

■ How to Live Together with Rats

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Abstract

As Donna Haraway suggests in *When Species Meet*, there can be many forms of “becoming with” nonhuman animals; some include killing them. The idea of trying to live together with species such as rats challenges our imaginations when compared with charismatic megafauna more likely to be the subjects of conservation campaigns. This article focuses on rats in relation to both a personal narrative about them invading the author’s cabin and examples from literature, particularly T. Coraghessan Boyle’s “Thirteen Hundred Rats” (2008). What is central for the author is the question of how to live together with rats: how can we translate theories and concepts from fields such as multispecies studies and ecocriticism into everyday life? While various forms of life must die to sustain us, whether they are mammals or fish or plants, we can also try to imagine other ways of being in the world, animal ways of being in the world, aiming to make our relationships with animals and environments more sustainable and grounded in symbiotic flourishing. But what about rats running across the living-room floor and destroying insulation inside the walls? Building upon recent work in biopolitics and multispecies studies, this article brings particular attention to the concept of idiorrhymy as it was developed by Roland Barthes in a series of late lectures at the Collège de France. Idiorrhymy can be seen as an ideal model for living together, a form of community in which individuals are not constrained by others because the rhythm of their interactions allows them to keep enough distance. Literary texts can illustrate not only

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this kind of ideal, but also what makes it fall apart. In the end, the author asks, how can this concept help us to think differently about various ways of living together with rats?

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T. Coraghessan Boyle

The rats are in the walls.¹ Our walls. Last winter and spring, in our cabin, outside of Oslo, Norway. They burrowed their way first into the new compost bin outside the back wall, with precision teeth cutting through the bottom of the heavy plastic bin, the hole oval-shaped to fit the bodies of rats apparently partying there all winter. But then they found their way up through the floorboards underneath the cabin, up into the walls, into the kitchen. I am a pacifist and a vegetarian. I teach and write about animals and animality. I did not want to kill these rats. But I also did not want to live together with them, pretending not to care about their occasional mad dashes across the living-room floor, or cleaning up their messes in the food pantry, under the sink, inside our thoughts as we attempted to retreat to peace in the woods.



Fig.1. Outside of Oslo. Photograph by Michael Lundblad.

Some animals more easily capture the imagination of environmentalists and animal advocates than others. It is often the charismatic megafauna—tigers and pandas and whales, for example—that are featured in conservation campaigns. As Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren have noted, “in this perilous era known as the Anthropocene, a time when much of the diversity of life on Earth is being lost through human action,” the “creatures who are so vividly present in our imaginative lives are nonetheless on the edge of loss” (1). But what about the “countless other creatures,” Rose and van Dooren ask, “who are less visible, less beautiful, less a part of our cultural lives? What of the

¹ This essay intentionally disrupts traditional academic approaches to texts and theories by interweaving personal experience with literary and cultural analysis, in line with ecocritical traditions inspired by Scott Slovic, for example, in *Going Away to Think*. For readers less interested in academic aspects, may I suggest ignoring the subsequent footnotes?

unloved others...?” (1).² My focus recently has been on a particular species of unloved others, a species actually “loathed” by many: the common rat (*Rattus norvegicus*).

Other people keep rats as pets in their homes. Some people eat them. How many environmentalists are mobilized to *save the rats*? They can be ecologically important actors. They can be companion species. They can also be carriers of disease and destroyers of wires and appliances and insulation inside your walls. As Donna Haraway suggests in *When Species Meet* (2008), there can be many forms of “becoming with” nonhuman animals; some include killing them.³ The idea of trying to live together with rats challenges our imaginations. How many of them do you want to develop relations with? How many can you tolerate before you might be willing to kill them, directly, with blood on your own hands, rather than on the teeth of your cat or dog, or various kinds of lethal traps? Or poison aiming for eradication, if not extinction?

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One of our dogs, Heldig, can execute rats. I hem and haw. Or offer them up to her. Flush them out to her. Two today: one stuck in the trash can. One somehow cornered by Lula, another one of our dogs, outside. We did not yet have our cat at that point. Heldig doesn't try to eat them. She just crushes the life out of their bodies. Snapping her jaws shut through their guts. The last one needed a second chomp. But a quick death, anyway, from what I can tell. Much better than the solution offered by a human executioner today. Pest control. He came by to explain what he would do: four boxes of poison, designed to overdose the blood pressure of both rats and mice, making them dizzy at first, nudging them back toward their dens, deep underground in the case of the rats, stomachs exploding anywhere from six to forty-eight hours later.

Not so fun for the rats, I said.

No, he said.

² See also Rose, et al., editors, *Extinction Studies*.

³ Haraway's concept of “becoming with” builds upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, as well as Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, arguing that humans and nonhumans “become” who we are through our interactions—or intra-actions—with others, whether we are respectful, on the one hand, or exploitative and violent, on the other hand, or anything in between. See Haraway, *When Species Meet* and *Staying with the Trouble*.



Fig. 2. Companion animals. Photographs by Michael Lundblad.

I teach and write, more specifically, about literature and theory, about texts that help us think about how to live together with the biodiversity of life we value or at least try to understand, within environments we want to protect, on the planet we want to save, in the midst of mass extinctions and climate-change catastrophes. I live together now with one feline and three canine companions, along with four humans: all of us vegetarians (the humans, that is, not the dogs and the cat), although my anthropologist wife and I are willing to make exceptions, with an eye toward respectful and sustainable treatment and traditions. I think a lot about which forms of life must die to sustain us, whether mammals or fish or plants. I also spend considerable time trying to imagine other ways of being in the world, animal ways of being in the world, and how our various relationships with animals and environments can be more sustainable and grounded in symbiotic flourishing. Or when and how they are not. I want to think more about stories such as T. Coraghessan Boyle's "Thirteen Hundred Rats" (2008), theories such as biopolitics, and concepts such as idiorrhhythmy,

which was developed by Roland Barthes to explore different forms of living together.⁴ What is central, here, for me, is the question of how to live together with rats: how can I translate ideas from academic fields such as multispecies studies and ecocriticism into everyday life, into the problem of the rats inside the walls? Inside our walls?



Fig. 3. To catch a live rat. Photograph by Michael Lundblad.

Could Heldig execute hundreds of rats with her teeth? I caught one in a live trap about a week ago. I pored over Google Maps, satellite view, to find the best release location. They say the rats will find their way back unless it's at least two miles away with better options for food and shelter. We drove along a dirt road until we found piles of horse manure in a dirt cul-de-sac, in the middle of the forest. Okay, yes, a few cabins not that far away, actually. But that points to another issue: giving your own problem away to someone else. You might not kill them, but the neighbors probably will. They probably will go all in for the poisoning. Does it appease your conscience if you didn't do it yourself? Or asked your dog to do it for you?

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One of the primary fears surrounding rats, like mice, is their reputation for prolific reproduction. Exponentially exploding numbers in a matter of weeks.

⁴ For an introduction to biopolitics including excerpts from key figures such as Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Donna Haraway, Hannah Arendt, and Roberto Esposito, among others, see Campbell, et al., editors, *Biopolitics: A Reader*. Barthes's work on idiorrhythmy can be found in *How to Live Together*.

Unless you do something about it. Immediately. Boyle's "Thirteen Hundred Rats" evokes this fear. From the initial purchase of one rat to feed a pet Burmese python, to the decision to keep ten more rats as pets, a middle-aged man is eventually found with "upward of thirteen hundred rats in the house."

One of the theoretical ideas I want to reflect upon here is Barthes's concept of idiorrhythmy. In a series of lectures at the Collège de France in 1977, Barthes began to develop this concept as an ideal model for living together: a form of community in which individuals are not constrained by others because the rhythm of their interactions allows them to keep enough distance. Picture a school of fish, says Barthes. Or a murmuration of starlings. Individuals living together, moving together, yet also able to move on their own, without being forced or constrained by others. Barthes's concept is inspired by thinking about monks living together on Mt. Athos. He sets out a series of investigations into literary texts, however, as sites for exploring what disrupts idiorrhythmy: power, force, violence. But also subtler elements: hierarchy, competing interests, undesirable work, desire itself. Barthes has no interest in the lives of animals for their own sake, though, only as metaphors for human relations.⁵ But idiorrhythmy is a keyword we can nonetheless think about in relation to nonhuman species, our relations with them, the communities we want to foster within ecosystems we want to sustain. What makes it go wrong? How can we live together with rats? Can we create idiorrhythmy with thirteen hundred of them?

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Met with another pest control company today. More of an advisor, actually. Completely different logic. Much more humane, and logical. Impossible to kill all of the rats and mice in the area, he says. Most important to seal off all the ways they can get into our cabin. Detailed inspection, taking pictures of all the holes, next to new pipes negligently left unprotected by the last contractor, and other places where there are no metal screens to stop the mice, who only need 6mm to get in, or the rats, who only need 12mm. Huge job to seal it all off. Need to check with a carpenter about some of the gaping access points. In the meantime, regular old traps baited with peanut butter are ready to snap the heads and necks of the supposedly unwitting. But he says we're not allowed to use poison in private residences. Even if we did, the poison could kill them inside the walls, leaving their bodies there to rot and stink. Traps are set, though, and materials ordered online to cover the gaps in the

⁵ For more on idiorrhythmy in relation to nonhuman animals, see Lundblad, "Opening Up a Dossier."

walls, the floor, the pipes.



Fig. 4. Hidden entries. Photographs by Michael Lundblad.

In “Thirteen Hundred Rats,” the main character, Gerard, develops a different kind of relationship with rats. Instead of feeding them to his Burmese python, which was his original plan, he apparently converts to what we might see as a desire for idiorrhythmy. We are told the story from a different perspective, however, by the bourgeois suburban neighbor Roger, who informs us that he is imagining what happened in retrospect. He is relating “a kind of fiction, really, or a fictive reconstruction of actual events,” because he had needed to travel to Switzerland on business for several months while the drama of Gerard’s rats had unfolded. From the perspective of this neighbor, it is possible to imagine the supplies necessary to provide for the pet rats: Rat Chow to eat, cages for shelter, and wood shavings for nesting. We are also told that despite the fact that Gerard previously “had never touched a rat in his life,” he is soon cuddling up with the one named Robbie, who perches on his shoulder. Gerard feels Robbie’s “fur like a caress on the side of his neck.” Eventually he takes the rat to bed with him, feeling “its presence beside him, its spirit, its heart, its heat, and it was no reptile, no cold thankless thing with a flicking tongue and two dead eyes, but a creature radiant with life.”

When the narrator returns four months later, however, whatever idiorrhythmy there might have been initially has clearly gone horribly wrong. He is told that “when the firemen broke down the front door a sea of rodents flooded out into the yard, fleeing in every direction. Inside the floors were gummy with waste. . . . In addition to the free-roaming animals, there were hundreds more rats stacked in cages, most of them starving and many cannibalized or displaying truncated limbs.” By the end of the story, the narrator has come to a different view. The rats have become a “horde of creatures that could only be described

as pests, as vermin, as enemies of mankind that should be exterminated, not nurtured. . . . how could he allow even a single one of them to come near him, to fall under the caress of his hand, to sleep with him, eat with him, breathe the same air”?



Fig. 5. Snap judgment. Photograph by Michael Lundblad.

The neighbors have experience, they say. They recommend two other exterminators who will use poison. These rats, they say, are skadedyr: the Norwegian word for pests, vermin, animals that create nothing but damage. I contact both of these firms. The first tells me that poison is not recommended in areas with pets and other wildlife. The second doesn't get back to me for several days. In the meantime, we are overrun in our online neighbor forum. Something must be done. Poison, that is, and a contract for seasonal replenishment of the poison boxes. Our other neighbors, whose bird feeding has presumably also sustained some of the rats, seem to want to focus the attention on us, on what we will do. From our perspective, there is good reason to believe that the rats will move away from our homes, along with the mice, as the weather gets warmer, and especially as we eliminate their food sources. We dismantled the compost bin long ago. We've trapped and killed probably 8-10 inside the cabin and in the shed next to it. Being imprecise about the number killed is a biopolitical defense mechanism; their individuality is not supposed to matter. But I am haunted by memories of heads crushed by metal bars, death springs, sometimes not immediately. Then they must be crushed by bigger rocks, by my weight on the rocks, by my explicit complicity.

In the middle of all of this we get COVID-19, a zoonotic virus (spread from other species to ours, but not from these rats). We cannot get the deliveries right, so the rat-proofing materials are sent to Oslo by mistake while we isolate at the cabin. Not feeling up for sealing off the holes anyway.

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In “Thirteen Hundred Rats,” we are told that Gerard holds the life of his first rat literally in his hands, over the terrarium that houses his Burmese python. The narrator tells us that he “felt like a god, like a Roman emperor with the power of fatality in his thumb.” This power to let live or make die is one we might claim with individual animals, or even groups of them in our neighborhoods or homes, but it is also a power that manifests itself in less visible ways. Biopolitics has become a theoretical keyword in the academy, with different genealogies and theorists developing the concept in different ways. But one of the basic ideas—from Michel Foucault—is helpful here when we think about populations either made to live (as in lab rats or factory-farm animals) or allowed to die (as in endangered species going extinct as their habitats are destroyed). Certain forms of life are constructed as less valuable than others, which allows them to become killable or subject to violence with impunity.⁶ Biopolitical structures can also be seen in relation to dehumanized and animalized constructions of human populations, historically justifying extreme forms of oppression and violence, including colonization, slavery, and genocide.⁷

In Boyle’s story, rats ultimately become killable within what can be seen as a biopolitical framework. Gerard, we are told, does not select the right kind of pet. Gerard is also left to die, so to speak, because he does not conform to the bourgeois norms of his forested neighbors after his wife dies, committing the grievous sin of not raking his leaves, for example, or smelling bad, or not accepting invitations to cocktail parties or charity fundraisers. Our narrator Roger, on the other hand, has the right kind of life and the right kind of pets: dogs, not rats—shelties named Tim and Tim II. Before Gerard is found dead, in his last encounter with Roger, we are told that Gerard describes the problem essentially as “nature”: “The force of nature,” leading Gerard to being simply “overwhelmed.” Who decides when and how the “force of nature” should live or be allowed to die? Which nonhuman species are framed as pests or vermin versus those deemed worthy of protection? Relevant comparisons can be made with other animals in Norway (which is also the etymological origin of the Latin name for the common rat, *norvegicus*). Here there are also wolves in forests and fields, for example, juxtaposed with grazing cattle and sheep: should the wolves be seen as noble symbols of wildness? Or are they also *skadedyr*—pests—

⁶ See Wolfe, *Before the Law*.

⁷ See Lundblad, *The Birth of a Jungle*.

defined primarily by the threats they may pose to a farmer's livelihood? How do we live together with neighbors who might respond differently?



Fig. 6. Biopolitics. Photograph by Michael Lundblad.

Finally spoke with the last exterminator. He has been in touch with the neighbors, who plan to make a deal in two days, when he will inspect the whole area. He agrees that the poison is not so great for the rats—it can take a few days before they die, and sometimes they will die and decay inside the walls. He says they are trying to move people away from poison (reaching out to me as his audience now), but thinks it can still be a good idea if there is a large outbreak, just to get the numbers down (despite the fact that rapid reproductive capabilities mean that the problem wouldn't necessarily be solved). He says he will place the poison stations under the house, where the dogs can't get to them. He says the dogs will not be harmed. But what happens to other animals in the environment, or our dogs, if they were to eat a poisoned rat who stumbles out into the open? What about the poison leaching into the environment with unknown future consequences?

Don't worry, he says.

I'm not so sure.



Fig. 7. Poison stations under the cabin. Photographs by Michael Lundblad.

What other models might there be for trying to live together with rats? According to Eben Kirksey, Craig Schuetze, and Stefan Helmreich, multispecies studies as an academic field can also foreground collaborations with “artists and biological scientists to illuminate how diverse organisms are entangled in political, economic, and cultural systems” (2). More generally, we might want to focus on “the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds” (Kirksey and Helmreich 545).⁸ I would add that we don’t necessarily need to aim for peaceful idiorrhythmy with all of the organisms entangled with us. In *The Multispecies Salon* (2014), the bioart of Kathy High suggests a different model, though, for challenging the biopolitics that frame the lives and deaths of rats. For her installation titled *Embracing Animal* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (2004-2006), High ordered three transgenic rats from a biomedical supplier.



Fig. 8. Kathy High, *Embracing Animal*. Photographs and permission by the artist.

⁸ For more on multispecies studies, see, for example, Swanson, et al., editors, *Domestication Gone Wild*.

These rats were grafted with human genes (like the OncoMouse famously studied by Donna Haraway)⁹ for laboratory research into human diseases, including cancer, as well as Crohn's disease, which High herself lives with; she wants to acknowledge explicitly the rat-based research that has helped her. Building a transparent but comfortable architectural space for the rats to live in for the installation, High sees them as "sisters in suffering," yet offers them a better form of life. According to Kirksey, Brandon Costelloe-Kuehn, and Dorion Sagan, High "worked to bring them from the realm of 'bare life' (*zoe*), which is killable, into the realm of bios, with legible biographical and political lives alongside humans" (Kirksey et al. 2008). Illustrating Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical distinctions,¹⁰ the rats can thus become collaborators, while "High found herself enfolded in relationships with rats premised on reciprocity of curious touching, infectious affects, and symbiotic attachments. These generative becomings produced cause for care" (2008). There is also recognition of the power over life and death nonetheless maintained by human collaborators. What would it look like if we were to try to follow this model in our cabin? Could we build architectural constraints and border controls that would still include the potential for collaboration? That seems challenging, to say the least. But what about the possibility of grieving for rats that are killed, acknowledging their unique lives, arguing passionately for quick and painless death, if we ultimately agree that at least some of them must be killed? One of the key tasks here seems to be imagining ourselves more productively into the lives of animals, including each animal as an individual.

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The executioner arrives. He speaks in reasonable tones. He understands our concerns, he says. And yet he puts out poison. Not just in sealed boxes, but hanging from wires. Small cubes of green and white death. They are less likely to go for it in the boxes, you see. Difenacoum. He shows me. A box full of hundreds of cubes. Much better than that alfa poison they used to have. He will come back in a week or two to get what's left, so that dogs and other forms of life we value more will not eat them. No comment about potential leaching into the soil.

⁹ Haraway's discussion can be found in Haraway, *Modest Witness*.

¹⁰ See, for example, Agamben, *Homo Sacer and The Open*.



Fig. 9. Poison cubes. Photograph by Michael Lundblad.

The first time we go back, there is no evidence of dead rats or mice. Subsequent report: some of the poison seems to have been eaten, but it's surprising not to see more death. The executioner is not sure why. He will check back again in another week or so. The report is shared without comment by the neighbors. No reflection that perhaps this extreme approach was unwarranted, if our nonhuman neighbors decided to leave, without food sources, with better weather, with memories of comrades killed in regular old snap traps. But the rats will have retreated to their dens, underground, and in the walls, they say, so expect the smell of rotting death for months to come. I'm not so sure. The neighbors insist that their hierarchies of value must make more sense than ours. The lives they see as disposable can be written off, without any hesitation, the end justifying the means. Rats might be carriers of disease, yes, but what about dogs bringing ticks with Lyme disease into our beds and bodies. I do not want to act out "Thirteen Hundred Rats." But I think there might be other ways of learning how to live together with both rats and dogs. I am not saying, however, that we should resign ourselves to being overrun by rats, or that we would be happy to have them running through our walls and living rooms.



Fig. 10. Entry foreclosed. Photographs by Michael Lundblad.

We have now killed many rats, snapping their bodies in traps and crushing them under rocks we drop on them if they are trapped but not killed immediately. We have removed compost, dog food, and other opportunities for them to dine with us, or after us. We have sealed all the holes under the house where they can get in. This was no small task. It was, in fact, an enormous undertaking. We are complicit: we will likely kill again, in order to claim this space as viable only for those forms of life we deem worthy. But I, at least, am not willing to put out more poison in the fall, when some will inevitably come back.

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There are no easy answers here, ultimately. Perhaps, instead, we should think further about idiorrhythmy, including how to live together with our neighbors, both human and nonhuman. We need to think more about biopolitics and embracing animals, rather than making snap judgments that deny their individuality. But it is difficult to know in advance what kinds of trouble might ensue.

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What kind of mazes are we building for ourselves here?

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