Sedgwick’s long, unfinished verse novel, ‘The Warm Decembers’ (c. 1978–1986), invites us to think carefully about the relations between humans and animals, the value of animals in poetry, and how these ideas might link to the abject. In what follows, these points of connection emerge as functions of the “perverse, desiring energies” which, Sedgwick suggests, animate and colour the poem’s representation of boundaries between states of being, between, that is, beings dead and alive, past and present, real and fictional, and human and animal.¹ In ‘The Warm Decembers’, animals are figures of the abject, which intensify and diversify the poem’s expressive capabilities. They are represented as something other than the simple outside of humanity, as parts of structures which are never stable but constantly folding in on themselves or dissolving into indistinctness. And, in this linguistic and conceptual reconfiguration, Sedgwick offers a vision of how the category of the abject can help us re-describe our relations with different forms of animal life and a vision of how animals can offer writers uniquely flexible models for articulation and expression.

Juxtaposed with the discussion of the poem’s conceptual work are short accounts of the conditions governing the lives

of billions of real-world animals in the hope of widening the scope of what might be meant by Julia Kristeva’s idea of the abject territories of the animal.\(^2\) Part of the aim of this chapter is to suggest some connections between the linguistic representation of animals and the harsh realities of existence for many actual animals by putting side-by-side fictional, poetic accounts and non-fictional ones. My other hope for this split structure is that it retains some of the character of the work it discusses, which itself twines together a fictional literary-historical past and an emphatic autobiographical present, and conveys the sense of non-linear thinking which the poem seems to encourage or even require. For though there is a clear narrative strand running through the figure of Beatrix, its progression is constantly interrupted or turned back on itself and many aspects of Sedgwick’s poem resist clear understanding or simple explanation: its split parallel timelines (“The present tense of the poem is 1880, except where it is circa 1980”);\(^3\) its striking and sometimes oblique use of figurative language; its strange mix of personal lyric and third-person narrative, and the hybridity of its generic make-up (epistolary, realist novel, civil rights protest poem, journal); and the fact that it remains unfinished. This chapter is, therefore, an attempt to follow a certain thread through what is a thoroughly knotted text. But, ultimately, these crossed wires are what allow for unexpected connections, and are what make this poem such a generous one to think with.

Drawing on a spectrum of more or less figurative embodiments, Sedgwick continually places animal life in key points or relations, and they play an important role in expanding the poem’s imaginative range—both of action and imagery. Therefore, one of the questions I want to ask here is: what kind of work might these animal figures be doing in the poem? They appear as metaphorical qualities of objects—“tapeworm swags


\(^3\) Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 88.
of linen”,4 “shrimp light breasting the tub”.5 As ways of acting (or not acting): Beatrix stands “silent — her father / would have said, she imagined, like a horse”.6 They appear as images of visual confusion, and tactile proximity — as Beatrix makes her escape, “swans, cows; in the sloppy landscape anything / condensed in front of her”; thinking she had fallen “asleep under a windmill”, she realises that “the creaking noise she still heard / was a cygnet — climbing up and down / on top of her. She could have hugged it”.7 They are richly and symbolically suggestive — Butterscotch, the kitten, is removed from the young narrator’s lap, because “two cats were two too many” for young girls to have as pets, according to their father.8 Animals help describe the qualities of art — in Beatrix’s landscapes, the grass looks like “the fur of an animal / too sick to tend itself”;9 and both human and nonhuman animals are themselves drawn from, and form part of, these landscapes — “extents of vital texture… / only at the last extremity nipped in / to make an animal form”.10 Animals are food, good and spoiled — “broken meat” and “miles” of ham” — but they are also companion animals, as in the “almost exactly the same dog” joke.12 They are even models for sexual play when Richard Burton is quoted on “whole” boy prostitutes, and the use of their scrotums as a “bridle for directing / the movements of the animal”.13 Indeed, in Sedgwick’s ‘Notes’ on the poem, she says that her initial idea for the poem was to have “a man named Miles and a hound named Miles”, who, at “the formal climax of the poem […] would somehow get their narrative

4 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 116.
5 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 100.
7 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 111.
8 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 123.
9 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 114.
10 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 114–115.
11 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 130, 98.
12 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 135.
13 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 148.
points-of-view inextricably fused”.\textsuperscript{14} That this fusing of narrative viewpoints both was planned and fails to materialize is revealing of the poem’s boundary-skirting impulses. Sedgwick herself notes that, while borders between states of being are “sought out with longing” in the poem,\textsuperscript{15} inevitably such seeking is as likely to run up against these borders as to flow along and across them. Recounting the unrealized germ of the poem — particularly its metamorphic quality — is then, perhaps, a limited way in which Sedgwick can have her cake and eat it, a way of seeking out or recalling a boundary to be crossed, and running up against the impossibility of doing so, or the acknowledgement of not having done so. The difficulty of knowing what such perspectival confusion would look like appears to be tacitly admitted, when, in retrospect, Sedgwick leaves out the ontological boundary between human and animal in her list of the distinctions the poem seeks out and plays with:

between a person alive and dead; a person and a photograph; a sister and a sister; a present and a past; a person child and adult; people with the same name; a happening and the dream of it; a writer (or a model) and a character; an I and a she or a he.\textsuperscript{16}

This implicit acknowledgement of a barrier between human and animal experience can help us understand why the poem’s animal figures frequently correlate with images of abjection. Though, as I note above, animals are all over ‘The Warm Decembers’, I want to think closely about animals of the poem that

\textsuperscript{14} Sedgwick, \textit{Fat Art, Thin Art}, 157. Narratologist David Herman is currently working on critical strategies for exploring the ways an array of writers and texts have refracted nonhuman experience or perspectives through fiction. For example, see ‘Modernist Life Writing and Nonhuman Lives: Ecologies of Experience in Virginia Woolf’s \textit{Flush}’, \textit{Modernist Fiction Studies} 59.3 (2013), 547–568, and, ‘Storyworld / Umwelt: Nonhuman Experiences in Graphic Novels’, \textit{SubStance} 40.1 (2011), 156–181.

\textsuperscript{15} Sedgwick, \textit{Fat Art, Thin Art}, 160.

\textsuperscript{16} Sedgwick, \textit{Fat Art, Thin Art}, 157.
might be considered, in different ways, abject. Paying attention to bacteria, cow’s milk, and hunted ‘vermin’ or ‘pests’, what emerges from the text is not only a poetics of animals and the abject, but a poetics of abject animals.17

Sedgwick’s incorporation of animals into the poem enriches its scope, resulting in a more nuanced layering of questions of subjectivity and subjection, agency, will, and life itself. But the relation between animality and poetics is two-way. Poetry itself may be a way of saying more with less (or indeed, less with more), as well as of articulating the inarticulable, and the animal poetics of ‘The Warm Decembers’ extends the range of the work it can do and the ideas it can encompass. Animals therefore allow Sedgwick’s poem to speak about more and more widely, but the range of reference opened up would be, in its particular complexity and messiness, nearly impossible to reproduce in expository, non-fictional prose; not only do animals enable Sedgwick’s poetry to say more, but Sedgwick’s poetry is itself able to say more about, and do more with, animals. Messiness is, in fact, a necessary structuring principle of this chapter, and my aim has been throughout to resist, wherever possible, the assignation of too-ready or too-easy burdens of signification on the animals and animal-figures of this strange text. In this way, I am responding here not only to Kristeva and deconstruction, but to Donna Haraway’s explorations of the “knot[s] of species coshaping one another […] sticky with all their muddled histories” 18 One significant lack those explorations suffer

17 In a different context, Mark Payne has explored the links between animals, poetry, and the abject, considering emotionally continuous feelings of aggression between humans other animals in the poetry of ancient Greece and William Carlos Williams, as articulated through a poetics structured by abjection (The Animal Part: Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010], 27–58).

18 Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 42. A poetics of abject animals with its attendant implications of recuperation, worldly entanglement, and increased attention to diversity and scale, necessarily owes an important debt to Haraway: “I think we learn to be worldly from grappling with, rather than generalizing from, the ordinary. I am a creature of the mud, not the sky. I am a biologist who has
from, however, is the lack of scope or space for a sensitivity to
the equally—if not more—knotted relations between species
_in language_, especially literary language, a question which this
chapter takes up.

The poem’s animals’ intersections with the abject often in-
volve the binary processes of consumption and abjection, and,
within this framework, the text performatively enacts a similar
analysis to _Epistemology of the Closet_, that is, the “deconstruc-
tive procedure of isolating particular nodes in a web of inter-
connected binarisms”._19_ While the oversimplified dichotomies
I discuss here (such as consumption/abjection, edible/inedible,
companion/vermin, captivity/freedom) are drawn from the text
itself, they also help structure Western conceptualisations of
human-animal relations, and this overlap in the linguistic pat-
terning of poetry and broader philosophical patterns of thinking about other animals speaks to an ongoing reconfiguration

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_always found edification in the amazing abilities of slime to hold things in
touch and to lubricate passages for living beings and their parts. I love the
fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the
cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent
of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such,
some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and
some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm.
I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an
adult human being in company with these tiny messmates” (3–4). When
Species Meet and The Companion Species Manifesto (Chicago: Prickly Para-
digm Press, 2003) both stand as important and idiomatic contributions to
the field of animal studies, although I should note that I harbour certain
reservations surrounding Haraway’s approach, particularly over the total-
izing and homogenizing power of the overarching metaphor of all species
as “messmates at table, eating together” (301). The risk being that, for all
the insistence on attention to the messy specifics of interspecies response
and interaction, the metaphor itself implies a lack of differentiation between
these “messmates”, thereby creating a more or less sophisticated continu-
ance of justifying the killing of animals for human use or, to put it in Har-
away’s own words, “simply a different way of making killable” (80).

_19_ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, _Epistemology of the Closet_ (Los Angeles: University
within deconstruction of the relation of language to animals.\textsuperscript{20} (It is also, I contend, what makes possible and productive the juxtaposition of poetic and factual representations of animals). Jacques Derrida has long claimed that, for him, the distinction between human and animal has been the foundational structure of Western metaphysics,\textsuperscript{21} and more recent work has sought to ask how we can account for the fact that the logic of the trace and the iterative structure of human language seem to have "something strangely animal at work" in them.\textsuperscript{22}

As I have so far suggested, ‘The Warm Decembers’ is a productive text with which to think about the relations between animals, desire, and human language, and part of the connection between the latter two terms is hinted at by a remark of Sedgwick’s on the poem. The concept of the trace—distinguished from, perhaps, but also related to the trace of deconstruction referred to in the previous paragraph—becomes important to, and metamorphosed by, Sedgwick throughout her career; this mix of confluence and departure marks a potentially fruitful site of interplay between Sedgwick’s readings of desire, and her deconstruction-influenced reading practices.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Sarah Wood, ‘Swans of Life (External Provocations and Autobiographical Flights That Teach Us How to Read)’, in The Animal Question in Deconstruction, 13–33; 26.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Indeed the point may be that the notion of Queer itself exists as trace. In Tendencies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), Sedgwick hopes that “the essays collected in this book […] make, cumulatively, stubbornly, a counterclaim against […] obsolescence: a claim that something about queer is indistinguishable. Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troublant” (xii). Also worth seeing is the long,
the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic’, she suggests that, in “refusing or evaporating” elements of his lived homosexual desires in his writing, James “reliably left a residue both of material that he did not attempt to transmute and of material that could be transmuted only rather violently and messily”. The trace here becomes not only a part of the function of language but a part of both the function of secrets and homophobia. This question of the trace or residue of desire that has been thwarted, disavowed, rerouted, Sedgwick suggests, is also inscribed into ‘The Warm Decembers’. In ‘A Poem is Being Written’, she asks “How far can or will an already gendered and physically very localized desire swerve, how radically will it misrecognize itself in its need to join a preexisting current of discourse through which to become manifest […] to become, in short, meaningful?” The answer is, she believes the poem suggests, “quite far indeed”, but “not without cost, nor perhaps without leaving a trace of its own particular itinerary”. The boundary-seeking, boundary-skirting, and indeed boundary-loving impulses mentioned earlier are then liable to leave a trace, both in terms of language and desire (though how far these terms are separable is, perhaps, always in question), in the poem. What is remarkable, given the absence of the boundary between human and animal in Sedgwick’s list to which I have referred, is just how much of a trace animals seem to leave.

quasi-narrative poem, ‘Trace at 46’, in Fat Art, Thin Art, where Trace is the name of the middle-aged male protagonist, experiencing a case of writer’s block and mid-life crisis (“Why can’t he work on getting the current chapter written, / on Fauré?” [43]), what you might call an experience of anxiety surrounding his trace. A reference to this poem appears as the first sentence of chapter nine of Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 161.

24 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 197.
25 Sedgwick, Tendencies, 206.
26 Sedgwick, Tendencies, 206.
27 This assertion would run contrary, as Derrida has pointed out, to a long-running and decisive strand of Western philosophical thinking on the animal: “even those who, from Descartes to Lacan, have conceded to the animal some aptitude for signs and for communication but have always denied
An exploration of animal poetics needs both to account for the overlap between human language and the other animals it can refer to and remain attuned to the differences between the two. But Derrida’s insistence on the similarities between conceptual structures of thought or language and the real-world conditions that it both sustains and generates is nonetheless particularly useful here. These patterns of thought and representation, he argues, are frequently couched in “commonly accredited oppositional limits between what is called nature and culture, nature/law, physis/nomos, God, man, and animal”, and these limits are framed by the real-world conditions described in The Animal That Therefore I Am:

However one interprets it, whatever practical, technical, scientific, juridical, ethical, or political consequence one draws from it, no one can today deny this event—that is, the unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal. […] No one can deny seriously any more, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves; in order to organize on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence, which some would compare to the worst cases of genocide. […] It is occurring through the organization and exploitation of an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival, in conditions that previous generations would have judged monstrous, outside of every presumed norm of a life proper to animals that are thus exterminated by means of their continued existence or even their overpopulation.\footnote{Derrida, The Beast and the Sovereign, 1: 15.}

In contrast, Kristeva’s seminal 1980 work, Powers of Horror, offers a less clear, but nonetheless provocative link between language, animals, and the abject: stating that “the abject confronts
us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*”. 30 ‘Animal’ is italicized in the text, and the sense that Kristeva requires the word to signify perhaps both too expansively and too securely is hard to avoid (as is the sense of a missing definite article). 31 Simply grammatically, for instance, it is not clear whether in this sentence *animal* is a noun (as in “the territories of *animals*”) or an adjective (as in “territories which are *animalized* or *animalistic*”). This ambiguity, though, is nonetheless important to a more expansive sense of the links between animals and the abject. The “fragile states” between “man and animal” is another way of characterizing and understanding the variety and fecundity with which animals signify poetically in ‘The Warm Decembers’, as well as another way of describing the often occluded links between conceptual or linguistic categories and their possible counterparts in more praxis-based contexts. For it is in the flexibility and ambiguity of written language that these “fragile states” can be recovered and explored. What are the links between the abject and animals, or “the animal”? And what links the grammatical or semantic function of an animal in a text with an individual animal’s wider relational interactions? Are the territories of animals always necessarily abject? Sedgwick’s poem, of course, provides no answers to these questions, but its animal poetics create room in which they can be explored. In considering these questions of structure and meaning making, what follows is a series of meeting points between abjection and consumption and human and animal, which attempt to render some sense of the messiness with which these two complicated categories of human identity-construction and meaning-making can interact.

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31 On the impossibly expansive corraling that the term ‘the Animal’ is allowed to achieve, and on the idea of the animot, see Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 32–39.
Parts of characters, memories, images, and objects are all consumed and/or ejected throughout the text, and the idea of what is kept inside and what is thrown up or ejected keeps resurfacing—indeed it will not stay down. In particular, the juxtaposition of infant and parasite registers a certain uncanny analogousness between the two as invasive and (initially) unrecognisable foreign species, who must ultimately be expelled to preserve the health and integrity of the carrier. Baby Henry is thrown up in “tapeworm swags of indigestible linens”, beached “like the stove-in carcass of some ship”, oscillating between outside and inside—ejected, swaddled, and stoved-in. Prior to Beatrix’s hiccuping into the world, though, the fine but important line between foetus and parasite is more insistently foregrounded.

Lucinda’s pregnancy shares a timeline and a body with the tuberculosis that kills her (which is also, of course, known as consumption), a simultaneity which manifests not only the potentially radical strangeness of pregnancy and birth, but the potency of Kristeva’s figuration of the abject in this context. One of the most distinctive characteristics of what is abject is its “[dis]respect [of] borders, positions, rules”; while the “stranger” in Lucinda’s lungs only brushes its “heavy tail matted with dung / and leaves” up against her chest, the intimate tactility of brushing in this case is the most complete violation. This strain of mycobacteria inhabiting and destroying Lucinda’s lungs is a creature with a “fine snout” and “dry feet”: a distinctly animal if not precisely porcine, figure, and, above all, a “stranger”. While the “oxygenless hue of radishes”—Beatrix—is ready to “hurl herself” in any direction, it is another involuntary muscular spasm, a “yawn”, which signals the departure of both the tuberculous stranger and Lucinda. The occupation of her body leaves practically no room for Lucinda herself, dispossessing her of the capacity for action and agency, so that neither the exit of the stranger or Beatrix are voluntary actions. A yawn and a hiccup

33 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 91.
34 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 92.
are all that Lucinda has left, and, as Steven Connor has suggested, the hiccup, like the sob, enacts a strange kind of incapability within desire, as the manifestation of an obstacle. A hiccup is parasitic: “countermanding speech, [it] nonetheless seems to cling to it; it strains for articulation, and is empty and abstract until it has bound itself to it, like the virus with no DNA of its own which it must acquire of its host”.35 During the pregnancy, a similarly involuntary breaking in of voice on speech permeates borders between Lucinda and Lucy Lucas: “Death […] / uttered its sentence in […] / the very tattoo, of Lucy Lucas”.36 The hiccup, the yawn, the unconscious rhythmic tattoo: Lucinda’s pregnancy is characterized by moments of involuntary oral abjection, and by the confusion and permeability of borders between lovers, children and parasites, and life and death. What is abject, we seem to learn, has profoundly different ontological possibilities and ambiguities; pregnancy and birth itself are not so much contrasted with the stranger in the lungs, as uncannily juxtaposed.

Procreation and gestation are the processes by which life is continued, but in placing a vividly realized animal life inside Lucinda, alongside the foetus, Sedgwick queers the culmination of the reproductive process, perhaps anticipating a kind of deconstruction within the paradigmatic act of reproductive futurism, where pregnancy and birth itself is already queered.37 All of us carry nonhuman life within our bodies — and both baby and the animalized mycobacteria of TB are “strangers”. If, as is certainly the case, the category of the human is produced at least in part through the abjection of what is “animal” or (what this is often synonymous with) other, the strange knotting of the fates of Lucinda, the baby, and the creature complicates this claim,

36 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 92.
and reminds us of the different ways in which a human subject is intimately inhabited by something other.\textsuperscript{38}

In locating the territories of the animal within the pregnant female body, Sedgwick also draws together the abject with a certain model of both fertile and fragile femininity and animals. While the link between animals and the former two terms appears to be an insight unique to the poem, Sedgwick notes intriguingly during the period of the poem’s writing that “the relation between the traffic-in-women paradigm […] and Kristeva’s [hypothesis] in \textit{Powers of Horror}, of a primary fear in men and women of the maternal power of women, is yet to be analyzed”.\textsuperscript{39}

Less of such an analysis, but more of a thinking, would seem to be happening in this complex reconfiguration of Kristeva’s formulation of the abject, which employs a remarkable, arresting, almost vehemently anti-conventionalist poetics in which abjection-gestation is an evacuation and obliteration of the female body, but at the same time produces a protagonist to which perhaps our own, but certainly Sedgwick’s, identificatory desires are focused towards: Beatrix.\textsuperscript{40}

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The dairy cow surely has pride of place among farmed animals. Historically, she has been revered, and she is frequently portrayed as a symbol of maternal nurturing. The life of the majority of cows used for dairy, however, is very harsh.

\textsuperscript{38} Diana Fuss articulates just this kind of resistance to simplification in the face of definitions of the human: “Our purpose in this volume is not to broaden the category of the human to include previously abjected and excluded others, but to engage in a more radical interpretation of the process by which the human comes to mean in the production of cultural difference” \textit{‘Introduction’}, in ed., \textit{Human, All Too Human} (London: Routledge, 1996), 1–2.
\textsuperscript{39} Sedgwick, \textit{Between Men}, 18.
\textsuperscript{40} In a much later essay on Proust, Sedgwick identifies Kristeva’s readings of the same author as sharing a certain anti-Oedipal kinship (\textit{The Weather in Proust} [Durham: Duke University Press, 2011], 5, 37).
The young female, or heifer, can produce her first calf at around two years of age. In a natural environment, she would let her calf suckle several times a day — in between, she would leave him in a sheltered, safe area, probably with some other calves, and wander off to graze, thus fuelling her own milk supply. After a couple of weeks, the calf would start eating grass as well, and over the next eight months or so, he would gradually wean himself off his mother. The maternal bond is very strong. There are records of cows traveling several miles on their own to find calves who have been taken from them and sold to other farms. In all cases they somehow manage to scent out their own calf in completely unknown territories.

In the high-tec dairy industry, the calf is taken away from his mother at just a day or two old. This causes apparent anguish to both. The cow is then milked to capacity, often producing ten times as much milk as her calf would have suckled from her, had he been allowed to do so.41

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Using her revulsion to milk as an example of the way abjection works to create and maintain a human subject, Kristeva recalls the sight-clouding dizziness, nausea [that] makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire […]. “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that

they see that “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.\footnote{Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 3.}

There is a certain resemblance between the process Kristeva describes and the account of Lucinda’s pregnancy, a kind of literalization performed in Sedgwick’s poem. The human body which Lucinda expels was forced onto her by Cosmo, and as this growing body inside Lucinda takes up more and more of her TB-depleted resources — takes up, more and more, the body of Lucinda — the final hiccup of expulsion occurs at precisely the same time as “out the other end” life leaves Lucinda.\footnote{Sedgwick, \textit{Fat Art, Thin Art}, 92.} The subject that is produced through this abjection in Sedgwick’s version, however, is the abject being itself, Beatrix.

Later in the poem, Beatrix herself is forced to negotiate a threat to her own sense of subjecthood, and, curiously, this is, in part, precipitated by, and resolved through, a revulsion to milk and other animal products. That milk is, in both Sedgwick’s and Kristeva’s imaginary, a prominent feature of a scene of difficult negotiations between parent and child is perhaps paradoxically appropriate, given that the production of milk involves doing such violence to the maternal bond, a violence that is both physical (forcibly removing the calf, for male ones often to veal crates), and psychological. But if the production processes of dairy in some ways set the scene for their appearance in \textit{Powers of Horror} and ‘The Warm Decembers’, so too do the rhetorical and conceptual lives of milk chime with Sedgwick’s poem.

Beatrix’s account of her dream in Chapter Five describes a conversation with her mother, who tells her that her dead father “had / always disliked” Beatrix, as well as featuring an encounter with the same father. His intense dislike of Beatrix, she learns, was meant “to conceal something the opposite, / a strong, underlying desire”, and it is this “whiplash of hatred and love”
which, for the space of the dream, “keep[s] him a little / longer from dispersing in that death- / that-comes-just-after-death”. He enters, carrying a “pudding” or “trollope”, “an architectural mayonnaise, / rounded, and swaggy with arabesques, and huge” (ibid), which more and more seems to represent a fascinating horror of dissolution and incorporation. The trollope is “forgetful” of the plate it is on, a “sucking rift / of pudding pulling pudding”, “slewing across the tipsy platter when / already it was broken meat, burst dimpled milk, / the protein girdle ruptured, / or almost” (ibid), and ultimately the forgetful pudding is a figure of her father’s disregard of ontological boundaries — “like his forgetting he was dead”. What saves Beatrix, it would seem, from the “spreading turbid place of that / ruinous thing” (ibid) is precisely the repulsion to the “burst dimpled milk” and “the dead breath of milk” on her father’s breath (ibid); the instinctive recoil they generate are signs of a separate being. In this dream, Beatrix reaches out beyond the boundaries of death (in a passage which seems to anticipate Sedgwick’s interest in Tibetan Buddhism later in her life), and her mother struggling to articulate a feeling that death might not mean abjection from the realms of the living and that the reactive process of abjection might delay spiritual death. There is something so pungent and nauseating about the smell of decaying cow’s milk in both Powers of Horror and ‘The Warm Decembers’ that the instinctual retch of abjection it produces is itself a sign of life, and that retch bears some similarity to the powerful and contradictory energies of desire that protracts her father’s death. And indeed it also bears some similarity to the unconscious “rhythmic tattoo”, the hiccup, and the yawn that accompany Beatrix’s birth. But the point must also be that dairy and eggs are what Carol J. Adams describes as “absent referents”. Ttalking about “dairy”, “milk”,

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44 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 129–130.
45 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 131.
47 Carol J. Adams, The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory (London: Continuum, 1990). Here, if there were time, would also
“eggs”, and “meat” instead of “cow’s milk”, “chicken’s eggs”, or “dead cow” are ways of hiding the facts of their production and of the lives that are ended in bringing them to the plate, and so the actual animals that these consumable objects (should) signify become absent referents. Absence, then, is inscribed at the heart of the milk and eggs — the “architectural mayonnaise” and “sour milk” — which signifies, for Beatrix, the strange presence of the absence of her father.

But if the involuntary reaction to milk is a way of affirming some kind of selfhood, it also crosses what Derrida has identified as a foundational, structuring binary of the human/animal dichotomy: the distinction between response and reaction. In several places, Derrida argues that the enduring legacy of Descartes has continued to depict animals as mere automata, incapable — crucially — of the capacity to respond. In a footnote (always a productive place for Derrida), he states:

Here we would need, as I have tried elsewhere, in a rereading of Descartes, to unfold what I shall here call the question of the response. And to define the hegemonic performance of this “Cartesianism” that dominates the discourse of human and humanist modernity — as to the animal. What the programmed machine, like the animal, supposedly cannot do, is not to emit signs but, says the Discourse on Method (part 5), to “respond.”

“The question of the response” is pursued in The Beast and the Sovereign through a reading of Lacan (whose influence on Kristeva is, of course, fundamental), who, for Derrida, exemplifies the way even the most theoretically sophisticated thinkers can present “simultaneously a theoretical mutation and a stagnant

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48 I owe this insight to Emelia Quinn. For more on this see her MA dissertation, “Is He a Martyr Or Is He a Fucking Jalfrezi?”: Reading Islamophobia Through a Vegan Lens, University of York, 2014.

49 Derrida, Beast and the Sovereign, 1: 111–112.
confirmation of the legacy [of Cartesianism], its presuppositions and its dogmas”.\textsuperscript{50} But, he argues, when these presuppositions and dogmas are interrogated, it becomes clear that exactly what it means to respond is unstable and ill-defined itself—a problem, therefore, for anyone who insists that humans alone possess the ability to respond, and to distinguish response and the lack thereof in other beings. The retch of abjection, then, constitutes a human subject in a moment of instinctive reaction, thereby straying on the “territories of the animal”, in Lacan-through-Kristeva’s formulation. These fragile states are then, in one way, points at which our oppositional definitions of the human—of ourselves—are troubled and, at least in this case, troubled by the para-linguistic affects caused by an animal product which has been culturally transformed for human consumption.

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And eating animals is one of those topics, like abortion, where it is impossible to definitively know some of the most important details (When is a foetus a person, as opposed to a potential person? What is animal experience really like?) and that cuts right to one’s deepest discomforts, often provoking defensiveness or aggression. It’s a slippery, frustrating, and resonant subject.\textsuperscript{51}

I wouldn’t eat George, because she’s mine. But why wouldn’t I eat a dog I’d never met? Or more to the point, what justification might I have for sparing dogs but eating other animals? […]

Dogs are wonderful, and in many ways unique. But they are remarkably unremarkable in their intellectual and experiential capacities. Pigs are every bit as intelligent and feeling, by any sensible definition of the words. They can’t hop into

\textsuperscript{50} Derrida, \emph{The Beast and the Sovereign}, 1: 113.

the back of a Volvo, but they can fetch, run and play, be mischievous, and reciprocate affection. So why don’t they get to curl up by the fire? Why can’t they at least be spared being tossed on the fire?

Our taboo against dog eating says something about dogs and a great deal about us.\textsuperscript{52}

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The inedibility of burst milk that causes the retch of Beatrix and Kristeva links to another thematic thread in the poem. While cow’s milk has long been designated edible by agrarian northern/western cultures, ‘The Warm Decembers’ also draws attention to the role inedible, abject animals — often classified as vermin — play in the scenes around Bluefields.

Jonathan Safran Foer argues that the labels of edible and inedible come not from “a law of nature” but “from the stories we tell about nature”,\textsuperscript{53} but in ‘The Warm Decembers’ these labels are rather explored through stories told about hunting and photography, stories, one might say, about the processes by which humans make nature mean something. Bluefields is, like Trollope’s novels, the site of regular fox hunting. Hunting, that is, as a sport and not as a means of sustenance is an activity that aims at the capture, not consumption, of an inedible quarry. “Hounds do not eat the fox that they kill, and fox does not constitute part of their diet. Hounds are neither capturing food for themselves, nor are they doing so, as in many other hunting events, for humans”.\textsuperscript{54} In a canny juxtaposition of the masculine, homosocial hunt and Beatrix’s personal photographic hobby, Sedgwick in contrast highlights the terminology of consumption that photography is couched in. If the men hunt to kill rather than to eat, Beatrix’s hobby is considerably less wasteful: when asked by

\textsuperscript{52} Foer, \textit{Eating Animals}, 24–25.

\textsuperscript{53} Foer, \textit{Eating Animals}, 25.

Trollope, “you with your light and camera have consumed / how many plates?”, Beatrix replies, “It’s slow, but I’m omnivorous”. And as she captures the landscapes around Bluefields, the scene of hunting is indeed omnivorously gobbled up by her camera: “the wheatfield hoofed to silver after fox, / hounds, horn, huntsmen, horses: the / photographic light that eats the plate”. This photographic metaphor is engaged alongside more familiar ideas of capturing and shooting (Trollope finds Beatrix “hiding” “from the hunters”, trying “to shoot / the Priory ruins”), and, in doing so, the text points towards the proximity, as well as the shifting demarcations, of the edible and inedible, of, perhaps, fox hunting and hunter-gathering. However, that Beatrix is the photographer and that we never properly witness a hunt also suggests that Sedgwick is sensitive to what Giovanni Aloi has identified as “traditionally masculine perceptions and attitudes towards the wider world [and] animals” and “the synergic conflation of gun, camera, gaze and the desire to possess” that such attitudes found artistic footholds in. Beatrix’s photography equipment is a hand-me-down from her violent husband, and both this second-hand equipment and her gender combine perhaps to centre the photographing subject.

The hunt also raises questions of agency, will, and waste, which intersect with Beatrix’s failed escape attempt from the boarding house to which Cosmo confines her, her mother, and her sister; an escape attempt, that is, in which she is the pursued. The inedibility of the quarry in the foxhunt is the counterpart of Beatrix’s camera’s omnivorous ability to capture and consume anything and everything. But if inedibility is an important part of the hunt, it is no less critically structured, anthropologist Garry Marvin suggests, by the possibility of the

56 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 100.
57 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 127.
quarry escaping. What the fox hunt relies upon, we might say, is the hunted animal being capable of resisting the aims of the human participants, of what Vinciane Despret has called *agency*. This describes a capacity to affect other beings that only emerges in the interaction between individuals, rather than an idea of agency as an attribute of those individuals. Rather than thinking of agency as “intentional, rational, and premeditated” Despret urges us to see it as a function of reciprocal actions. The rules of the foxhunt necessarily allow the possibility for the fox to escape, to thwart the hunters. And so we can see how similar law-bound structures might create limited conditions for the exercise of individual will. The possibility of resistance to, or escape from, a given structure might offer a more flexible model of agency than is generally still relied upon.

At the risk of over-extending the homologies between structures of hunting and Beatrix’s photography, it is important to remember that Beatrix is, in many ways, a failed escape artist. She only barely manages to escape the womb, at the loss of her mother; she is unable to step out of her husband’s shadow in the eyes of the other guests at Bluefields; the “demented pup” and Trollope “nose” her out when she tries to shoot the priory ruins in solitude; and her attempt to escape from the work of a “slavey in a rooming-house” leaves her bedridden in the very house she fled. Thus the focus above on “subject/agent boundaries” is useful for highlighting the fact that Beatrix’s own failed escape attempt from Great Yarmouth, and the subsequent urinary tract infection she develops, in part redraws her own subjectivity and free will. Her escape is foiled by her regard for the rules of propriety and gender-appropriate behaviour and her sense of shame, and ultimately she thwarts her own attempt by not being willing to get rid of her own bodily waste when necessary.

This failure to escape given social and personal structures makes legible a confusion regarding agency and will, a confusion not so much caused by the “middle ranges of agency” (a question in which Sedgwick is deeply engaged critically)\textsuperscript{64} as by the kind of paradoxically impossible escape from discipline which D.A. Miller outlines in \textit{The Novel and the Police} (1988).\textsuperscript{65} To what extent does Beatrix stop herself, and to what extent is it an inevitability derived from restrictive social conventions? To what extent can the fox exert its own will in the fox hunt, and is escape properly possible? If, to mix Despret’s and Marvin’s terms, agency is possible in the structures of pursuit, but not a rational, intentionalist style of agency, we might remain suspicious, as I think Sedgwick does, of the efficacy of such redefinitions or new terminologies alone in fundamentally altering the repressive structures of either patriarchy or human exceptionalism.

During Beatrix’s escape, Sedgwick’s turn to an animal poetics, once again a linked poetics of dissolution and elision, coincides with a foregrounding of this question of will or agency. When the “will so local in the distended bladder of this woman too shy (of course) to / urinate in the light and air was let to lapse”,\textsuperscript{66} the stream of piss morphs into a snaking, coiling water-hose in 1960’s Alabama, dropping civil rights protestors as “glistening offal” and pulling out the feet of those trying to direct it. From out of this knotted, self-defeating and uncontrollable image of supposedly agentive will — “the running noose; Bea’s control, let out / of her control” — distinctions between subject and object, animate and inanimate, become blurred:


\textsuperscript{65} D.A. Miller, \textit{The Novel and the Police} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

\textsuperscript{66} Sedgwick, \textit{Fat Art, Thin Art}, 110.
Swans, cows; in the sloppy landscape anything condensed in front of her.
Not only the land
and the water, or the sea water and the fresh water,
but the water and the air, over and over the same places,
sometimes invisible and sometimes visible.

And the “creaking noise” she thought was a windmill turns out to be a cygnet, “climbing up and down / on top of her”. These dim, nebulous moments threaten a coherent sense of individual selfhood — as do both Trollope and the trollope — but they also prove artistically productive for Beatrix, who, while bedridden, scratches landscapes in chalk, “extents of vital texture, slabs of it / only at the last extremity nipped in / to make an animal form”.

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Pigs also have an inborn tendency to use separate areas for sleeping and defecating that is totally thwarted in confinement. The pregnant pigs, like most all pigs in industrial systems, must lie or step in their excrement to force it through the slatted floor.

In Smithfield’s case, the number is about 281 pounds of shit for each American citizen. That means that Smithfield — a single legal entity — produces at least as much fecal waste as the entire human population of California and Texas combined.

Imagine it. Imagine if, instead of the massive water-treatment infrastructure that we take for granted in modern cities, every man, woman, and child in every city and town in

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67 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 111.
68 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 153.
69 Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 115.
70 Foer, Eating Animals, 184.
all of California and all of Texas crapped and pissed in a huge open-air pit for a day. Now imagine that they don’t do this for just a day, but all year round, in perpetuity.\textsuperscript{71}

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These “extents of vital texture” “nipped in” to make animal forms is perhaps the best way to understand the animal poetics of ‘The Warm Decembers’. “Nipping in” is a kind of gathering that is always fluid, contingent, and improvisatory: as liable to come apart as it is to get stuck. And so the poem, gathering as it does fluid and various “ontological thresholds”, is about what it means to self-fashion and be fashioned into a human subject. But in the poem, not only are the attachments and pressures that shape a subjectivity probed and enlarged in scope, but subjectivity, volition, and the continuance of our identities become impossible to think without an animal presence. Sedgwick’s poetic language is one which embraces the fantasies and horrors of dissolution, of spiritual and material elision, at the same time as it boldly seeks out the fragile boundaries erected to stave them off. And its animal poetics are, Sedgwick seems to suggest, ways of raising related questions that complicate and thicken our sense of this. That these poetics are underlaid by her familiarity with object relations psychoanalysis\textsuperscript{72} (as I hope to have shown) suggests that, for her, the animal poetics of ‘The Warm Decembers’ are, in some ways, another attempt to find a language, or vocabulary, for how we fashion semi-coherent selves. But, perhaps most importantly, the animal in these animal poetics is another way of exploring the “transitivity” at the heart of queer.\textsuperscript{73} That queer “tend[s] toward ‘across’ formulations” is central to Sedgwick’s definition, and what is evident in ‘The Warm Decembers’ is that it at no point takes either the boundaries separating, or the vectors of relation between, human and other

\textsuperscript{71} Foer, Eating Animals, 175.
\textsuperscript{72} For example, see The Weather in Proust, 123–143.
\textsuperscript{73} Sedgwick, Tendencies, xii.
animals for granted. These borders and paths, when they occur in the poem, tend to differentially move across other forms of relati
onality and subjectivity that are also kept in play, to the extent that to speak only of an animal poetics is perhaps artificially to pick a single thread in a beautifully tangled skein. What ‘The Warm Decembers’ messily, strangely points out is that the lines separating, and the lines joining, human and other animals can—maybe should—be part of a queer constellation of thought. I leave the final word to Sedgwick, who sums up this messiness succinctly: “The immemorial current that queer represents is antiseparationist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange.”

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74 Sedgwick, Tendencies, xii.