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## Provocations from the Field : The Place of Bees

Michael R. Griffiths

*University of Wollongong*, [mickg@uow.edu.au](mailto:mickg@uow.edu.au)

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## Provocations from the Field : The Place of Bees

### **Abstract**

What would it mean to permit lack to become a productive place? What, indeed, would it mean to think place – so often feminized in the carnophallogocentric order – as active? Lack, in these terms, could be constitutive rather than a mere marker of absence. I propose that the place of bees in the symbolics of species could yield answers to these and related questions. Insects are often understood and conceived as communicators – through pheromones for instance. But in the very gesture that recognizes their communication, one finds the refusal of consciousness behind this communicative apparatus. If bees are said to lack consciousness, bees nonetheless matter. But what place will bees have as they face extinction? Amidst much else, bees are a medium of pollination for human agriculture. In that sense, bees are a matrix for the very sustenance of the human species: a place for humans. In China, honeybee death has led to the need for human workers to pollinate crops by hand (Goulson). The possible extinction of the honeybee is a potentially devastating effect of the anthropocene. We are tied to bees as long as we are tied to crops and agriculture, but this is not the sole reason to care about bees.



## The Place of Bees

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**Michael R. Griffiths**

**University of Wollongong**

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*How, then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people (Woolf, 55).*

— Virginia Woolf

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medium of pollination for human agriculture. In that sense, bees are a matrix for the very sustenance of the human species: a place for humans. In China, honeybee death has led to the need for human workers to pollinate crops by hand (Goulson). The possible extinction of the honeybee is a potentially devastating effect of the anthropocene. We are tied to bees as long as we are tied to crops and agriculture, but this is not the sole reason to care about bees.

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the speciesist asininity of a binary distinction of human and animal – the abyssal rupture of *l'animot* – is something most scholars in the field of Human-Animal studies are aware of. But the implications of this deconstruction of the *animot* are sometimes less well understood than they are cited (Derrida, 30). Here, I parse Derrida's deconstruction of the human animal binary, particularly as it takes issue with Jacques Lacan; this critique is not insignificantly concerned with the place of bees. I do so not only to reveal the steps in Derrida's argument, but also the gendered limits: the lack within its very thought of lack. It is for this reason I turn finally to Luce Irigaray in order to rethink lack as such and the way it is imputed to the honeybee.

As I have suggested, the honeybee is one critter at the heart of Derrida's deconstruction of Lacan. Lacan writes:

It is now generally admitted that when the bee returns to the hive from its honey-gathering it indicates to its companions by two sorts of dance the existence of nectar and its relative distance, near or far, from the hive. The second type of dance is the most remarkable, for the plane in which the bee traces the figure-of-eight curve – which is why it has been called the “wagging dance,” – and the frequency of the figures executed within a given time, designate, on the one hand, exactly the direction to be followed, determined in relation to the inclination of the sun (on which bees are able to orient themselves in all weathers, thanks to their sensitivity to polarized light), and, on the other hand, the distance, up to several miles, at which the nectar is to be found. And the other bees respond to this message by setting off immediately for the place thus designated (quoted in Derrida 123.)

*Apis Nearctica*, the honeybees and their relatives can dance and in dancing, communicate to their hive fellows the relative distance and trajectory that can be followed to find sources of water and pollen — a process which James L. Gould famously called honey bee ‘recruitment’

(Gould). Karl Von Frisch is credited with having ‘showed that bees indicate the distance and direction of food sources by two kinds of dances: a round and a tail-waggle dance.’ In doing so, he posited these twin dances as a mode of communication, or code, or language – and the distinction between these three will be crucial to those various humans it upsets. Since the debate about bee communication took place between Von Frisch – with his dance hypothesis – and Adrian Wenner – with his reductionist insistence on pheromone signalling – bees have come to appear epistemically fragile creatures, as well as literally endangered in varying geopolitical sites and spaces. While Wenner queried the complexity of honeybee dance by recourse to a reduction of the bee to a pheromonal automaton, Von Frisch’s ideas have prevailed among ethologists.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing from the revelations of Von Frisch, then, Lacan opens a space for the bee in the thought of signs and signification. At least, one would have thought so, but Lacan continues, sceptically:

But is it necessarily a language? We can say that it is distinguished from language precisely by the *fixed* correlation of its signs to the reality that they signify. For in a language signs take on their value from their relations to each other in the lexical distribution of semantemes as much as in the positional, or even flectional, use of morphemes, in sharp contrast to the fixity of the coding used by bees. And the diversity of human languages [*langues*] takes on its full value from this enlightening discovery (quoted in Derrida, 123–4).

For Lacan, *human* languages in their diversity are to be the human exceptionalist ground for the dismissal of other diverse communicative apparatuses – including bee or human dances. Their phylogenetic distinctness seems to me no good reason to dismiss the Bee dance in its complexity or affective vivacity. Indeed, Lacan does not do so. Yet he nonetheless denies bee

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<sup>1</sup> Tania Munz has discussed this debate in rigorous historical detail (Munz).

communication the status of a language in spite of such complexity. For this reason, Derrida detects a bad conscience and a Cartesian reductionist human exceptionalism to boot:

Lacan is so precise and firm when it comes to accrediting the old yet modernized topos of the bee that he seems, if I might say so, not to have a clear conscience. I detect an unavowed anxiety behind the authority of this new, yet so old, old discourse concerning the bee. . . . When bees appear to “respond” to a “message,” they do not respond but react; they merely obey a fixed program, whereas the human subject responds to the other, to the question from or of the other (quoted in Derrida, 123).

As Derrida shows, for Lacan, the bee is hermetically sealed from a true *response*. It is supposed, rather, to be a machine that merely *reacts* to stimuli.

It is therefore precisely the question of the radicality of alterity that will form the ground of Derrida’s debate with Lacan over lack, in which bees become a drone in a poststructuralist hive of debate. As Derrida notes, for Lacan: ‘When bees appear to ‘respond’ to a ‘message,’ they do not respond but react; they merely obey a fixed program, whereas the human subject responds to the other, to the question from or of the other’ (qtd. in Derrida, 123). As Derrida will further note, throwing up his arms: ‘This discourse is quite literally Cartesian.’ For Derrida, instead, it is not the Cartesian relation between the subject and consciousness that matters, but the fact of the relation’s redundancy when the question of a code is evoked. To signify subjectivity through a code – whether human language or honeybee dance – is to give up the Cartesian centrality of the thinking ‘I’ as what is essential to subjectivity. It becomes not only ethically but also epistemologically problematic to undertake to distinguish the human from the nonhuman, *as such*. As Cary Wolfe has argued, two consequences follow from the error of the *animot*: the first is that differences in degree tend to be confused with differences in kind; the second, which paradoxically follows from the first, arises insofar as this difference of kind occasionally permits us to recognize nonhuman animals as worthy ethical agents when they resemble the kind that we are (Wolfe 10).

So the metacommunicative structure is inaugurated by the passaging from pretense to a ‘feigning’ of ‘feigning.’ This doubled feigning becomes for Lacan, in turn, the basis for the ontological rift discursively maintained by Lacan as an inheritor of the founding carnophallogocentric presuppositions of Cartesian abyssal rupture. For Lacan, the animal cannot

‘feign feigning,’ it cannot pretend to pretend – this is the first binary distinction that will exclude prey animals and predators alike. Lacan nevertheless admits that animals are capable of certain kinds of feints and pretences:

[d]eployed in an imaginary capture, the feint is integrated into the play of approach and retreat that constituted the first dance . . . [A]nimals show that they are capable of such behaviour when they are being hunted down; they manage to throw their pursuers off the scent by briefly going in one direction as a lure and then changing direction . . . But an animal does not feign feigning [*feindre de feindre*]. It does not make tracks whose deceptiveness lies in getting them to be taken as false, when in fact they are true — that is tracks that indicate the right trail (Lacan 293).

What is most vital is not only that Lacan sets up an abyssal rupture between the human and the nonhuman at the level of *animot* – though he certainly does that and Derrida will not fail to point it out. Rather, what is most significant about the mode of *animot* installed by Lacan and deconstructed here, at the level of the logic of the sign, is that it assumes a fundamental difference between consciousness of metacommunication and metacommunication itself.

Derrida describes the undecidability of logocentric language, with its binaries, as itself opening onto a lack at the centre of the supposed stability of the *Cogito*:

Undecidability comes to trouble the opposition, which is so decisive for Lacan, between leaving tracks [*tracer*] and covering one’s tracks [*effacer ses traces*]. The animal can trace, inscribe, or leave a track or trace but, Lacan adds, it does not “cover up its tracks, which would be tantamount to making itself the subject of the signifier.” . . . (*and this is why so long ago I substituted the concept of trace for that of signifier*), the structure of the trace presupposes that *to trace amounts to erasing a trace* (always present-absent) (Derrida 135. Emphasis added).

The signifier is always already undecidable in its sincerity and, as such, there is no distinction between feigning and feigning feigning. For Derrida, all signification is trace. One consequence of this is that the possibility of feigning feigning is emergent from the very first pretence (or, indeed, from the most faithfully performed act, always at risk of recognition as pretence or indeed, pretence of pretence). Every sign inaugurates the possibility of its reversal; this is where

metacommunicative possibilities arise as such. When ‘I’ am given in signification, ‘I’ is given to the vicissitudes of what Derrida will variously call a general play of trace and iterability. It is not that some beings are the subject of the signifier and others are mere automatons because, for Derrida, signs are always already trace and marks of meaning can always be feints, or, indeed, feints of feints. What is crucial is that abandoning the Cartesian proposition in favor of the inscription of the subject in the *trace* of code (linguistic or otherwise) means that one cannot discriminate between the relative complexity of codes and communicative devices.

While Derrida takes issue with Lacan on the question of signifier and trace, nonetheless each continues to maintain the basic post-structuralist proposition that the subject is inscribed in language. Once one has granted such a proposition, then the specificity of the subject of language (as opposed to the code of the automaton) remains in play whether the levels of tracing and erasure are many or few. This is the case whether one expresses the proposition through Lacan’s phrase ‘man’s desire is the Other’s desire’ [*le désir de l’homme est le désir de l’Autre*] or through Derrida’s notion that ‘there is nothing outside the text,’ or as it perhaps should better be rendered, ‘there is no outside-text’ [*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*] (Lacan 158–9). For Derrida, once agreement has been reached on certain crucial propositions of post-structuralism about the alien-ness of the subject to the *langue* that inscribes it, to insist on the distinction between making and erasing a trace inevitably results in a *reduction ad absurdum*.

The problem that Derrida rightly sees in Lacan’s discourse is that it produces a difference between human and animal on the basis of a lack:

if ‘human knowledge has greater autonomy than animal knowledge in relation to the field of force of desire,’ and if ‘the human order is distinguished from nature,’ it is, paradoxically, because of an imperfection, because of an originary lack or defect [*défaut*] in man, who has, in sum, received speech and technics only inasmuch *as he lacks something* (Derrida 122).

Derrida deconstructs Lacan by showing that he relies on a notion of lack [*manque*] and defect [*défaut*] in ‘man,’ even as such tropes of absence are also the basis for his diagnostic exclusion of ‘the’ animal from any possible resemblance to *langues*.

The point, implicit in Derrida's discussion is that there is an affinity between human and bee at the level of lack: each is to some degree estranged from conscious participation in the respective codes within which they are inscribed. The inscription of the subject in a code inevitably implies a lack of conscious participation in that code. It is not that humans lack consciousness or that bees can be shown to possess it. The point is that even the conscious subject lacks a relation to the code in which they are inscribed. It is also, therefore something shared between every being that operates in relation to some communicative code or other: bee or 'man,' or 'human,' or 'woman.' Unless a Cartesian reduction is the basis of one's discursive grounding of human-animal difference, then the recognition that the languages we speak, speak us is something we share at the level of affinity (if, perhaps, not complexity) with every form of signifying life. It is here that bees will become a sticking point between the two post-structuralists.

Bees matter and they lack no less than we do. Derrida gives us a great deal more reason than Lacan to care about the suffering and potential disappearance of bees, no doubt. But nonetheless, Derrida's thought operates not by showing what we might be said to share with bees, except in so far as what we share is the fundamental lack at the center of language. In this way, what Derrida is concerned about in Lacan is true of Derrida himself: namely that there is a constitutive lack at the center of the subject of the signifier. Derrida agrees with Lacan (more or less) on this point; the difference is that Derrida would not foreclose the sharedness that this lack might proffer between the human and what it calls the *animot*.

Since humans rely on bee pollination practices to grow and eat food, humans are dependent on bees. Bees then – their sociality, their practices of pollination informed by this gregariness – can be seen as a matrix for humans. Bee social life is the womb of human rebirth. As Luce Irigaray argues, matrices are subject to the aporia of lack: 'If the matrix is extendable, it can figure as *the place of place*' (Irigaray 34. Original emphasis). How can a place, have a place? Therein goes the aporia that Aristotle poses in *Physics IV* and which Irigaray takes up for feminist thought. Irigaray develops the concealed gendering of this logic: '[a]s for woman, she is place' (Irigaray 35). For Irigaray, the phallogocentric rendering of woman as a place for man means that the presence and agency of woman is limited by her positioning as place. The queen of an *Apis Nearctica* hive is not dissimilar, the sovereign figure of the reproduction of the hive as a site of life.

Yet, if the human (gendered ‘man’ by Lacan) is a site of lack: other to himself, then man is as constitutively marked by absence as the bee. Further, Irigaray restores to place and therefore to woman, an active status denied her by the patriarchal order. Woman as place is more agential than the thing that man is, in his lack.<sup>2</sup> ‘Place,’ Irigaray develops it, ‘is thus not the thing but that which permits the thing to be insofar as the thing can exist in and outside place’ (Irigaray 38). Here, if place is not a thing, it nonetheless actively ‘permits’ the formation of all things, all matter. Place is the positive attribute of lack. Perhaps consciousness of metacommunication – something lacking in ‘man’ and in bees – is productive of affective connection. Place, rather than carnophallogocentric consciousness – constituting the thing – permits affect to be transferred between human and nonhuman beings; the dance of the bee does so as much as the chatter of ‘man.’

Just as ‘man’ as the signifier of the gendered human is constitutively lacking, as Derrida argues, so Irigaray revalues the active role as matrix to ‘woman’ (as signifier of the human gendered female). That woman as place can envelop and command and that ‘man’ as a figure of Cartesian mastery can actually be shown to lack precisely what is constitutive of his mastery leads Irigaray to reimagine reciprocity:

What is, in the masculine, the relation between these two vessels? Is he able to receive woman in the reverse of herself? In the mourning for herself? Can he beckon to her and welcome her into himself once he has separated himself from her? Since he must separate himself from her in order to be able to be her place (Irigaray 39–40).

Man too, as place, can beckon and welcome woman, always the site of welcoming, hospitality, place. If then, the bee is a figure of equivalence, I would propose that we think those phylogenetically distinct non-humans as *places that permit us to be* and in permitting us, in this way, demand our reciprocity. Bees are a place for human food production. They are, then,

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<sup>2</sup> By ‘woman,’ I do not mean living embodied, cysgendered female subjects. Rather, I follow Irigaray in using ‘woman’ as the signifier assigned to that subject in the semiotic economy of phallogocentric (and indeed carnophallogocentric) thought.

thought of as a place for man — penetrative, exploitative, carnophallogocentric. We must, I argue, feminize the human and permit ‘man’ to be rearticulated as an open receptacle — a place for place.

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