relations among humans, animal species, and the natural world, but also in their bending and blending of the limits between human/non-human. The first section offers an examination of *ubuntu* and *ukama* as concepts of

indigenous thought in conjunction with Derrida's reflexions. In this section I delve into their semantic, cultural, and social connotations, and the imperative and complex philosophical debate on their potential as concepts that provide a mental framework for the re-evaluation of animal ethics and the reconsideration of the world outside anthropocentric narratives. The second section explores the manifestation of these beliefs in indigenous art and storytelling. More specifically, I examine stories and mythologies of the San peoples of southern Africa grounding my analysis on Michael Wessels' study of the 1873 Orpen-Qing text. It is not my intent for this article to offer an exhaustive account or a comprehensive review of traditional African belief systems, but to accentuate the need to unearth those modes of consolidating the human in being-with with the Other-than human while creating a space for the consideration of Derrida's thought outside its traditional Western-centric context. By establishing a conceptual rearticulation of Derridean deconstruction, I undertake the task of disengaging his thought of its typical frame of reference and of engaging in reconfiguring the human beyond the framework of colonial modernity.

### **Derrida and the African Beliefs of *Ubuntu* and *Ukama***

The African ethical beliefs of *ubuntu* and *ukama* attempt to question the anthropocentrism-ecocentrism division, converging, thus, with Derrida's impression of the limit not as an indivisible line but as "more than one internally divided line" described by its heterogeneous nature and metamorphosizing attitude (Derrida, *Animal* 31). In view of the unprecedented rate of ecological destruction in the time of the Anthropocene, there has been a resurgence of interest in excavating traditional indigenous belief systems and concepts that may help reassess the relationship between humans and nature, soil, animal. Dissecting these terms with a singular purpose of forging one to constitute the foundation of a novel approach towards human/non-human relations is to essentialize the complexity of cross-species connections and the ways these have been incorporated in indigenous traditions, and to disregard the obliterating effects of years of colonial epistemicide, pertaining to the annihilation of indigenous knowledge systems in the name of an unremitting epistemic output based on the supposedly unequivocal superiority of Western thought. The outcome would be, at best, reductive. As Evan Mwangi has stated, "contemporary ecological writing tends either to celebrate the flora and fauna of the Global South while demonizing its human residents or to uncritically idealize 'natives' as perfect environmentalists" (3). My hope is for this paper to escape this

twofold trap, offering, instead, a discussion about the possibility of drawing attention to these metaphysical constructs that nod towards certain ideas or ideals that are essential in developing a new conceptual vocabulary during the struggle of establishing the imaginaries and vocabularies that will subtend a just and sustainable planet to come. My reading of Derrida's limitrophic approach to cross-species connections alongside *ubuntu* and *ukama* attempts to explore an emerging philosophy of being-with, which calls into question dogmatic discourses of human supremacy.

Age-old African belief systems were for the most part established on intricate collective networks that went beyond the centrality of human species. Achille Mbembe reads in indigenous traditions' quest for understanding human existence the imperative to associate it with the encounter of the self through what presents oneself as other, in flesh and spirit (28). This contrasts what Derrida understands in Western philosophic thought as "a profound anthropocentrism and humanism" that fails to perceive the significance of self-perception through the figure of the non-human Other (*Animal* 113). For to think of oneself from the perspective of the Other is not to offer them priority over human but to think of one's humanness "from the perspective of an animal question and request, of an audible or silent appeal that calls within us outside of us, from the most far away, before us after us, preceding and pursuing us in an unavoidable way" (Ibid.). This thinking beyond the borders of human-self permits an understanding of interconnectedness that takes root in the pliable limits that separate self and that which exists outside. The "heterogeneous multiplicity of the living" and non-living, organic and inorganic, life and death, that exist beyond the "*so-called*" human, accentuate the interplay of relations between different forms of existence and undermine attempts to draw rigid dividing lines between them, leaving no "room for any simple exteriority of one term with respect to another" (Ibid. 31). In this sense, Derrida's exploration of the human in relation to living and non-living organizations that dwell outside the porous limits of self is evocative of Mbembe's reading of indigenous traditions as locating identity in the process of "co-composition, of opening onto the over-there of another flesh, of reciprocity between multiple fleshs and their multiple names and places" (Mbembe 28).

The permeability of the borders between human and non-human existences is fundamental to diverse African belief systems, including the philosophical concepts of *ubuntu* and *ukama*. *Ubuntu* is a term originating from the Nguni language, a linguistic cultural group made up of Bantu ethnic groups from central Africa that encapsulates notions of a shared humanity, or humanness (Horsthemke 3), while *ukama* "is a moral belief among the Shona

of Zimbabwe,” that indicates a consideration of the surrounding world “in terms of relatedness” (Chimakonam 14). Although closely related, the two terms are not interchangeable but have unique individual characteristics, distinct etymological origins, and socio-historical backgrounds, while sharing a common ground that is rooted in the understanding of self in relation to living and non-living Others. The nature of their connection has not been thoroughly explored, with Munamoto Chemhuru, for example, maintaining that *ukama* has been widely ignored as peripheral to African ethics of community and interrelatedness while it should be considered the ground on which *ubuntu* is based (254). Nonetheless, reading *ubuntu* and *ukama* through a Derridean understanding of the permeability of the limits that divide human and non-human Other, holds further implications in destabilizing a structural understanding of the natural world that has led to rampant exploitation and destruction of indigenous ecosystems, ideologies, and knowledge systems. Derrida’s problematization of the limit between human and animal based on a deconstruction of what is proper to human nature, and what differentiates the political man from the animal/beast offers an analytical framework that permits the re-examination and rearticulation of human/animal entanglements and their ramifications.

The worldview of *ubuntu* is articulated by the Nguni expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* which translates as “a person is a person through other persons,” or, “I am because you are, you are because we are,” with the latter translation reducing the stress on personhood which has been critically examined, as later discussed (Chimakonam 11; Mwangi 31). The word involves the ideas of a shared humanity, a community of interdependence and unity, and underlines the individual’s connection with the world around them, both natural and spiritual. According to Jonathan Chimakonam, “[w]hen the Bantu cultures of central, eastern and southern Africa say of someone that they do not have ubuntu, they mean that the individual lacks a sense of ‘we’ or collective goodwill or solidarity” (17). If this communal “we” encompasses the other-than-human world, however, has been the point of scholarly contention. *Ubuntu* has been accused of not being able to transcend anthropocentric notions, evident in the connections it delineates between human, nonhuman animal, and nature. The argument has mostly been sustained by Kai Horsthemke, who vigorously makes a case against idealizing *ubuntu* as a philosophy where a new animal ethics may be anchored. In the translation “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am,” Horsthemke reads the interdependence amongst human beings instead of a reciprocal connection with the nonhuman world (82). For Horsthemke, the bonds formed between humans and nonhumans

are grounded exclusively on human benefit and thus are not concentrated on a mutual give and take, intended to achieve collective prosperity. “The prime and direct beneficiaries of such a relationship or ‘respect’ must be human beings, whether as agents or recipients,” Horsthemke states, and thus, “ubuntu is anthropocentric, as is the slogan *batho pele*— ‘people first’” (82). The argument has been both sustained and questioned by scholars like Elisa Galgut (2017), who seems more sympathetic towards Horsthemke’s reluctance to accept core philosophical ideas in Africa as non-anthropocentric, and Thaddeus Metz (2017) and Edwin Etieyibo (2017), who support the potential of African metaphysical worldviews to surpass anthropocentric ideals and provide fertile ground for a horizontal understanding of human/non-human connections. For Mwangi, as well, *ubuntu* “considers the shared experiences of various marginalized groups in ways that empower humans as well as animals, marking a posthuman ethics that sees the world as having a complexity beyond anthropocentric interests” (31). Linguistically, according to Mogobe Ramose, “Ubu- as the generalized understanding of be-ing may be said to be distinctly ontological. Whereas -ntu as the nodal point at which be-ing assumes concrete form or a form of being in the process of continual unfoldment may be said to be distinctly epistemological” (231). Several scholars have looked at *ubuntu* as an alternative theoretical resource to overrule and replace hierarchical notions of human dominance and the colonial extractive policies they have generated and continue to harbour. As Mwangi points out, Rosi Braidotti “includes ubuntu alongside Édouard Glissant’s poetics of relations, Paul Gilroy’s planetary cosmopolitanism, Avtar Brah’s diasporic ethics, Homi Bhabha’s subaltern secularism, and Vandana Shiva’s antiglobal neohumanism among the concepts we could employ to salvage the study of humanities in the West” (31). *Ubuntu* thus has both ontological significance and epistemological merit as the root of African ethics. If communitarianism is the corner stone of African knowledge systems, then *ubuntu* is the notion that encompasses these shared bonds.

Much like *ubuntu*, the Shona concept *ukama* understands personhood in relation to not just other people, both alive and in spiritual form, but also to all living and non-living things that transpire in a natural environment, and it expresses a relational understanding of life that does not necessarily abide by anthropocentric views that sustain divisive discourses. Although in the discourse of African relational ethics *ukama* mostly refers to communal links between human beings, most African philosophers see the concept as one that goes beyond species-specific bonds but extends to relationships formed with non-human animals and the world beyond human understanding of self (Chemhuru 255). Munyaradzi Felix Murove’s etymological interpretation of

the word reinforces but also complicates this understanding, as he understands *ukama* as an adjective, with “u-” functioning as a prefix and “-kama” as a stem that means “to milk a cow or goat” (Quoted by Chemhuru, 255). While milking in Shona indicates a close bond of affection, attempting thus relational connections, it also insinuates a relationship of self-interest that is based on an anthropocentric understanding of human beings exploiting an animal for personal profit (255). This is where Horsthemke grounds the argument that *ukama*, although closer to denoting a human/non-human non-hierarchical relationship and constituting a concept with a much wider consideration of the relationships formed between self and cosmos, it still remains attached to the self as the centre of all links with what remains exterior and thus is not properly established as an African metaphysical understanding of humans in relation to the organic and inorganic world that surrounds them (98). According to Chemhuru though, this view is based on Murove’s etymological misunderstanding of the word as having an adjectival form, while its interpretation as a noun, irrelevant to the word *-kama/kukama*, more unquestionably communicates its reciprocal associations (256). In any case, *ukama* describes cultural convictions that inform practices of togetherness, unity, and relational disposition in several African cultures south of the Sahara.

Discussions on their etymological nature and ability to establish a fertile ground for animals’ rights aside, *ubuntu* and *ukama* certainly determine how indigenous African beliefs maintain an equilibrium between the human-kind and non-human beings, evading divisional ideologies and the factionalism promoted by the theoretical framework through which Western societies interpret the world. This merits further reflection pertaining to the ways human superiority over animals has been equated with the dehumanization of certain groups of people in diverse historical contexts that were deemed sub-human, occupying the category of beast, and deemed worthy of analogous brutality. As Horsthemke argues, more and more African scholars understand the inability to draw rigid lines and hierarchize species, in acknowledgement of anthropocentrism’s closeness to ethnocentrism, and speciesism’s similarity to racism (14). Horsthemke then problematizes the violent behaviour towards other species by these very people that were themselves brutalized for years, going as far as to argue that in engaging with violent behaviours towards other species, Africans contribute to their own ongoing dehumanization (14). In a similar fashion, for Evan Mwangi the futile human/animal dichotomy that many African students assign to *ubuntu*, in which a human is only considered human in relation to and in the denunciation of the notion of the animal, may



be considered an aftermath of years of being treated as inferior, and being forced into a state of animal-like subjugation, in the sense of being lessened and dominated (32). Yet, the transformation into a beast-like state is not exclusive to the conquered but also involves the conqueror, as Derrida's critical examination of the animal/human conjunction in relation to political thought, sovereignty and human law complicates. This "double and contradictory figuration," as articulated in his *The Beast and the Sovereign* seminars, consists of a simultaneous state of the "political man" as, on the one hand, superior in lifting himself above the conquered animal while, on the other, becoming animal oneself in the process; it thus consolidates the figure of the political man as superior to animality and as animality at the same time (26). Further along in the seminars, while quoting and examining Carl Schmitt's idea of the implication of "humanity" as a theoretical construct that became a weapon in the hands of imperialist conquest, he further discusses how the "humanitarian pretension, when it goes off to war, treats its enemies as "hors la loi [outside the law]" and "hors l'humanité [outside humanity]" (*Beast* 73). While doing so in order to subjugate and inspire fear, the oppressor themselves turn towards the cruelty they assign to non-human beasts. "Nothing, on this view," Derrida argues, "would be less human than this imperialism which, acting in the name of human rights and the humanity of man, excludes men and humanity and imposes on men inhuman treatments. Treats them like beasts" (Ibid.).

### **Derrida and the Animals in San Rock Art and Storytelling**

The intricate, symbiotic relationship of human with the non-human world, interlaced in the core of what defines personhood as expressed in the African philosophical concepts of *ubuntu* and *ukama*, is also articulated in indigenous storytelling and depicted in artistic expressions that testify to the relationship of humans with animals and the natural world. Southern Africa, the vast region encompassing South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and parts of Mozambique and Tanzania, is rich in rock paintings and carvings, with people still uncovering the evidence of the artistic activity that was consistently practiced over an extensive period (Ego 11). As Renaud Ego attests, the vast corpus of paintings "constitutes a splendid bestiary" populated by a plethora of animal species, like giraffes, rhinoceroses, elephants, ostriches, springboks, rheboks, kudus, and "the largest and most majestic of African antelope, the Cape eland," along with "human figurines in groups or alone, recorded in a variety of poses and situations," as well as "strange, hybrid creatures: antelope-men,

snakes with ears, and other freaks born from sensorial intercourse that transgresses the species barrier” (11). Most of these depictions are attributed to the San, nomadic foraging people who “were long the sole inhabitants of southern Africa, along with the Khoekhoen” (11). The movements of the San “were dictated by seasonal cycles that themselves governed animal migrations and the germination of the fruits, wild berries and root tubers that constituted the basis of the San diet, even more than the results of hunting” (28). The essential things in the life of this nomadic community were to be found “in activities that were simultaneously playful, artistic and spiritual, which encouraged friendliness and contributed to the unity and emotional security of their groups,” like painting, engraving, dancing, and storytelling (28). Stories of creation, legends and folklore traditions, communal daily life and all metaphysical narratives that define the social fabric of the indigenous community delineate more than a reciprocal connection between humans and other-than-human animals in view of an effectively structured daily life and labour. They communicate, instead, a waning of boundaries between what is perceived as wholly human and what is located outside this demarcated humanness, constituting existing articulations of Derrida’s theoretical mediations on limitrophy as the permeability of the borders that separate human and non-human. In what follows, my aim is to extract the ties of affinity between Derrida’s reflections on the limits of the animal/human binary in Western thought as these are expressed in his intellectual ruminations on the nature of the division between the beast and the sovereign, and the cultural expressions of the San peoples that manifest the animal/human ontological convergence. These cultural manifestations determine that the metaphysical understanding of human/animal intimacy and the importance of being-with the non-human Other in defining the human-self in indigenous African traditions as these are expressed in the philosophical concepts of *ubuntu* and *ukama* are intertwined in the stories and traditions that define these native communities and, thus, bestow a profound dimension to limitrophy as a philosophical term and theoretical framework.

Michael Wessels’ exploration of indigenous storytelling based on pre-historic rock art offers a fertile ground to further study these developing connotations. Wessels, in his contribution to the collection *Indigenous Creatures, Native Knowledges, and the Arts* (2017), bases his exploration of human-animal connections in indigenous traditions on an article produced by colonial officer Joseph Orpen on San rock art and a narrative cycle of fables its encounter initiated, recounted by a young man of San descent named Qing. According to Wessels account, in 1873 Orpen was called to intercept the Hlubi chief,

Langalibalele, who, along with his men, had taken refuge in the Maloti Mountains, refusing to surrender their guns to the colonial authorities (13). To do so, Orpen hired Qing as a guide to the expedition, in the course of which he collected enough material to later publish an article in *The Cape Monthly Magazine* with a brief report on the nature of their journey and Qing's comments on San rock art and stories (13). The San peoples are considered the earliest inhabitants of the KwaZulu-Natal region of southern Africa, later followed by the Bantu-speaking communities amongst which the notion of *ubuntu* was established and where the term had a wide linguistic adaptation in almost all Bantu languages. The Orpen-Qing article was published appended with remarks by Wilhelm Bleek, an eminent linguist and collector of folklore of the /Xam-speaking San, and interpretations of the copies of rock art Orpen made along the journey by Dia!kwain, one of the /Xam informants who lived in Bleek's household (13-14). Wessels adds that a significant secondary source for a more rounded understanding of the journey in the Maloti Mountains is the journal account of officer James Murray Grant, leader of the expedition to intercept Langalibalele (14). The importance of the Orpen-Qing article lies in its rendition of indigenous art and mythology of the San, its description of human/animal connections, but also its hybrid nature in having been produced and appended by both indigenous inhabitants of the area and non-natives.

The different attitudes towards animal companions and the surrounding wildlife between colonial forces and native populations during the expedition, as these are articulated in the Orpen-Qing article and Grant's journal account, are telling of a fundamentally distinct frame of reference between African belief systems and Western thought. In fact, Grant extensively discusses animals, but mostly in a context associated with the services they may or may not adequately provide or with the possible profit they may yield (15-16). While Grant's accounts seem deprived of any sentiment of companionship towards the non-human Other, Orpen's notes do present certain unity between human and non-human companions, but this is for the most part expressed in the harmony that Qing and his mare display. In Orpen's comparison, in which Qing and his mare move together in unison like a rabbit, Wessels reads "tropes of the San as wild people, people of the bush" while also, later, Orpen proceeds to presenting Qing "as a man of culture, an informant about rock art and mythology" (16). Nonetheless, while Orpen's accounts of human/animal relations at the time hint at a lingering companionship in comparison to Grant's sterile account of animals as service and income, they still come in contrast to the ways Qing later describes animals and their pertinence in the mythology of the native peoples. As Wessels testifies, in Qing's stories that

spring from their encounters with the rock art images in Melikane and Sehonghong shelters, animals “become agents and characters, key elements in a social imaginary that is much less anthropocentric than the world from which Orpen and Grant come” (17). As years of colonial occupation have demonstrated, it was this anthropocentric understanding of the Western imperial forces that ultimately facilitated the annihilation of peoples and the expropriation of their territories, as whole populations were conveniently placed outside the sphere of humanity and therefore beyond the bounds of agency and in need of a master. In his theoretical contemplations on imperialist expansion, Derrida condemns not only the “treating [of] men as beasts, but the hypocrisy of an imperialism that gives itself the alibi of universal humanitarianism (therefore beyond the sovereignty of a nation-state) in order *in fact* to protect or extend the powers of a particular nation state” (*Beast* 74). Orpen and Grant’s accounts are reminiscent of the human/animal conjunction and the turning-into-beast of the colonized in the name of a preeminent human civilization that overpowered African territories and annihilated native belief systems.

Qing’s accounts on the indigenous mythologies of the region, however, offer an alternate understanding of human as part of the surrounding environment. When asked about the rock paintings of men with rhebok’s heads, for example, Qing’s explanations of the therianthropic images establish a mélange of species that extends beyond the anthropo-zoological union and suggests a certain interchangeability in the name-giving practices of different species, challenging structured taxonomic systems (Wessels 18). In his descriptions, the rhebok-headed men are also associated with elands: “They were men who had died and now lived in rivers and were spoilt at the same time as the elands and by the dances of which you have seen paintings” (Orpen quoted by Wessels 18). Similarly, painted hippo-like animals are identified as snakes: “That animal which the men are catching is a *snake* (!),” causing the surprise of Orpen who renders Qing’s account by italicizing the word ‘snake’ and adding an exclamation mark after it (Orpen quoted by Wessels 18). However unclear the exact thinking behind Qing’s shifting name-giving practices may be, Wessels emphasizes the breakdown of European species classification systems (19). Although taxonomical differences are present, they are not always linguistically acknowledged or required to form clear divisions between diverse species and, therefore, what guides understanding, and interpretation is not bound to restrictive lexical cues. The complacency of language in the violence acted against the non-human Other has been expressed in Derrida’s philosophical contemplations through his dismissal of the reductive and

contemptuous category of “the animal” as a generalization that reinforces the rigid limit between human and non-human while erasing the multiplicity that exists outside the human species. His rejection of the “Animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single, indivisible limit” finds expression in *animot*, compound of the word animal and *mot* which in French stands for “word”, as a neologism that draws attention to the fabricability of language and proposes a conceptual framework to undermine the limit that the naming of the Animal seeks to draw (*Animal* 47). For Derrida, “it is a rather a matter of taking into account a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits,” since “among nonhumans, and separate from nonhumans, there is an immense multiplicity of other living things that cannot in any way be homogenized...” (48). In Qing’s accounts the linguistic rigidity that derives from the classification of the non-human Other is destabilized though this interchangeability of terms, which recognizes the heterogeneity of non-human species while also determining their ontological interconnection amongst them and in relation to humans.

The double-layered synthesis that arises from Qing’s stories, then, articulates a blurring of limits both between humans and non-humans, and amongst non-human animals. The rhebok-headed men that appear in the rock art depictions experience the personal transformation of wholly or partly becoming animal. The recurrence of the depictions of rheboks and elands in rock art of the Drakensberg-Maloti area, though, has also been considered as demonstrating an association that transcends the individual transformation of human to animal but extends to include connotations between human and animal communities. Wessels discusses Patricia Vinnicombe’s hypothesis that the San people of the area considered a symbolic distinction between elands and rheboks in relation to their own social structures (20). Namely, in her analysis, rheboks indicate the tight-knit group of the family unit, as they are sometimes depicted as performing practices of nurture like suckling their young, while elands represent the broader human collective, since they separate in dispersed smaller groups during winter months and then are again united in large groups in the summer, like the Drakensberg-Maloti San (20). For Wessels, Vinnicombe’s suggestion of a comparison between the social organization of the rhebok and the eland with that of humans as understood by indigenous collectivities of the area follows a “metaphorical logic” which should be considered with moderate caution (20). This is because, as he states, the human/non-human relationship, as depicted in the art and stories of the area, seems to be one more of “identification and extension than comparison” (21). However, if Vinnicombe’s hypothesis is to be true, it could indicate more

than a relational analogy amongst elands, rheboks, and humans, but point towards a reversal of the common association of humans as comparable to animals due to shared animalistic qualities, which leads to the reconsideration of animal social structures as related to the ones commonly attributed as unique to human societies. This closely follows Derrida's call to "invert the sense of the analogy and recognize...not that political man is still animal but that the animal is already political," which is demonstrated in a number of animal societies which bear "the appearance of refined, complicated organizations, with hierarchical structures, attributes of authority and power, phenomena of symbolic credit, so many things that are so often attributed to and so naively reserved or so-called human *culture*, in opposition to *nature*" (*Beast* 14). The associations, thus, that Vinnicombe's theory establishes between eland, rhebok and human social structures may be perceived as exceeding mere similarities but indeed attesting to the ontological connection between humans and non-human animals that Wessels reads in the Orpen-Qing account of the indigenous mythologies of the area, and which undermines clear-cut distinctions between human/non-human social or individual fundamental attributes.

This ontological association is further reflected in the anthropo-zoological conjunction as derived from Qing's stories of Cagn, a mythological figure which is identified as like the /Xam stories of /Kággen, more commonly referred to as the Mantis, the southern San trickster deity (Lewis-Williams 195). Regardless of certain differences in Qing's accounts and the /Xam material, the stories of Cagn (/Kággen) and his family prompt a consideration of the human-animal-God triptych as this is expressed in indigenous metaphysical narratives. Wessels, for example, in accentuating the identification of humans with both divinity and animality, references the story of the creation of the first eland from the flesh and blood of Cagn's family, which then prompted the beginning of hunting as the epitome of human activities of the era (21-22). The two do not function as markers of human virtues and vices, neither the turning into animal indicates a bestial state but is instead considered as a necessary transformation that bestows valuable attributes to the metamorphosed human or hybrid that arises. The permeability of limits as expressed in the God-as-human-as-animal indigenous narratives transcends what Derrida describes as "the double and contradictory figuration of political man" that needs further questioning, and which derives from the opposition of the animal realm that is regarded as non-political opposite the human political state which has paradoxically often been represented "in the formless form of animal monstrosity" (*Beast* 25-26). Cagn and his family are humans, animals,

and deities, depending on the story and the circumstance, with their transformative qualities uncovering a metaphysical onto-theological understanding that is founded in the porosity of the limit between humans and non-humans that is evident in the natives' belief system.

## Conclusion

In discussing the construction of the “space of Otherness,” originating from medieval Latin-Christian Europe and lasting during “landed-gentry West,” Wynter accentuates the divided character of the pre-ascribed roles of subjects in the metaphysical hierarchy of being, perceived as “extrahumanly designed and/or determined, rather than as veridically or systematically produced by our collective human agency” (315). Indeed, the dividing nature ascribed in the West's ethnoreligious and sociopolitical codes, in its “ethno-knowledges,” in Wynter's terms, has consolidated “divinely created” distinctions expressed in both the “ontological substance between heaven and earth (Spirit/Flesh)” as well as “between rational humans and irrational animals,” with the latter category also encompassing all considered-to-be-irrational humans (315). Derrida's reading of the animal/Other and his limitrophic understanding of any and every dividing line seek to question the arbitrary nature of these divisions that have for years established and fed a hierarchical understanding of being that casted indigenous peoples and their cosmologies as peripheral to the orders of imperialist expansion and colonial modernity. In this article I attempted to establish a dialogue between Derrida's philosophical contemplations on the connections between human and other-than-human Other, and the porous limits that determine their separation. I argue that exploring indigenous African belief systems and their tentative expressions of a potential horizontal symbiosis between what is considered human and what other-than through a limitrophic understanding of what separates a human *we* from a non-human Other, as expressed in Derridean philosophy, carries the potential for a deconstruction of the Western archetype of Man, rooted in the very belief systems of the ones that were for years deemed unworthy of the title. It also diffidently points towards a decolonial intervention in the hierarchical understanding of human and that regarded as less-than-human Animal/Other. The African beliefs of *ubuntu* and *ukama*, as well as the broader understanding of human and non-human connections as these are expressed in indigenous art and storytelling, transcend the limits of an anthropocentric understanding of being to encompass the intricate connections that consolidate human and non-human existence in an interconnected network of relations that

accentuate the urgency of creating networks of shared living instead of drawing dividing lines. Their consideration points towards the power of indigenous cosmologies, for years regarded as marginal, to rearticulate our ontological and epistemological understanding as in relation and not in command of that which remains external to self. Much like the Orpen-Qing article as examined by Wessels, thus, *ubuntu* and *ukama* attest to the ways African indigenous belief systems, art, and mythologies incorporate and incarnate these philosophical concepts that gesture towards a being-with with the other-than-human Other. As Wessels states, “[t]he world of Qing’s stories is a world in which the boundaries between animal and human are fluid; they are continually subject to revision and negotiation” and, in that sense, they resonate with Derridean approaches of the limit not as a rigid border but as an active, ever-transforming system which reverberates in these “stories of transition and becoming” (31).

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Here, Karavanta considers Sylvia Wynter’s article “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism” in *boundary 2* 12.3 (Spring-Autumn, 1984): 19-70.

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