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Lions leave uneven tracks. While imprints from their front paws are usually unclear, impressions from their hind metacarpal pads and four lobes are often intact. This is because a lion's walk is both soft and heavy. They flop their front feet at the wrist as they go, while pounding their back legs against the ground. Prints, scat, sonic communication and the behaviour of other animals can complement technology in the search for lions. This is a uniquely human pursuit, since lions top their food chain. They tend to fall prey to other animals only when young, ill or if separated from their pride.

In *SaF05*, Charlotte Prodder follows indexical signs like footprints in order to track a rare subject, a maned lioness for which she searches but never finds. This trail is mediated through footage from a camera trap, material recorded on a smartphone, and high-resolution video shot through long-lens cameras and by drone. Sequenced on multiple timelines of digital editing software, the progression of images appears like a hallucinatory flow of unstable representations and shifting intensities.

This is where the animal comes in. The film takes its rhythms and its name from *SaF05*, also known as *Mmamoriri*, or 'hairy princess', an animal both like other lionesses and not. What we know of her habits is what has been observed and weighed against the rest of her breed in the Okavango Delta, Botswana. As with other females, she exhibits scent-marking behaviour and mates with males. However, she is prone to an overt marking posture more commonly seen in males and has been known to mount females. She roars at a higher than normal rate, is likely to be infertile, and spends most of her time alone. Perhaps she is less vulnerable because of her size. She has been known to kill in plain sight.

In the presence of lions, other animals – zebras, wildebeest and giraffes – stare at the thicket and birds stir overhead. It is as though a pride is the vanishing point of the landscape. The attention of all other animals is organised around them. Lions are at their most active and most dangerous after dusk. Because of this, they are subjects well suited to peopleless cameras. A camera trap augments the eye using intensification techniques such as infrared, active illumination or thermal imaging. Motion sensors enable pictures to be produced without risk to an observer. Technology like this descends from Eadweard Muybridge's experiments with multiple cameras in the 1870s, which captured animal locomotion for the first time. His photographs record the problematic entry of the animal into a field of knowledge that was determined by technologies of vision.

In her preparatory research for *SaF05*, Prodger spent time examining the depiction of a lion hunt that appears in the Assyrian Palace reliefs, which decorated the residencies of Nimrud and Nineveh during the reign of King Ashurbanipal in 668–627 BC. The panels dedicated to the hunt render epic the image of lions in defeat: skins splayed, manes resplendent and claws still sheathed. The depiction of death in the panels is different from the death of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In C.S. Lewis's story, the child Lucy weeps over the shaved body of Aslan, which she finds tied upon a stone block in a scene that is famously an allegory of the resurrection of Christ – both lion and lamb. The lions in the Assyrian palace reliefs belong to another order. Their flayed forms do not serve narrative coherence, but are dynamic studies of violence carved into ancient rock.

In their essay 'Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign', Che Gossett notes the killing of a lion by American dentist Walter Palmer in the Hwange National Park in Matabeleland North,

Zimbabwe in 2015. The lion, Cecil, was wounded by an arrow, tracked and finally killed ten to twelve hours later. Gossett weighs the consequent outcry in the international media against the absence of empathy for black life. 'It feels important to discuss how these two are connected by white militarized masculinity and colonial fantasies about Africa', they write, reflecting on the co-constitutive processes of racialization and animality that underpin necropolitics.

Animal traits are routinely invoked to serve the logic of non-animal systems. In September 2016, headlines of reports on the lioness SaF05 read: "Gender fluid" lioness is queen of her pride' (*New York Post*) and 'Meet the 12 most influential LGBTI animals to walk the Earth' (*Gay Star News*). The mainstream LGBT circular *Pink News* ('Scientists discover "genderfluid" lioness who looks like, acts and roars like a male') was at pains to point out that, though the political Right often argues that homosexual relationships are somehow "unnatural", the appearance of this "genderfluid" lioness shows how "wrong" they are. These headlines are a simple reversal of the way in which heterosexual kinships and biological essentialism have been legitimised through recourse to the animal. At best, statements like these exhibit breath-taking narcissism, finding in the non-animal world a likeness that serves a current politics of identity. At worst, by assigning non-normative expressions of gender to an animal other, the mainstream media continues to spectacularise certain bodies in ways that perpetuate colonial fantasies that have so often underpinned queer imaginaries.

In *SaF05*, the titular lioness is mediated by cameras and configured through a system of queer relations. The narrator renames friends and lovers according to an algorithm of data similar to the one that the Botswana Predator Conservation Trust uses to tag animals. These handles look like passwords. Rather than

allowing the viewer to track the network of individuals summoned in the film, they serve to anonymise the identity of their referent. Apprehension is contingent on privileged access to the specific details of the encounter described. You had to be there.

Names hold us in the world. They make us legible, fix us into sexual and social identities, accumulate value (or not) and produce material articulations of ownership. In patriarchal societies, names usually tether us to male lines unless something is done to sever these lineages. Such work has been at the heart of a great deal of feminist thought and politics, which has mapped matriarchal lineages, taken the surnames of mothers or else dreamed new denominations. Prodder often employs languages so that it permits a practice of creative etymology; SaFO5 readily becomes Sappho and, to an English monoglot, Mmamoriri sounds like both mama and roar.

In the absence of the lioness, other subjects are made to stand in. The narrator in SaFO5 recounts a series of formative sexual encounters with other women. Bearing witness to the psychosexual scene of the self, this record counters an absence of psychoanalytic models through which lesbian relations can be thought, felt or described. Precarious instances of identification butt up against the abrupt ways in which such ties might be severed. A lover's body is briefly transformed into that of the narrator's mother. Desire is met with ambivalence. A hand recoils as an invisible boundary is exceeded. Shame generates a pattern of bonding that reproduces its own losses, banally and violently.

At stake in SaFO5 is the distillation of desire in the ceaseless pursuit of an image that is always already severed from its referent. If this sounds as if it runs the risk that Donna Haraway warns us about in her *Companion Species Manifesto*,

I should make clear that a lion is not a metaphor. It is not a companion animal, either. Yoking a system of attachment to a lioness gestures to a material interdependency that challenges distinctions between self and other, the non-animal and animal. Yet the gesture also figures interpolation into a queer community through a deeply ambivalent encounter, one that prolongs the intrusion of non-animal practices within a system that ought to be organised otherwise.

Early on in her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir refers to the ambiguity of animal institutions. On termites, for example, she writes that 'the enormous queen, crammed with nourishment and laying as many as 4,000 eggs per day until she becomes sterile and is pitilessly killed, is no less a slave than the comparatively tiny male who attends her and provides frequent fecundations'. Unlike the headlines referenced earlier, de Beauvoir finds in the animal a frame through which social meanings of gender might be upended rather than entrenched. The urgency of her project was the ontological freedom of the self. If the animal is not one thing, neither is the human. This isn't quite de Beauvoir's point, but it is Gossett's.

The lioness is an ambivalent protagonist who refuses to appear under the conditions established by Prodder's attempts to find her, but not before a last search takes place in the dark. So goes desire. Driving through the Delta at night, the narrator describes how a flashlight extends the reduced field of vision. The beam illuminates vast planes of land in a strange play of perspective that produces the effect of isolated images appearing in sequence-like rhythm. 'Further, closer, tree, broken tree, further, far, tree, closer' she says, rendering the landscape an un-aesthetic set of components as though seen through an animal's eye.



The final image we see in *SaFO5* is not of the lioness but of a termite mound shot from above by a drone. Termites might not, as de Beauvoir argued, tell us very much about the condition of women under patriarchy, but they are highly social creatures deeply embedded in the ecosystems that they inhabit. The mounds are made of soil and shit and sealed together with saliva. Some have been built over thousands of years. Inside, they are a hub of activity, whereas their exteriors – images of which are interspersed through the film – are as monumental and motionless as standing stones.

This impression of a stilled exterior and teeming core is another uneasy surrogate for the kind of irrational desire that drives *SaFO5*. It is scrutinised through the unemotional eye of a drone. Drones are an ambivalent kind of technology, employing radio frequency to relay images back to the remote observer. The product of military systems, the drone creates a central fulcrum around which pivot the other technological devices employed by Prodger throughout *SaFO5*. This image of the termite mound is haunted by the spectre of destruction that hovers throughout the film. Produced by the frequencies of militarised vision, it is produced by the aesthetics of cinema too.

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I begin to make notes for this text as 2018 draws to a close. The UK is hooked on rolling news items dedicated to the shut-down of a major airport apparently by an unauthorised drone. Our attention is drawn to a repeating image of a minute black dot in the sky that may or may not be the aircraft in question. A thing that sees without being seen causes the largest disruption to the international circulation of people and goods since the eruption of a volcano in Iceland in 2010. Perversely, perhaps, the drone in *SaFO5* sees but without ever seeing our lioness. In her absence it repeats its aimless circuit: pans up, is still, pans down, is stilled again. It is a sight line suspended by the animal it tracks.