

Infancy, Animality and the Limits of Language in the Work of Giorgio Agamben

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Introduction: A Strange Amphibian

While it may seem strange to identify classics in a field as new as critical animal studies, for Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal* the label seems appropriate. Since its English translation in 2004, *The Open*'s central concept—the “anthropological machine”—has found countless applications as a marker of the logic of “inclusive exclusion” that distinguishes human and non-human animals (see especially Calarco, 2008; Oliver, 2009; and Jones, 2007). According to Agamben, the anthropological machine describes the human as a “zone of indeterminacy” in which “the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside” (2004: 37). In *The Open*, the humanized animal and the animalized human are pre-modern and modern figures of this ambiguous unstable fracture. They also share its hidden truth: language is not a natural given but a historical production. In the anthropological machine, the human is a “ceaselessly updated decision” on what constitutes language, a site “in which the caesurae and their re-articulation are always dislocated and displaced anew” (2004: 38). If relations between human and non-human animals are to take on a new form, if neither are to be reduced to “bare life,” then the machine must be “rendered inoperative.”

Many researchers in critical animal studies share Agamben's goal of transforming the relationship between human and non-human animals but few have a clear sense of what lies beyond the anthropological machine. At the conclusion of *The Open*, Agamben offers only ellipses. To render the machine inoperative, he says, is to

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witness “the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in that emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man” (93). In other texts and especially alongside his notion of “infancy,” Agamben provides clues to the content of this Shabbat. Developed across *Infancy and History* (1978), *Language and Death* (1982), *The Idea of Prose* (1985) and *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1998), “infancy” describes an experience of language beyond the logic of inclusive exclusion, an experience of potentiality rather than violent exposure. Agamben’s recurrent figure of infantile potentiality is the *axolotl*, or “Mexican walking fish,” an amphibian that retains juvenile characteristics (gills) even after the development of adult traits (lungs and reproductive organs). With this figure of an “eternal child,” Agamben suggests that a new relation between human and non-human animals might emerge via a new childlike experience of language.

While the *axolotl* is a curious and clarifying figure, in this essay, I argue that the amphibian betrays the limitations of infancy for any Shabbat of animal and man beyond the anthropological machine. On my reading of the *axolotl*, Agamben conflates infantile potentiality with infantile *independence* and, in this way, abstracts early experiences of language from important experiences of dependence (like the relation of children to their mothers). While Agamben would like to disconnect the constitution of language from its dependence on violence (against non-human animals), his attempt to locate language in a radical independence bears a violence of its own. Instead of jamming the anthropological machine, infancy re-functions it. If Agamben is to provide more than critical offerings for the field of critical animal studies, I argue that he must more thoroughly “risk [himself] in the emptiness” of a Shabbat both animal and man. To transform relations between human and non-human animals Agamben must attend to the vulnerable, dependent, *risky* relations-with-others that condition experiences of language.

From the Anthropological Machine to Infantile Potentiality

The Open begins with a mysterious image found in a Hebrew Bible in Milan’s Ambrosian Library. The image depicts “the messianic banquet of the righteous on the

last day” but instead of human faces, the righteous are represented with animal heads—“the eagle’s fierce beak, the red head of the ox and the lion’s head.” For Agamben, this image stands as a promise that, “on the last day, relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and that man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature” (2004: 2-3). In effect, the righteous symbolize the end of the anthropological machine and its logic of inclusive exclusion; according to this violent machinating logic, “the speaking man places his own muteness outside himself, as already and not yet human,” and conserves the animal other in the heart of the human (35). Much of *The Open* proceeds, then, as a critique of philosophies that assign language to man over and against the animal. In its most accessible discussion, Agamben analyzes evolutionary theories of language and their anxiety over a pre-linguistic stage of human evolution. In its most extended and complicated engagement, Agamben focuses on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* and Heidegger’s attempt to define the world-relation of humans and animals. According to Agamben, Heidegger’s Dasein retains an anthropological gesture, conserving, by suspending, a relation to “animal captivity.” Agamben’s reading of Heidegger elucidates his notion of infancy as a “suspension of suspension.”

Because each involves the uncovering of an inclusive exclusion, Agamben’s critique of Heidegger is analogous to his critique of evolutionary theory. In the latter, he finds and follows an anxiety over the human being that cannot speak—the “ape-man.” Demonstrating the contradictions that the “ape-man” presents to Darwin’s readers, Agamben quotes evolutionary linguist Heymann Steinthal:

We have invented a stage of man that precedes language. But of course this is only a fiction; for language is so necessary and natural for the human being, that without it man can neither truly exist nor be thought of as existing. Either man has language, or he simply is not. On the other hand—and this justifies the fiction—language nevertheless cannot be regarded as already inherent in the human soul ... it is a stage of the soul’s development and requires a deduction from the preceding stages. But why the human soul alone builds this bridge, why man alone and not the animal progresses through language from animality to humanity[?] (Agamben, 2004: 36)

According to Agamben (and in the admission of Steinthal several years later), evolutionary theory is unable to answer the question it poses itself regarding the relation between the animal and the “animal-man.” That is, evolutionary theorists fail to explain why the capacity of speech follows from the evolution of *homo sapiens* but not from the evolution of other animals. The distinctively human nature of the bridge from a pre-linguistic to a linguistic stage of existence is a working “fiction” that takes the shape of an inclusive exclusion. “What distinguishes man from animal is language, but this is not a natural given inherent in the psychophysical structure of man; it is, rather, a historical production which as such, can be properly assigned neither to man nor to animal” (Agamben, 2004: 36). In evolutionary texts, the anthropological machine improperly assigns language to man only by pre-supposing the identity between the origin of language and the origin of man.

Agamben identifies an analogous bridge between the animal and Dasein in Heidegger’s attempt to break from anthropological modes of thought via fundamental ontology. As is well known, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* presents the animal as “poor in world” in a manner distinct from both Dasein and non-living material objects. Whereas Dasein is “world-forming” and the stone is fundamentally “without world,” Heidegger argues that the animal is “poor in world” in the sense of deprivation, that is, in the sense of possible, yet denied, access to being (Heidegger, 1995: 177). Specifically, the animal’s mode of relation is a “captivation” with its environment wherein the animal is paradoxically and respectively open and closed to beings and being-as-such; while animal captivation is an intense form of openness riveted to beings, the captivated animal cannot “disconceal its disinhibitor” and is closed being-as-such. By contrast, Heidegger argues that Dasein can suspend the relation of environmental captivation and open onto being and world.

On Agamben’s reading, the account of profound boredom in *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* reveals the close proximity, rather than abyssal distance, of Dasein and the animal. In profound boredom, Dasein is riveted to “something that refuses itself” in a manner analogous to the animal captivated by something unrevealed. For Heidegger, this refusal refers to “possibilities that lie inactive,” possibilities that, as unutilized, “leave us in the lurch” of boredom. By being delivered over to inactive

possibilities in boredom, Dasein is compelled to break towards the distinctively human experience of pure possibility (Heidegger, 1995: 144). Agamben makes much of the “being-compelled”/“being held in limbo”/“being held in suspense” that characterizes this second stage of profound boredom. To be compelled towards pure possibility is simply to suspend the captivation with inactive possibilities. In this way, boredom is effectively a passage from animal captivation to human world. “Profound boredom appears as the metaphysical operator in which the passage from poverty in world to world, from animal environment to human world, is realized” (Agamben, 2004: 68).

As a bridge from one to the other, boredom betrays not only the proximity but also the anthropological machination of Dasein and animal. Instead of a radical abyss between the human and the animal (in which “the open” opens “beyond the limits of the animal environment, and unrelated to it”) boredom marks a close proximity of man and animal (in which “the open” opens “*by means of* a suspension of the animal relation with the disinhibitor”) (Agamben, 2004: 68). In a profoundly anthropogenetic (and un-Heideggerian) turn of phrase, Agamben defines profound boredom as the “becoming Da-sein of the living man”. Boredom is a metaphysico-anthropological operator in which the question of openness to world and being is folded into the differentiation of human and animal. Thus, when Agamben remarks of Dasein that “the jewel set at the center of the human world and its clearing is nothing but animal captivation,” he reveals an “inclusive exclusion” in the Heideggerian text, one that—via boredom—conceals the animal other in the heart of Dasein (68).

Having linked Dasein to the violence of anthropology, Agamben’s notion of infancy dares to complete Heidegger’s radical break with machinating modes of thought. Only present in the ellipses of *The Open*, Agamben develops the notion of infancy most explicitly in *Infancy and History* (1978), *Language and Death* (1982), *The Idea of Prose* (1985) and the recent *Homo Sacer* series (1998-). An alternative “double negativity,” for Agamben, infancy is an experience of language that does not rely on inclusive exclusion. To evaluate its potential to “render inoperative” the anthropological machine, infancy must be considered through Agamben’s dramatic account of potentiality.

In his characteristic play with etymology, Agamben roots infancy in an archaic Latin term *in-fans* meaning “to be unable or unwilling to speak, to be silent or speechless.” Although tied to the figure of the infant child as one who cannot speak, Agamben is careful to emphasize that “in-fancy is not a simple given whose chronological site might be isolated, nor is it like an age or psychosomatic state which a psychology or a paleo-anthropology could construct as a human fact independent of language” (1993: 4). The archaic meaning of infancy points beyond the term’s indication of a developmental stage and toward its revelation of the contingent character of human speech. Unlike the “natural voice” of non-human animals, human infants do not have a given voice. According to Agamben, “animals are not in fact denied language; on the contrary, they are always and totally language. In them *la voix sacrée de la terre ingénue* (the sacred voice of the unknowing earth) ... knows no breaks or interruptions. Animals do not enter language, they are already inside it” (1993: 59). By contrast, the human “wordless” experience of infancy is an ontological break or interruption that conditions the possibility of speech. Coexisting with a language that appropriates it “in each instance to produce the individual as subject,” infancy is a mute undergoing constitutive of the (human) speaking subject (55). To speak is to be appropriated by language and alienated from infancy, not as a developmental trauma but as an ontological condition carried within every act of speech (Mills, 2005: 23).

If infancy is a kind of muteness internal to the act of speaking, Agamben is careful to distinguish it from a muteness exclusively excluded from the act of speaking. In order to counter the movement of machination, Agamben emphasizes that infancy is a kind of “not not speaking” that “touches” the “thing itself” of language. Speechless but not without relation to language, infancy reflects a “pure” experience of language itself without speech. Here Agamben maintains that *langue* has an anonymous and pre-suppositional character with respect to *parole*; speech presupposes that there is language and language is presupposed in everything that is said. As Daniel Heller-Roazen puts it, “preceding and exceeding every proposition is not something unsayable and ineffable but, rather, an event presupposed in every utterance, a *factum linguae* to which all actual speech necessarily bears witness” (Heller-Roazen, 1999: 4). When infancy “touches” the “thing itself” of language it touches not an ineffable or removed thing behind *langue*. For Agamben, “the thing itself is not a thing; it is the very sayability, the very openness at issue in language, which, in language, we always

presuppose and forget” (1999: 35). To touch or engage the thing itself is not to encounter the site of an inclusive exclusion but rather the site of potentiality as sayability.

Agamben’s account of potentiality is central to his claim that “not not speaking” opens infancy unto pure potentiality rather than violent indeterminacy. Drawn from an idiosyncratic reading of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, for Agamben, the essence of potentiality is maintained in relation to privation. “To be potential means: to be one’s own lack, *to be in relation to one’s own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-Being” (Agamben, 1999: 183). If potentiality is maintained in relation to impotentiality, the capacity of speech maintains itself in relation to the incapacity of speech. So described, potentiality provides the metaphysical structure for Agamben’s claim that every act of speaking maintains a relation to time without speech (infancy) and vice versa. In effect, the double negation “not not speaking” defines infancy through the thought of the persistent relation of potential and impotential. With respect to actuality, then, Agamben claims that potentiality “does not disappear in actuality; on the contrary, it preserves itself as such in actuality ... potentiality, so to speak, survives actuality and, in this way, *gives itself to itself*” (1999: 184). Where traditional metaphysics introduces the negative, the threat of nullification between actuality and potentiality, Agamben finds a persistent relation. Daniel Heller-Roazen describes the “gift of itself to itself” in terms that emphasize, again, a double negation

at this point, actuality reveals itself to be simply a potential not to be (or do) turned back upon itself, capable of *not* not being and, in this way, of granting the existence of what is actuality ... in the movement of the ‘gift of itself to itself,’ potentiality and actuality, what is capable and what is actual, what is possible and what is real, can no longer strictly be distinguished. (Heller-Roazen, 1998: 18)

Potentiality is not exhausted or extinguished in actuality. Understood as a potentiality “turned back on itself,” actuality maintains a relation to potentiality that “survives” and “preserves itself.” Agamben’s account of infancy extends this thought in order to

disengage the potential to speak from inclusive exclusion to affirm sayability instead of ineffability. Infancy is not exhausted in speaking but rather speaking is infancy “giving itself to itself.”

Supported by this account of potentiality, infancy describes an experience of language that is persistently related to sayability rather than silencing. Instead of “placing muteness outside itself” and conserving a mute animal other in its heart, the logic of infancy maintains a relation to a muteness or “not not speaking” *as* potentiality. However, if Agamben suggests that infantile experiences of language take place beyond the logic of the anthropological machine, it is noteworthy that these experiences appear strikingly self-relational. The relations of potentiality enumerated above are in each case relations of “one’s own”—“beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of *their own* impotentiality,” potentiality “preserves *itself* in actuality” “giving itself to itself,” “turning back on itself” (1999: 182-183). The figure of the *axolotl* also embodies the infancy’s auto-relational dimensions. When held in contrast with other theories of infantile dependency and embodied vulnerability, the *axolotl* marks Agamben’s strange disconnection of potentiality from relations-with-others, in particular maternal and non-human animal others.

The Axolotl: Infancy and In/dependence

Agamben takes a recurrent interest in the *axolotl*, an amphibian native to the freshwater lakes of Mexico, because of its “stubborn infantilism” or neoteny (1995: 95). While other amphibians lose juvenile traits in order to develop adult traits, the *axolotl* maintains juvenile gills throughout its maturation. According to Agamben, insights drawn from the life of the *axolotl* have helped revise understandings of human evolution. Humans are now said to evolve, not from individual adult primates but from a young primate with premature reproductive capacities (Agamben, 1995). Thus, “traits that are transitory in primates have in humans become definitive, somehow bringing to pass, in flesh and bone, the type of the eternal child” (Agamben, 1995: 96). Drawing on the *axolotl*’s stubborn infantilism, Agamben proceeds to imagine this eternal child as “abandoned to its own state of infancy, and so little specialized and so totipotent that it rejects any specific destiny and any determined

environment in order to hold onto its immaturity and helplessness” (1995, 96). Unbound from and undetermined by any destiny or environ, the neotenic child is thrown into “the pre-eminent setting of the possible [*possibile*] and of the potential [*potenziale*] ... What characterizes the infant is that it is its own potentiality [*potenza*], it lives its own possibility [*possibilità*” (2001: 121). *Axolotl*-inspired infancy is shot through with a potentiality that it gives to itself, being and living its own *potenza* and *possibilita*.

While the child is a common figure of dependency on others, Agamben’s eternal-child appears, in a hyperbolic self-relational fashion, to be independent. As a contrast, the relationality of infancy might be considered alongside Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva’s recent writings on “vulnerability.” Introduced in her important text *Precarious Life*, Butler’s notion of “primary vulnerability” describes the infantile “condition of being laid bare from the start,” of being “given over to the touch of the other” (Butler, 2004: 31-32). For Butler, primary vulnerability is an experience of exposure that reflects and conditions social attachments; “without seeing how this primary condition is exploited and exploitable, thwarted and denied ... it would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand how humans suffer from oppression” (Butler, 2004: 32). In *La haine et le pardon*, Kristeva outlines an alternative relational vulnerability, one that is sited in the specifically *speaking* body (Kristeva, 2005). According to Kristeva, vulnerability lies in the “crossroad” of “biology/language” and is “integral to the identity of the human species and the singularity of the speaking subject” (113). Failing to acknowledge the vulnerable junction of bodies and words encourages “rejections caused by race, social origin or religious differences [that have] taken over the place once occupied by charity” (114-116). Kristeva claims that vulnerability is the absent fourth term of Enlightenment humanism, that it “inflects” liberty, equality, and fraternity “towards a concern for sharing.”

Agamben’s auto-relational *independent* infancy appears to be an inversion of Butler and Kristeva’s accounts of relational dependent vulnerability. In denying or thwarting that condition, Agamben performs exclusions that both Butler and Kristeva link to its disavowal. Abstracted from exposure to others, the *axolotl*-inspired eternal child is disconnected from the social attachments and losses of others. In fact Agamben’s only mention of infantile relations-with-others is a reference to the “vain” misguided

project of parenting. There Agamben claims that, because the child “risks its whole life” in play, “it is in vain that grown-ups attempt to check this immediate coincidence of the child’s life and possibility, confining it to limited times and places: the nursery, codified games, playtime, and fairy-tales” (1996). More dramatically, Agamben maintains that the child “escapes” vulnerable exposure and the threat of violence because

it adheres so closely to its physiological life that it becomes indiscernible from it. (This is the true sense of the experiment on the possible that we mentioned earlier.) Similar in this respect to a woman’s life, the life of a child is ungraspable, not because it transcends toward an other world, but because it adheres to this world and to its body in a way that adults find intolerable. (Agamben, 1996)

A disturbing reduction of children and women to physiological life, Agamben’s comments illustrate the violence of figuring infancy as auto-relational and *independent*. By figuring the child as in a certain sense its own mother, Agamben obscures the child’s dependent relation to others yet reveals its dependence on maternal sacrifice. In effect, his remarks make clear how the reduction of relations to auto-relations supports the reduction of woman and child to ungraspable physiology *and vice versa*.

Following Agamben’s own connotations, we might wonder what would happen if the figure of the child were read systematically as the figure of the woman, if infancy were, in each case, substituted with maternity. Maternity is involved in language development; early maternal relations support the development of symbolic capacities and are preserved in the act of speaking. Further, giving birth involves a movement of potentiality. For instance, while Agamben describes the infant’s potentiality as “totipotent,” actual totipotent cells develop only in the maternal body, after cell fertilization and before the development of the zygote into specialized multi- or pluri-potent cells; in a process that can be described as maternity “giving itself to itself,” totipotent cells produce not only the fetus but also placental and other extra-embryonic cells. Such translations of infancy into maternity are simple if not straightforward because, in Agamben’s text, the child is already a mother-child and

the mother already a child-mother. Part of the ontological and evolutionary story of Agamben's infancy, the *axolotl* is an eternal child that can also give birth, the animal coincidence of mother and infant that challenges attempts to fully distinguish one from the other. Given the kind of indeterminacy easily set into motion between woman and child, it seems that maternity is included in Agamben's concept of infancy by way of exclusion, the very operation that the infantile experience of language was to overcome. The independence and auto-relational character of infancy emerges (and unravels) only by the child's dependent relation to the mother's mute inclusive exclusion.

Having already read infancy as maternity we might also wonder what would happen if infancy were read as *animality*, the child as the *animal*. This reading involves a consideration of the *axolotl*'s simultaneous status as a real animal and as a metaphor of infancy. An eternal child and a non-human animal, the *axolotl*, contradictorily, does "not not speak" and yet it is "always already inside language." Taken as a real amphibian, the *axolotl* is exposed to the violence of the anthropological machine even in Agamben's own texts. Agamben's (*axolotl*-inspired) evolutionary hypothesis claims that humans developed from young primates with premature reproductive capacities. For Agamben, the hypothesis supports his account of infancy not only as an approach to language but also as an approach to the "entire sphere of the exosomatic tradition which, more than any genetic imprint, characterizes *homo sapiens*" (Agamben, 1995: 96). Linking the somatic to "genetic prescription and the exosomatic to totipotent potentiality, he proceeds to claim that "animals are not concerned with possibilities of their soma that are not inscribed in the germen ... they pay no attention to that which is mortal ... and they develop only the infinitely repeatable possibilities fixed in the genetic code" (96).

In light of the machinations of Agamben's false dichotomies (soma/exosoma, genetic determinism and totipotent potentiality) and the violence they inflict on the *axolotl*, it appears that infancy inclusively excludes animality as well as maternity. In general, one should be wary of any picture of *homo sapiens* so wholly detached from the somatic sphere and genetic imprints.² Whether supported by crude dichotomies or more insidious procedures, auto-relational infancy appears to drive rather than jam the

anthropological machine. According to Agamben, “only on the day when the original infantile openness is truly, dizzyingly taken up as such ... will men be able finally to construct a history and language which are universal and no longer deferrable, and stop their wandering through traditions” (1995: 98). But the multiplying voices of infancy’s inclusive exclusion—child-mothers, animal-mothers, animal-children—suggest only a deferral that is itself dizzying.

Conclusion: Agamben and the Question of the Animal

Agamben’s notion of infancy is rarely read alongside his theory of the anthropological machine, yet these analyses would appear, at first glance, to bring readers to a familiar place: a simple recognition of Agamben’s (long acknowledged) anthropocentrism and (less acknowledged) androcentrism. In a widely read article, Matthew Calarco has criticized Agamben for modeling his radical politics on human figures alone (Calarco, 2000). Gesturing to the *Language and Death* as well as *The Open*, Calarco queries after Agamben’s anthropocentrism:

If one accepts Agamben’s argument that man’s essence is not to be found in his experience of language and death as such, then does not the displacement of man’s essence simultaneously work to disrupt the strict binary that excludes the animal from man’s essence? ... if man’s proper essence and the ground for human community can no longer be found in an experience of language and death *as such*, then how can a thought of another coming community not lead to a rethinking of the place of animals in community? (Calarco, 2000: 96)

² To be sure, in *Infancy and History* Agamben draws on Chomsky, Lenneberg and Jakobsen to offer a more sophisticated account of the “complex interrelation” of endosomatic and esosomatic inheritance in order supports his hypothesis that animals are “always already in language” whereas humans lack language and must “receive it from the outside.” However, this hypothesis, by further twists and turns, also operates through the work of inclusive exclusion. Not only does Agamben cite and disregard important exceptions to it—for instance, the existence of certain birds that, deprived of hearing a song of their species, can only produce the normal song in partial form—but the search for a “mediating element” between endosoma and esosoma returns him, via phonemes, to the “engine” of human infancy (Agamben, 1995: 65).

Agamben's withdrawal from the "question of the animal" is, for Calarco, a missed opportunity to rethink the place of animals in community beyond violent logics of mute inclusion/exclusion. However, in light of the dizzying reading of infancy and its others provided above, a stronger reproach of Agamben is in order. As a new figure and experience of language, infancy does not simply forego the "question of the animal" as much as it renders a more expansive and non-violent response to that question more difficult to achieve.

Understood as a dependent and relational foil to Agamben's infancy, Butler and Kristeva's notion of vulnerability would seem apt resources for alternatives to infancy; vulnerability marks the exposure of the (speaking) body, a condition ineluctably given over to, rather than inclusively exclusive of, others. Careful not to collapse vulnerability and maternity, both authors discuss the dependence of infants on maternal others and early caregivers. Butler writes of newborns "abandoned" to "primary others" in virtue of "bodily requirements" and, throughout her work, Kristeva emphasizes maternal support of symbolic development; the *chora* (where Agamben anchors phonemic passage to the human child) is, in the Kristevan text, linked to maternal semiotic conditions of language. However, while the relational character of vulnerability extends to maternal others, it does not extend, for either theorist, to non-human animal others. In her recent text *Animal Lessons*, Kelly Oliver challenges Butler and Kristeva's failure to consider non-human animals as embodied, mortal beings capable of being wounded or wounding others. In a query that runs parallel to Calarco's critique of Agamben, Oliver asks:

Once we take bodily vulnerability—which is to say the fact that we are mortal and can be wounded—as our starting point, are we delineating what constitutes humanity? Or are we setting out what constitutes all living creatures? And if we are relational, dependent beings by virtue of having bodies, then isn't this also true of animals? Moreover, if we extend the notion of dependence in the way that Butler and Kristeva do to make it a cornerstone of ethics and politics, then aren't we also obligated to consider the (material and conceptual) interdependence of humans and animals? (Oliver, 2009: 44)

Like Agamben's account of infancy, Butler and Kristeva's theories of vulnerability invite but do not require that we rethink the place of animals in community. Failing to "extend the notion of dependence" beyond the borders of the human, Butler and Kristeva "derealize" the shared embodiment of non-human animal others (Taylor, 2008).

Following Calarco and Oliver's comments and in light of Agamben's *experimentum linguae*, what comes of the deferral of voices and questions, animal and otherwise? In the case of Agamben, resources seem to lie in reflexive rather than jamming capacities of his thought. Calarco's commitment that "the critical promise of Agamben's thought is to be found in its ability to disrupt classical notions of human community" is substantiated by Agamben's critique of the anthropological machine (Calarco, 2000: 96). While infancy falters in its pursuit of "a language and a history which are universal," it nevertheless reflects the disruptive and radical thesis that language is "fabricated in piecemeal fashion from alien forms." To carry out its critical promise, Agamben's disruptive thesis must be engaged *and* returned to his own texts. The reading of infancy above models such a reflexive critique. By pursuing the operation of inclusive exclusion and uncovering the mute inclusion of maternal and animal voices in the *axolotl*, Agamben's own resources bring his thought to a limit he is unable to overcome. There, dizzying deferrals are, each time, opportunities to rethink and the limits of language and the production of the distinction between man and animal.

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