



CALL OF THE WILD No. 3 – VISIT TO THE NORTH CAROLINA ZOO and DISCUSSION WITH CURATOR, Dr. RANDY FULK

(4 points) – Animal Captivity – spring 2012. NOTE: If you are unable to join the excursion to the NC Zoo on April 12, choose another time to visit the NC Zoo in April. You may also visit the NC Museum of Life and Science in Durham or the Natural Science Center in Greensboro. Submit your COW assignment by May 1, 2012.

There are over 200 species of animals at the North Carolina Zoo. That’s about 1,100 individual animals. Many of your animal partners are here. That includes the African Lion, Black Bear (or Grizzly if you prefer), the Barred Owl, Red River Hog, Western Banded Gecko, Madagascar hissing cockroach, brown water snake, Arctic fox, Nicobar pigeon, many types of frogs and toads, chimpanzees (no bonobos), and, of course, African elephant. It’s not Pi’s Pondicherry Zoo in *The Life of Pi*, but it’s a legitimate descendant. Zoos are where many children first encounter wild animals which don’t run away.

Rather than judging the zoo or empathizing with the captive animals, you have a different philosophical task. If you’re like most visitors, you spend a few seconds in front of each animal, on your way to see as many animals as possible, including the charismatic “big stars” of the menagerie. However, looking at the animals is NOT your reason for spending time with them. Your task is to be *looked at* by nonhumans. You are the exhibit, as it were, and you consent to be in their gaze...or to be ignored. You’ve been socially conditioned to approach a zoo as a privileged voyeur. You choose instead to be entirely vulnerable to their intelligent awareness. This is more than “being alone with a cat” as Derrida says. You will spend time under many different kinds of gazes and awareness.



You learn your social identity, in part, by how you are perceived by others. “Others” is not limited to humans. You going to deliberately allow yourself to be gazed upon and encountered by nonhumans. You are a unique homo sapiens. None of these nonhumans has encountered you before. Intentionally being part of an animal’s awareness may make you uneasy or surprised, relaxed, happy, or scared. You may feel sorrow. Perhaps you don’t know how you’re “supposed” to feel. Neither does the nonhuman. Do the following

1. Have a partner guide you, with your eyes closed, to an animal enclosure. Your partner will position you with your back to the nonhumans. What do you hear or smell? How do you feel? Spend a full minute allowing yourself to be seen by the nonhumans behind you before you give yourself permission to turn around and gaze. How does it feel to suddenly be part of nonhuman awareness? Different than you expected?

2. Do the same if you are in the aviary. Close your eyes before you enter. You are surrounded by the sounds of birds. Listen to as many distinct bird songs and calls as you can distinguish. Figure out where the birds are. Consider that they may be talking about you.



3. **Make a Speech.** Have you considered what you might say to the animal you most want to “see?” Do more than see or be seen. Prepare a written statement of a few paragraphs for this prospective animal. Have your partner bring you to the animal. You need a human witness for this. Stand with your back to the animal until you are ready to speak. Then turn around. Deliver this statement aloud to the animal which is gazing upon you. Make eye contact if possible and speak directly to the animal. This is not baby-talk. This is not a joke. This is for real. You may think that nonhuman can’t understand anything you say. Consider that humans communicate 80% of what they mean without saying a word. So do nonhumans. Tone of voice, posture, and intent say a great deal. Be sincere. And then be absolutely quiet and still after you finish, for a full minute before leaving. Do you feel stage fright before making your speech? If so...why?

1. Describe being under the gaze of different animals and being part of their awareness. How does this change your sense of who you really are? Is the experience positive or negative?

2. Attach the speech you have written to deliver to the animal in in the zoo. Do so in the presence of a witness. Do so in absolute earnest. Then be quiet for a full minute afterwards before leaving. Attach your speech to this Assignment.

3. What does it mean to be vulnerable to the awareness of nonhuman others? When you are no longer a voyeur, but one thou in the presence of many other thous, what has changed?