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Curbside Quarantine: A Scene of Interspecies Mediality

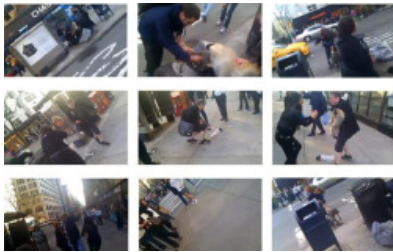
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Fig. 1.
Stills from "Pit Bull attacking little dog on streets of NYC." MissWooHoo11. *Youtube*. 27 Jun. 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2012.

Blogs, news Web sites, and content aggregators of all kinds feed a vast stream of stories about domesticated animals ostensibly "gone wild." *The Huffington Post* even has a regular specialty-features page called "Animals" that channels them from various cybermedia outlets. City-focused Web sites like New York's *Gothamist* and *HuffPost New York* also have a keen sense of the newsworthiness of four-leggers implicated in scenes of bad animus. Extreme behaviors occasionally emerge—usually due to humans' own acts of abuse or irresponsibility—and sometimes with horrific consequences (Freccero). But far more often, behavior condemned as feral tends to consist in some merely human-censured shift within a normal, creaturely behavioral continuum. Fear of such shifts has many sources, from dread of civic disorder to ontological anxiety, and the close-quartered urban lives of companion species are especially prone to entanglements—not only of bodies in close proximity but also of the complex animas that drive them. No matter where humans and their companion species go, we are bound to find ourselves ensnared, smack in the middle of the unrest that makes good copy.

Whether tabloid-style or more responsibly journalistic, such stories have a profound effect on how increasing numbers apprehend and manage the shared conditions of interspecies life. The great profusion of these stories can, unfortunately, effectively metastasize our fear of the potential threat posed by nonhuman animals, at the same time that these stories misleadingly exceptionalize the quotidian messiness, excitement, unpredictability, and usually sublethal—indeed at times comical—violence of interspecies encounters. Even for those with relatively limited access to cyberspace, in-the-flesh relatedness has become almost impossible to experience as something separate from digital transformation of the phenomenology of perception and the politics of representation, or as something irrelevant to our own and others' imperfect apprehensions of how this transformation is proceeding (Poster, Hansen).

The particular piece of digital ephemera I discuss below exists in the still challengingly new (or newly recognized) crossings of two forms of here-and-now relatedness: that of the pulses and bloodlettings of interspecies sociality's variously forced and unbidden breakdowns (Haraway, Freccero), and that of radically decentered yet also broadly intensified fusions of sociality through digital modalities and platforms

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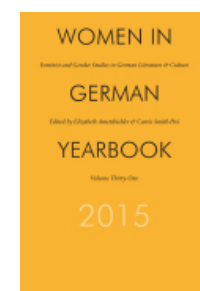
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(Massumi). This dialectical relation between the eventual and the systematic will prompt some readers' interest in my remarks and in the video itself. Some will lean toward the eventual take and others toward the systematic. Other readers, whom I hope for most of all, will find themselves stuck somewhere in between and will thus have to think for themselves about their own experience of impasse, that "curbing" or "quarantining" for which the man in the video so very dramatically and movingly stands as both subject and object. Could we make better use of that nexus than he seems to do?

This linked [video](#) of a recent big-dog-on-little-dog attack near the corner of New York's East 10th and Broadway has circulated through a number of cybervenues. It's a short clip of panic, poor judgment, bewilderment, and the need to locate blame—a drama that plays out a thousand times a day in a country with well over eighty million dogs. More than that, it highlights the uncanniness of suddenly finding yourself in the thick of violence involving an aggressor-animal that belongs to you—an uncanniness erupting here as part of a present history of human-canine relations overwhelmed by breed mythology. Identified rightly or wrongly as a Pit Bull, the aggressor-dog becomes, in the video and in its later circulation and viewing, the focus of a struggle to confirm him as a profoundly impaired form of an otherwise commonly hypervalorized interspecies attachment. Unedited and impersonal, without the coordinated emplotments of more conventional cinematic media, the video captures and refracts the crisis of me/not-me that any dog-identified dog owner might someday have to face. Perhaps most strikingly, it is faced here by a young man who is at the same time also turned, by a breed-specific politics of vulnerability, into a dogged human isolate, an animate but hauntingly suspended figure of uncertain, ruptured, or simply nonexistent solidarities, captured at a distinctly contemporary impasse of embodied exposure and communicative capitalism (Dean).

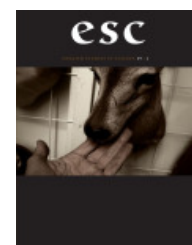
Any companion dog's blazing out into violence forces the question: am I my animal after all? This creature, so full of me and me of him, dander and spit, heart-leaps and resentments, nuzzles and echoes—we've crossed ourselves in ways the commonly used word "bonding" doesn't begin to cover: swapped DNA, merged assets, and projected onto one another all manner of fantasied qualities. Then suddenly an amygdalan click and the taste of blood make him forget me. And even though my whole spirit, along with my sinews and tendons and and limbs, is struggling to keep hold of him, he doesn't heed me. In this brief moment, his intimate knowledge of me—of my sounds, smells, moods, lymphatic currents, posture of my deepest sorrow, my play triggers, capacity to share, to read his needs—seems to be lifted out of what he considers the realm of necessity, and I'm reminded how little I can claim to understand about our attachment. Right now, as I experience along my arms and shoulders his determination to kill another creature, I get the feeling he's nowhere near me, and yet I've never felt more involuted in the substance of his being.

Where does that leave me, if I'm the man in the video? Who—among the people on the scene, or watching later on the Internet—reflects upon his isolation in the curbside quarantine tacitly imposed by the other bystanders and in which he seems quietly to have acquiesced, on behalf of himself and his dog, as he patiently awaits their fate amid a flurry of 911 calls? So many phones out. Like the one that shot this video, the overwhelming majority of them being manufactured today have built-in cameras. Of the roughly five billion cell phones currently in use worldwide, almost all take pictures (Richter). For whom are these images destined? Flickr cohorts? YouTube viewers? Civic authorities? The local news channel? Mom? Whomever. But because we can dial and film simultaneously, what might feel like obligation can quickly turn to mediation and deferral. These days, the behavior of witnessing often amounts to an almost unconscious act of pitching what we observe to objects that may offer, at best, dubious prospects for solidarity. We no longer pay attention so much as pass it along. Or even to the extent that we do pay attention, we're also heavily distracted by the desire to magnetize the attention of our intimate others, including strangers who might share something like our experience or something that is just stirring into experiential form.

What is passed along now can be recuperated later, and not just by the videographer but also by countless consumers of screen-ephemera. We pass along, in other words, manifold opportunities for networked reflection, communication, and creativity (Manovich, Bruns), such as, for example, my own uptake of the present video. At the



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same time, though, we may be irrecoverably passing up a foundational ethical experience of the material immediacy of exposure. The videographer's giggly expletives are a fitting soundtrack to this escalating loss of competence for exploring the precariousness of embodied sociality, and for doing so from a position other than that of anxious self-distancing. All media structure our experience of contingency, of course: this is nothing new. But the accelerated uploading and offloading of our encounters with the kind of visceral, creaturely exposure recorded at East 10th and Broadway seem to offer new opportunities for ignoring or forgetting that mediation itself, even in its most "throwaway" forms, is always structured by material conflict: who assumes control? what expenditures are required? whose exclusion facilitates my access? (Galloway, Dean).

Multinational-produced DSPs compress disturbing visual data and lossy codecs transmit wisecracks and alarmed cries in the form of VoIP packets to the city's PSAP, untethering information from its social location. Meanwhile, the man at the curb hasn't at any point dropped or relinquished his leash—the tether that tells the world this dog is his, and that he's snapped a kind of existential as well as juridical lock on him. The leash is both a sign and a tool of his dog's subjection to his rule, however incomplete and subject to breakdown that rule may be. But it can also be the means of giving his dog a way out—out of doing harm or out of harm's reach, offering him a vector of escape, or a tug toward freedom. Leashes are also called "leads," and certain dogs—regardless of sex, size, or breed—can lead the strongest human anywhere: out of danger, out of one's own inclination to submission, even out of oneself. So why don't these two make a break for it and flee this scene of humiliation and the authorities' possible retribution? Have they, resuturing companionability, silently agreed to wait voluntarily upon the rule of others? Or have they both failed to find a way out of forced endurance of their curbside quarantine, as everyone mills around, looking askance and asking themselves, just where does this guy end and his dog begin?



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Fig. 2.
 Still from "Pit Bull attacking little dog on streets of NYC." MissWooHoo11. *Youtube*. 27 Jun. 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2012.

For reasons that may or may not track consciously in his own mind, the man with the backpack standing in the street holding his dog waits in larger-than-canine awareness of what may be to come (see [Fig. 2](#)). But in the meantime no one comes near him, and not just because they might be afraid of his dog. His own quiet distress also evidently strikes others as unapproachable. The unwelcome reminder of the breakdown of human-canine fellowship has also thrown human fellowship as such under the rails of panic. What are we to one another, after all, in moments of lost control and acute, physical vulnerability? What are we to ourselves, when so liable to confusion and self-distancing? Even as they mill around, people look away. Who wants to face the image of one's own ever-faltering companionateness and inescapable psychic and bodily exposure?

The dog (a male, by the glimpses of his prick) appears unhurt. His post-attack posture, with his upturned nose and wagging tail, may even indicate pride and pleasure. But how fares his owner? His hand looks injured. His stance suggests he may be in shock, or close to it. Yet no one goes over to talk to him, to ask if he's OK, to offer some water, or simply to stand with him as he submits to the clamor of 911 calls going on

around him; while the owner of the smaller, more aristocratically-stereotyped breed—who is seen first somehow having fallen or been pushed *beneath* the fray and then helped to her feet and given back her injured dog—shrieks "Help me!" and runs down Broadway with the Pekingese (whose sex is indiscernible from the video) in her arms. In terms of social space, abjection seems to slow him down, whereas wounded entitlement seems to speed her up. His depressive solemnity roots him to the spot, while her concern for the "me" that is both herself and her dog propels her down the cleared path to envisioned succor. Does only one of them have a right to the goodwill of others? Or has only one of them been trained to chase it?

Violence can have a deceptively shattering relation to social space, apparently allergizing people against physical or psychic contact while actually shoring up certain craved or craven identifications. A man who hits his dog is an iconic candidate for ostracism, not least because he manifests the frustrations that bind up so many companionate couples' own thwarted or perverse expectations of one another in a generalized political bewilderment. The video shows the Pit Bull's owner hitting his dog repeatedly, desperately trying to force him to release the Pekingese. Does anyone present know that's not what you're supposed to do to break up a dog fight? Does anyone present know or care why one dog attacked another in the first place: whether it was prey drive or play drive, fear or anger, lust or boredom? Besides, wouldn't we all like an excuse to let loose a fist at the object of our disappointments? Why won't he obey my command to let go? This dog has spent his entire life hanging on my lips, listening for and puzzling over every word that passes through them, crazily adorning them with licks that might even be kisses. But right now, I'm just a gaping impediment to his overwhelming urge, his anima animated.

Not incidentally, for some onlookers and viewers there is the damning aspect of the young man's proletarian togs and shouldered bedroll, contrasted with the lost slipper of the Pekingese's more bourgeois-appearing female owner, whose shopping bags have been left scattered on the pavement. No one goes near this man, almost as if he were Dickens's Bill Sikes: that down-and-out rogue contaminated, not so much by association with his Bull Terrier, as by his perennial wariness and fear of the state's power and vengeance, which he viciously imitates by beating and even trying to kill the dog he nevertheless hopelessly loves. Another man with a hand wounded from the fray gathers up some of the woman's flotsam of emergency. (The raw video itself is a kind of flotsam or remnant, left for us to pick up online, uncertain as to what and who counts). But which dog was it, the Pit Bull or the Pekingese, who bit this good Samaritan's hand when he stepped in to help separate them? Is that what 911 will come to investigate, in the interest of restoring a class structure that the scene can barely be imagined to disrupt—vividly framed as it is, thanks to the videographer's accidental shot/countershot, by the figural crossfire between the branch offices of Chase Manhattan and Wells Fargo that just happen to face one another at this could-be-anywhere intersection (see [Fig. 3](#) below)? It's uncanny how well these shots of squared-off, brick-and-mortar bank branches conjure the lingering, face-to-face pretense of capitalism's invisible flows of violence and value, even as a scene of palpable violence—and of possibly other kinds of value—plays out between them. There's nowhere that disaster capitalism doesn't delight in hiding itself behind people's fears of vagrants and of dogs. And, almost everywhere, the cataracts of breed mythology make Pit Bulls the instantly recognizable garb of the dangerous classes.



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Fig. 3.
Stills from "Pit Bull attacking little dog on streets of NYC." MissWooHoo11. *Youtube*. 27 Jun. 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2012.

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Under New York law (AGM, Art. 7, §123), a "dangerous dog" determination can result in a wide range of sanctions, from mandatory public muzzling to special insurance to execution. But whatever might end up happening to the aggressor-dog in this video, it will have been his place, and in one way or another the place of his owner as well, to be evaluated and to have a determination made about him based on a certain moment: a moment that brought two dogs, two dog owners, and a number of other people into direct bodily contact with each other, in a scrambled present of many barely ascertainable, emotional and physical vulnerabilities and agitations on the part of every creature present. Most of this promiscuous, terrifying contact becomes interrupted within seconds, quickly making room for the restoration of a coarse wariness that invites congealing arguments about rights, redress, and—most of all—the putative, class-based truths about a certain kind of dog owner and a certain breed of dog.

Other more flexible and nuanced, less knowing and defensive orientations to improved solidarities have proven difficult to imagine, and even more difficult to bring to the reshaping of our moral and legal regimes (Hearne, Dayan). These difficulties are dismally underscored by other recent examples, including that of **Star** and homeless epileptic Lech Stankiewicz just a few blocks away at 14th Street and 2nd Avenue, and that of **Lennox** and the middle-class Barnes family in Northern Ireland. The difficulty of watching something better fail to unfold is also indicated by the 10th-and-Broadway video's coming to such an abrupt end, when the camera busy collecting the present is suddenly switched off, or the "raw feed" is deemed by someone to have shown enough. The aggressor-dog's owner and the videographer either can't or won't engage one another's look. Yet each time it is played, the video helps us to rehearse the scene enacted by its subjects, a scene of indeterminate rather than conclusively failed solidarity: while there are no obvious glances of reassurance or verbal support, there is an inclination or a compulsion on the part of some, at least, to stay in the impasse, despite not knowing what to do (Berlant). The video rehearses the question: whose marginality are any of us, in fact, looking at, and in looking at it, how does any of us apprehend what remains to be seen and to be done both before 911 arrives as well as after the video goes viral? There are so many different circles of isolation and incomprehension that might be breached if we could bring uncustomary attentiveness to bear on the circumstancing of fear and aggression, of projection and dissociation, of frail and errant attachments, of the predatory and the victimized, and, perhaps most of all, of our sheer vulnerability: of the flesh that pulls and tears and can barely hold itself ready for the catastrophes to come, and of the other bodies to which we hold ourselves close, for all the supremely loving *and* barbaric purposes that transect us and make us neither human nor animal but only incomparably akin to each.

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