



Alicia Andrzejewski //

“If you try and take a cat apart to see how it works, the first thing you have on your hands is a non-working cat.”—Douglas Adams

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), Derrida writes of “seeing oneself seen naked under a gaze”—his female cat’s gaze, in particular—“behind which there remains a bottomlessness, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret” (12). Hard to read, to interpret, both cats and the pregnant body resist domestication and civility, serving as a reminder that the animal body is both messy and graceful, wild and powerful.

The image above is part of a story that brings together the archetypal symbols of the cat and the pregnant body, and their relationship to the animal body—the unreadable, abyssal, and secret. This “life-size, blood-red depiction” of a cat is taken from transcripts circulated in 1596 among some of the highest ranking officials of the time; it accompanies the description of a strange case in Harborough, Leicestershire, in which Agnes Bowker, a twenty-seven-year-old unmarried woman gave birth to a cat (Cressy 10). The color of the cat conflates the fluids and matter issued forth from the womb with this monstrous feline birth, whose gaze meets the men who considered and circulated these legal documents. This cat, like the pregnant body, blurs the lines between domestic, civil bodies and animal bodies; both function in this story as threats to empirical knowing.

In his reading of the case in *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England: Tales of Discord and Dissension* (1999), David Cressy notes the story “starts simply enough . . . with the unwanted pregnancy of an unmarried domestic servant” (9). To be young, pregnant, and unmarried, indeed, is a common state for people to find themselves in, but far from simple. As Cressy argues, the options available to young women like Agnes were “to conceal her condition”; “to hope for a miscarriage or attempt an abortion”; or, “in most cases,” to find a midwife (10). Whether or not a

midwife intervened in most cases, the potential for secrecy—as well as agency—frames all of these conditions of possibility for Agnes, the young, unmarried pregnant person in this story.

As Agnes’s tale demonstrates, even the most normal pregnant bodies resist taxonomy and empirical knowing. In the testimony accompanying the blood-red cat, six attending midwives give accounts of helping Agnes in the birthing chamber—all saw the “monster cat,” but none could confirm Agnes had actually given birth to it. The closest account to this confirmation, from Margaret Harrison, argues that “she thinketh it came out of Agnes Bowker’s womb” (qtd. in Cressy 15). It is not until men begin to give accounts, as Cressy notes, that the tale becomes “an empirical examination” (Cressy 15). The cat is violently dissected. George Walker “ripped the maw of the cat, pulling it out of the body thereof, and there he did see certain meat congealed” (qtd. in Cressy 15). In finding this meat and straw in the cat’s stomach, the men decided this cat did not come from Agnes’s womb, but rather from “the lanes of Leicestershire”—a typical barn cat (Cressy 15). Antony Anderson, the man who referred the case to the appropriate nobleman, Henry Hastings, Earl of Huntingdon, performed his own experiment to demonstrate the cat Agnes gave birth to was an average cat:

I caused another cat to be killed and flayed, and betwixt the one and the other in the whole this was the difference and only the difference, the eyes of my cat were as cats’ eyes that be alive, and the monster cat’s eyes were darker than blue. I cast my flayn cat into boiling water, and pulling the same out again, both in eye and else they were altogether one. (qtd. in Cressy 20)

These accounts of gathering empirical evidence in order to know animal bodies make the violence inherent in these rational experiments, methods, and processes clear. At every point in this tale, officials attempt to bring the truth to light—to illuminate what happened in the dark and mysterious space of the pregnant body and birthing chamber.

The men of Leicestershire’s anatomization of the cat mirrors the attempts to surgically intervene in the birthing chamber. In the period, Caesarian sections were only

performed when mothers were dead or dying. One of the earliest printed illustrations of a Cesarean section, purportedly the birth of Julius Caesar, pictures a live infant being surgically removed from a dead woman. These days, Cesarean sections are far too common, performed as a preemptive measure to ensure the safety of the unborn child and/or mother, taking childbirth out of the hands of pregnant people. My own birth was a Cesarean —my mother went to the hospital too early and the doctors kept noting her and I’s “failure to progress.” As my mother was cut open on the table, I



From Suetonius’ *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, 1506.

started coming down the birth canal. The doctors and nurses had to push me back up to come out of the incision.

Like the “flayed” cat in Agnes Bowker’s tale, pregnant bodies are cut open to know, to ensure, the process and end of childbirth. Cressy briefly considers the symbolism of the cat in this tale, asking, “Would it be a mark of desperation to invoke the symbolic significance of cats as female domestic companions or as familiars and stand-ins for the devil” (26), but his main argument is to interrogate what constitutes truth-telling and evidence, how naïve it is “to believe that the secrets of the past may be laid open” (27). Throughout my own pregnancy, I was dragged to hospitals, clawing and scratching, in order to be laid open. Hooked up to machines, surveilled, monitored, invaded by technology that could *see* what was happening inside of me, all I wanted to do was retreat. During childbirth, when my body seized and contracted under the blinding, fluorescent hospital lights, I’d try to get down on all fours, monitors in the way, and arch my back for relief. During one contraction, a monitor came off, and a male nurse rushed in. When he saw me gripping the back of the hospital bed, on my knees, he said, “well that’s why,” and proceeded to hook me back up.

I understand why the attending midwives were in the dark, figuratively and literally, about whether or not Agnes gave birth to a blood-red cat, and unafraid to admit this ambiguity—being pregnant and giving birth are private experiences, a turning inwards, a retreat. After a contraction that made me vomit, I turned to my sister and asked her to leave. In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson describes the birth of her son, Iggy, in this way:

Everything around me is normal and inside I am in the pain cavern...in the tub, where strands of dark red mucus have started to float...At the bottom, which one can’t quite know is the bottom, one reckons. I’ve heard a lot of women describe this reckoning (it might also be called nine centimeters), at which one starts bargaining hard, as if striking a deal to save your conjoined lives.

Even in a sterile ward, surrounded by nurses and physicians, the bargain Nelson describes is one a pregnant person makes alone with the bottomless animal body—messy and painful and miraculous—but it is also a reckoning that is continually stolen from pregnant people, as they are trapped in neat, sterile rooms, hooked up to a plethora of monitors, and, far too often and unnecessarily, cut open in the process.

We all begin in the dark, private closet of the womb, and any good obstetrician will admit that even in our modern, post-Enlightenment period, technology fails to know and account for all aspects of pregnancy. My daughter always turned her back to the protrusion made by the ultrasound, an invasion into her own dark space. I remember seeing her alien face briefly turn toward the monitor before she lurched her entire body away from the technician, the pearls that made up her spine snaking across the screen. In so many growth scans, the technicians didn’t get what they needed from her. They’d jostle my belly, get me to stand and jump up and down, but to no avail. I appreciated this perceived resistance, her refusal to comply with being measured, even if I had to

go back to the hospital because of it, waiting for hours under bright lights, just so the techs could take a picture of the final chamber of her heart onscreen. In my journal from pregnancy, I write:

I stood in front of the mirror the other day and could see all the full, blue veins in my chest and stomach. It was a sublime experience; I was terrified by the sight—especially since it was out of my control—but there was also something exceptionally beautiful about it. It's like the whole universe was in my body and I was the whole universe, powerful, flawed, and beautiful.

Perhaps the trick is channeling this power, this refusal to comply—to be in conversation with surgical information in complicated ways that allow for the agency of the pregnant body—the animal body—as a way of knowing.

Featured Image

Anthony Anderson in 1569, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Works Cited

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