„Zoophilologica. Polish Journal of Animal Studies"
Nr 2 (16)/2025, pp. 1–16
ISSN 2451-3849
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/ZOOPHILOLOGICA.2025.16.13

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Rebellion Behind Glass Walls: The Potential for Queer Resistance in Pet Invertebrates

Бунт за стеклянными стенами:
Потенциал квир-сопротивления
у террариумных беспозвоночных

Абстракт

Многие исследователи, изучающие нечеловеческих животных и, в более широком смысле, нечеловеческие субъекты, подчеркивают их способность к сопротивлению человеческому порядку, навязанному им, – даже если это сопротивление может быть неосознанным. Эта глава посвящена анализу полевых материалов из этнографических исследований глобальных практик содержания беспозвоночных, проведенных в 2021–2023 годах в Польше, Таиланде, Сингапуре и Австралии. Анализ показывает различные способы, которыми беспозвоночные ставят под сомнение гетеронормативные представления своих опекунов, а также адаптивные стратегии, разработанные этими опекунами с целью включения квир-тел и поведения беспозвоночных в рамки современных западных норм, касающихся гендера, сексуальности и межличностных отношений. Напротив, когда квирные особенности беспозвоночных не удается скрыть, стратегия поддержания гетеронормы смещается в сторону отчуждения этих

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Abstract

Many scholars studying non-human animals and, more broadly, non-human subjects, highlight their capacity for resistance to human ordering imposed on them – even if this resistance might not be intentional. This article is dedicated to an analysis of field materials from ethnographic research on global invertebrate keeping practices conducted between 2021 and 2023 in Poland, Thailand, Singapore, and Australia. The analysis reveals various ways in which invertebrates challenge the heteronormative beliefs of their caretakers, as well as the adaptive strategies that their keepers develop for the goal of the incorporation of queer bodies and behaviours of the invertebrates into contemporary Western norms regarding gender, sexuality, and interpersonal relations. Conversely, when the queer characteristics of invertebrates cannot be concealed, the strategy for maintaining heteronormativity shifts to alienating these subjects and capitalising on their queer attributes, which are perceived as peculiar, exotic, and intriguing.

существ и капитализации их квирных характеристик, которые воспринимаются как экзотические и, следовательно, привлекательные.

Ключевые слова: беспозвоночные, квир, сопротивление, нечеловеческих животных, этнография

Keywords: invertebrate, queer, resistance, more-than-human, ethnography

> To revolt is a natural tendency of life. Even a worm turns against the foot that crushes it. In general, the vitality and relative dignity of an animal can be measured by the intensity of its instinct to revolt.
>
> Mikhail Bakunin

Introduction

This article concerns the ways in which invertebrates resist strict gender norms that are imposed on them. I will analyse two kinds of resistance – resisting the cultural preconceptions and roles to be moulded into, and resisting the reproductive wishes of invertebrate keepers. The study is based on my research on invertebrate keeping and breeding carried out in 2021–2023 with fieldwork conducted across Poland, Thailand, Singapore, and Australia. The findings from my fieldwork point to the engagement of non-humans in queer resistance, and hint at the possibility of forming multispecies alliances between creatures subjected to restrictive gender norms, regardless of the species difference.

Although in the Western tradition humans are distinguished from other animals by being *politikon zoon* – the political animal (it is worth noting that some Aristotelian scholars debate this interpretation of the original work[1]), many anthropologists have described the deep engagement of non-human animals in politics and fighting for their interest. The animals' political engagement must not be understood restrictively – they do not vote and do not organise protests, but their agency is exercised through direct or non-direct actions and assemblages that they form. They are not only subject to policies, but also in many ways – their creators or enablers.

When a cow escapes from the slaughterhouse or an orca strikes back against her sadistic trainer, these acts can easily be recognised as "resistance," at least in

[1] Cheryl Abbate, "'Higher' and 'Lower' Political Animals: A Critical Analysis of Aristotle's Account of the Political Animal," *Journal of Animal Ethics* 6, no. 1 (2016): 54–66.

some broad sense. But the queer resistance of invertebrates may be more difficult to acknowledge. I hope to address a more subtle way of resisting by not conforming to the expectations of the invertebrate keepers and breeders in the realms of reproduction and gender. Some theorists[2] believe that subversion does not have to be intentional to constitute the exercise of non-human agency, and I employ this attitude going forward. Bennet writes about matter and things being alive in the sense of not being passive, but rather actants that produce effects. Bennett forsakes the distinction between an object and a subject, describing all things as processual and ever changing. Distributive agency proposed by Bennett is understood as an effect of interactions between actants, be they human or not.[3]

Methods and Inspirations

Over the course of two years (2021–2023), I have combined ethnographic interviews and participant observation to study both human and non-human actors in the global pet invertebrate keeping hobby. Given the decentralised nature of this hobby and the varied interactions occurring in both virtual and physical spaces, I adopted a multi-sited research approach.[4] I even maintained a beetle colony as part of an autoethnographic practice,[5] and used embodied pre-textual ethnography[6] to explore haptic dimensions of the relationships between invertebrates and humans. I have also employed visual media as parts of my explorations – photographs and videos. Since then I have arranged exhibition of ethnographic photography relating to invertebrates, and I am planning to publish a short ethnographic film on the same topic. My fieldwork involved interviewing a range of participants: 18 interviews in Poland, 10 in Bangkok (including two group interviews), 2 in Singapore, and 32 in Australia (with some group interviews), along with research in online communities of collectors, sellers, breeders, and keepers. Due to the lack of my formal training in biology generally and entomology particularly I have received

[2] Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010).

[3] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10–11, 21–35.

[4] George E. Marcus, "The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117.

[5] Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[6] Tomasz Rakowski and Helena Patzer, eds., *Pre-Textual Ethnographies: Challenging the Phenomenological Level of Anthropological Knowledge-Making* (Bristol: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2018).

advice and help from people studying the field. I am particularly grateful to Iwa Kołodziejska, Artur Szpalek, Gabriel Biegniewski, Franciszek Mika, and Kristen Messenger. This article concerns only one of the many aspects of the hobby explored in my work.

I chose land invertebrates, because their relationship with humans is often contingent on direct physical touch called handling. That differentiates them from aquatic invertebrates, like corals and shrimp, that rely on other haptic ways of building relationships with humans. Hence, I focused on land invertebrates, a wide array of creatures, that are not closely related but are socially mostly assigned to the same category – bugs.

The methods of spectacularisation of bugs vary dependent on the species – while some, like tarantula females, are perceived as brutes, others like mantises are seen as cunning femme fatales. However, a precise description of these differences would extend beyond of the scope of this article. The invertebrates I interacted with the most are beetles, spiders, mantises, stick bugs, and snails, reliant on their keepers' willingness to interact with me. I was open to all interaction with domestically kept invertebrates, but these were the ones that I encountered in my research. The ones I met less often were butterflies, isopods, ants, cockroaches and many others that I cannot mention because of their endless diversity.

While there were serious differences between the countries I conducted my research in – particularly local character of the hobby in Australia, the role of Thailand as both an importer and an exporter, and Polish native entomofauna not being a product in modern times – the topic of queerness seems to work similarly, at least on a basic level. The reason for it might be both the general global character of the hobby (apart from Australia), its common root in Japan, or even partial loss of diversity of gender norms as a result of Euro-American cultural hegemony.

When I write about invertebrates speaking and rebelling, I am following Eva Meijer. In her monograph *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy* she argues that historically non-human animals were denied a voice – they were deemed mute, and thus incapable of partaking in political communities. She writes that to address this issue, we must rethink our understanding of language to include the diverse ways non-human animals express themselves and create meaning. If animals can speak, be agentic, and have their own interests, they can partake in political life that they are unfairly excluded from.[7]

On the other hand, the notion of multispecies alliance was used by Suryanarayanan Sainath and Katarzyna Beilin while describing the political relationship between Mayan communities, milpa crops, and indigenous Melipona bees and their

[7] Eva Meijer, *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 3–5, 12–13.

fight against practices of industrial farming.[8] It points to a possibility of many actors of different species acting politically towards a common goal – I believe this idea is relevant to my research and not an overstatement.

Gendering Invertebrates

Both the bodies of invertebrates and their behaviours are queer – their forms of sexuality and gender far exceed cisnormative and heteronormative conventions that constitute contemporary Western gender norms that are sometimes imposed over all animals. In the book *Posthuman Bodies*, chapter "Two Lessons from Burroughs" Steven Shaviro writes: "The ways in which insects feed and fuck, the two most important biological functions, are irreversibly different from our own. When we gaze across the vast evolutionary chasm, we are overwhelmed by dizzying shivers associated with gastric nausea and sexual hysteria."[9] My understanding of invertebrates as queer is founded on my experiences in the field that I will build upon in this text, but queerness of invertebrates was already mentioned by many theorists, including: Hugh Raffles,[10] and Halberstam and Livingstone.[11] Because of that, I see invertebrates as queer subjects.

Hugh Raffles writes about the influence of heteronormativity and bias on biological descriptions of animal ethology in one of *Insectopedia*'s chapters "The Quality of Queerness Is Not Strange Enough." According to him, in Western tradition queerness – particularly homosexual copulation – was typically ignored or dismissed as a pathology caused by life in captivity. It was not until the 1970s that the idea of an evolutionary role for "nonproductive" sexual behaviours in nature gained wider recognition. However, this explanation does not convince Raffles – he argues that the proposed functions of these behaviours are convoluted and questionable. Instead, he offers a much simpler explanation: sex is simply pleasurable. And while various human sexual behaviours could also be assigned a sociobiological function, that explanation alone is entirely sufficient.[12]

[8] Katarzyna Beilin and Sainath Suryanarayanan, "Milpa-Melipona-Maya. Mayan Interspecies Alliances Facing Agribiotechnology," *Yucatan, ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 19, no. 2 (2020): 469–500.

[9] Steven Shaviro, "Two Lessons from Burroughs," in *Posthuman Bodies*, eds. Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 46

[10] Hugh Raffles, *Insectopedia* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

[11] Halberstan and Livingstone, eds., *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

[12] Raffles, *Insectopedia*, 253–260.

The definition of queerness that is the most relevant to the topic is the one used by David Halperin in *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. He defines queer not as a fixed category of pathologies or perversions, but a horizon of possibilities, whose full scope cannot be defined in advance. From the nonconforming position occupied by the queer subject, new ways of reconfiguring relationships – among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, gender constructions, systems of knowledge, modes of representation, self-formation practices, and communal structures.[13]

Queerness does not define (homo)sexual identity as a fixed essence but rather as a fluid, relational, and oppositional stance – one that resists normative structures without being confined to a singular definition. This resistance is not solely negative, reactive, or deconstructive; it is also generative, dynamic, and creative. By challenging the discursive and institutional forces that seek to regulate identity and desire, queerness opens up new possibilities for being, knowing, and expressing oneself.

The queerness of invertebrate bodies is particularly visible among insects undergoing complete metamorphosis. Heteronormativity presents the body as fixed and stable. Beetles transforming from larvae to imago, or butterflies and moths beginning life as caterpillars and ending it in winged forms, tell a story of physical instability, continuous change, and radically new identities. Often, when attempting to translate insect body temporalities into human bodies, one compares the egg to a fetus, the larva to a child, and the imago to adulthood. However, this comparison does not fully hold, as the larval stage in many species of butterflies and beetles is longer than the imago. In extreme cases, "childhood" lasts years, while "adulthood" may last only a few days.

The complete metamorphosis of butterflies is often used as a metaphor for transgender experience, and despite its many limitations, it remains a narrative strategy that helps many transgender individuals communicate their own experiences.[14] The main criticisms Eden Duley,[15] an English scholar from the University of Southern Mississippi, has of the butterfly metaphor include its binary nature (caterpillar/butterfly), its focus on the aesthetic aspect of the process, and its treatment of transition as a process with a defined end. I would like to add that these characteristics do not describe the queer insect bodies I am writing about. They are not binary at all, but constantly taking on new forms, with their appearances varying from colourful butterflies to beetles to cockroaches. Most importantly, their development is not linear.

[13] David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), online ed., Oxford Academic, 44–48.

[14] Eden Duley, "Notes From the Chrysalis: Feminine Beauty, Gender Transition and My Attempts at Untangling the Two, Race," paper delivered at the Gender and Sexuality Symposium (2022), the University of Southern Mississippi.

[15] Kyla Presmei Depakakibo et al., "Capturing the Lived Experiences of Transgender Women in Cebu City," *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 11, no. 4 (2020): 9–16.

Antoni, a butterfly breeder from Mazovia, Poland, told me about caterpillars that, for reasons only known to them, chose not to transform, while Camille from Sydney bluntly explained to me never to assume what lies within a butterfly chrysalis until it has emerged: "[…] sometimes a pupa, you know, they won't hatch a moth or a butterfly. Instead, you'll have a bunch of wasps come out."

Invertebrates themselves sometimes serve as identity-affirming attributes for their keepers. This phenomenon is most common among tarantula and scorpion breeders. Several sellers I have spoken with have complained about men who, despite having no experience, inquire about purchasing the most dangerous animals. Hobbyists with this motivation are also more likely to take risks while handling dangerous species. One tarantula breeder in Australia, Megan from Adelaide, who is a renowned keeper, shared her experience:

> A lot of times people don't want babies, they want the big, bad, nasty tarantula. I have lost count of the number of messages I've received, that have asked me what's the biggest, nastiest tarantula I have, and am I selling any – the minute I see that, no I am not, and you are gone – they are removed from my group, and they are blocked and banned… They want… You know damn well – they want this nasty, big tarantula, that they can put in their hand, and they can scare people with, they can scare their friends with, and they can put photos up saying: look how brave I am… And that poor spider – you know will be dead within two months – because they will constantly take it out, and stress it out, and it will die. I won't sell to people that have that attitude – they don't care about the animal, they care about the scared factor – look how tough I am… Well, you're not tough mate, you're an arsehole – sorry, but you're an arsehole, and I tell them so, and then they're gone.

I also spoke with several women who found it difficult to enter the tarantula-breeding community due to its androcentric nature. By demonstrating that they could also breed dangerous tarantulas, they challenged this practice as a marker of masculinity. They described often encountering dismissiveness, reluctance, or even hostility as a result. On the other hand, snail breeding is heavily feminised. The overwhelming majority of snail breeders are women. Throughout my research, I only met one man with experience in snail breeding. Michał, who usually breeds spiders, bought a snail out of curiosity. His experience confirmed my assumptions – when visited by a friend, he was told he was keeping a "sissy" animal.

Juliusz Galiński

Resistance

Animal resistance is political. Animals' opposition to oppressive forces occurs in the context of their social and political positioning as commodities and as living property. Despite that, through the relationships with their keepers and representations in the media, they meaningfully influence the human political discourse. I propose to analyse invertebrate queerness as particular expression of other-than-human animal resistance. Animal resistance creates a form of subjectivity and a counter-narrative, that challenges the normalising mechanisms of power. Even within the systems of control and exploitation in the animal industries, there are subversive and resistant forces, as power is not only repressive, but also inherently productive. Following Foucault's idea, while power seeks to produce docile bodies (human, bovine, or arachnid, as the case may be), the dynamics of power-resistance always produce at least some margin of indocility, subjects who are "indocile" or "queer". The power that seeks to discipline humans ends up also producing indocile and queer subjects, the same is also the case among other-than-human animals subjected to power.[16]

The invertebrates' resistance takes many forms. First, they might resist being collected – by digging deep burrows, flying off and even biting or stinging the hand that catches them. They might also avoid being seen while in a terrarium by hiding and building elaborate structures. These behaviours are methods of mediating the rules of relationships with their keepers by opposing their will. Sarat Colling states that animal actions like these are examples of opposing the spatial and ideological orderings placed upon them by the subjugating human power. These are the ways in which they can exercise their agencies even while under the influence of their keepers.[17]

While rebelling against this power, the invertebrates might disrupt its systems that are in place to control other creatures, be they human or non-human. Common interest in fighting the power might bring unlikely allies together. Sharing a struggle can mean that forming closer bonds with invertebrates might be an important strategy in ways of knowing and ways of living that can destabilise oppressive structures. Just as in the case of bees and Mayan farmers described by Beilin and Suryanarayanan,[18] the coalitions are formed not only on a material level, but also on a symbolic one, learning or re-learning multispecies worlds of meaning. The actor-network theory of Bruno Latour is founded upon forsaking the distinc-

[16] Sarat Colling, *Animal Resistance in the Global Capitalist Era* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press 2021), 14–15, 29, 44, 130–131, 133–134.

[17] Colling, *Animal Resistance*, 13–14, 51–52, 61–62.

[18] Beilin and Suryanarayanan, "Milpa-Melipona-Maya," 469–500.

tion between natural and social focusing on relationships between actors. Abandonment of differentiating between objects and subjects is another common feature that is shared by Bennett and Latour. In the words of Latour "[…] its members *act*, that is, quite simply, *that they modify other actors through a series of trials that can be listed thanks to some experimental protocol*" (emphasis in the original).[19] In the approach of both Bennett and Latour the intentionality is not a factor in assessing if a being is agentic – firstly because every action is not performed by an individual, but rather a fluctuating assemblage of actants/actors. The process of gendering invertebrates is a part of their relationship with their keepers and breeders. The aim of gendering them is a reproduction of assumed heteronormative and cisnormative views of nature. By the elevation of the particular cultural phenomena to the level of natural laws, the systems that they constitute are legitimised. It is also a method of understanding the experiences of captive animals through the experiences of their keepers, albeit misguided. Through assumed universality of heterosexual love, gender norms and ways of reproduction, the human can relate to the invertebrate.

The idea of invertebrates fighting heteronormative gender norms might seem absurd, because gender norms are socially constructed categorisations and a result of social stratification. It might seem that to imagine spiders or beetles as queer and going against these norms is to think about them as engaging in political activism on behalf of humans, which is obviously false. However, once the strict, culturally specific gender norms are imposed on invertebrates, they fail to comply, resisting them in the process, which influences the politics of their relationships with their keepers, but also the wider social sphere. The best place to start is to point out some of the ways in which the assumptions about universalised Eurocentric gender norms are projected on non-human subjects, in this case pet invertebrates that participated in my study.

Invertebrates are gendered in various ways in the process of sexing, which is determining whether an individual is male or female, for example, by observing the reproductive organs, such as the genital slit, or the exuviae in spiders. Sexing represents a turning point in the life of many invertebrates. Through the process of gendering, their value, the conditions in which they will live, and the keeper's relationship to them are determined. A spider or beetle may biologically be female or male, but through sexing, the terrarium keeper assigns them the role of a woman or a man.

Most species of kept beetles are highly valued for their masculinity. For breeders, the indicator of this is the size and length of the horns. Breeders compete with each other to achieve the largest male size. Thai breeders, when selling adult male beetles,

[19] Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass. London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 75.

always state their size. The larger the male beetle, the higher the price it fetches. In the shop of Wata and Namfon, beetle sellers from Bangkok who showed me around their business during my fieldwork in Thailand, there is a special beetle gauge available, which is one of the basic tools for breeding these insects. The goal of many beetle breeders is to raise a hyper-male – a powerful beetle with spectacular horns.

Beetle breeding is one of the practices, in which the attribution of gender characteristics constructed within the context of human society to insects becomes apparent. Male beetles, outside of the reproductive context, are more valuable than females and become even more valuable the more they exhibit traits commonly recognised as masculine. Non-masculine beetles are valued much lower than masculine ones, especially when the latter exhibit exceptional size and horn length. Violence among males is celebrated and considered exciting, even if it is pragmatically avoided. Female fights, on the other hand, go unnoticed, despite occurring almost as frequently as those among males. All methods aimed at increasing the size of male beetles, however, are unable to eliminate the vast diversity of sexual expression found among them. In addition to enormous males with large horns, there are also smaller males with less impressive antlers, and even some with vestigial ones. Beetle breeders consider the lack of masculine features in beetles to be a type of disorder and deformation. They search for causes that could have led to the loss of male traits in the beetle, particularly referring to nutrient deficiencies and stress. Deviation from the standard of masculinity, similar to the human social context, is pathologised, and individuals exhibiting it are valued less. Developing bodies with characteristics of both sexes is an example of defying the expectations of the keepers and breaching the binary that they would like to impose. Contrary to beetle keepers, coleopterists (entomologists specialising in beetles) do not consider the third phenotype of beetles a hindrance, but rather an advantage. Emlen Douglas, using the example of the beetle *Onthophagus acuminatus*, demonstrates that both phenotypes of male beetles constitute evolutionary adaptations and are characterised by different reproductive strategies. Massive beetles with horns fight each other for resources and females, while smaller beetles without horns, by being mistaken for females, can achieve the same without fighting.[20] In some languages, names tend to be binarily gendered. This may be at odds with the biology of many commonly bred invertebrates, such as snails – all commonly bred snails are hermaphrodites. They do not exhibit neither female or male gender. If a caretaker wants to give their pet a name from a Polish repertoire, it requires them to assign it to a specific gender. Since relationships with snails resemble relationships with cats or dogs more than

[20] Emlen Douglas, "Alternative Reproductive Tactics and Male-Dimorphism in the Horned Beetle," *Onthophagus acuminatus* (Coleoptera: Scarabaeidae)," *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology* 41, no. 5 (1997): 335–341.

any other human-invertebrate relationship,[21] giving them a name is deemed necessary. This puts the caretaker in a difficult position, where gender must be imposed. Snail breeders adopt various conventions and usually stick to them. For example, Anna, a hobbyist from Warsaw, names all her snails with old-fashioned, serious male names, for instance, Stanisław, Kazimierz, Eustachy.

These examples point to a simple fact – invertebrates "destabilise, transgress or even resist our human orderings"[22] to quote Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert – they become "out of place."[23] The ultimate life purpose of every invertebrate is deemed to be reproduction – this is the result of simplified reading of evolution. If an invertebrate has any kind of "unproductive" sexual contact, it is assumed to either be a mistake (mistaking same sex for the opposite sex) or a defect. But not all invertebrates want to reproduce, and even less want to reproduce in a way that can be controlled by invertebrate keepers. This tendency of assuming that queerness in invertebrates must be either a pathology or a mistake was described by Raffles in his work *Insectopedia*, and it seems to converge with my findings in the field.

Assimilation or Alienation?

When queerness is profitable it is understood as part of nature. The best exemplifications of this are viral videos of spider copulation posted on YouTube by invertebrate keeping influencers. They gather a lot of attention, and to some viewers their content is a gateway into the hobby. The excitement of watching the videos was explained to me by a fan, Remigiusz, as stemming from the uncertainty of whether the male will survive or end up devoured by the female. The reversal of power balance and the bizarre amalgamation of sex and death is the key to understanding their allure – having a chance to witness a "bizarre freak show of nature." This feeling is the primary product being sold along with the video – the educational value is decidedly less important.

However, when it turns out to be a form of resistance or is non-commodifiable, it starts being pathologised by their keepers. The best example of this is the "mean,"

[21] The level of personal dimension of relationships of invertebrates with their keepers is usually dependent on many factors including the lifespan of the animal and if the animal is kept solitary or as a part of colony and their size. These factors cause relationships with GAS (Giant African Snails, *Lissachatina fulica*) to be very personal in opposition to relationships with ants, cockroaches, and isopods.

[22] Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, "Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: An Introduction," in *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human – Animal Relations*, eds. Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert (London: Routledge, 2000), 20.

[23] Colling, *Animal Resistance*, 50–52, 83–86, 91–93.

"abnormal" spiders that refuse motherhood, or the small, hornless beetles. Mateusz, a YouTuber and spider breeder from Warsaw, told me about one of the female spiders he keeps that caused him a lot of frustration by refusing to mate:

> And that particular female turned out to be a bitch. The first male that approached her – she tore off both of his genital bulbs, which are the copulatory organs [laughs]. The second one, unfortunately, I placed in such a way that I just closed them off, put another container on top, and waited to see what would happen. There was some courting going on, which was nice, but at some point, the male fell, slid off the wall, and that's when the female killed him. Only the third male managed, but even then, there was a situation where the female bit him, sinking her venomous fang into his genital bulb just as he was, let's say, inside her, and the bulb didn't come out for twenty seconds. I was like, "Uhh, just leave as much in there as you can, that'll do," and only then did I separate them with tweezers.

The attitude of terrarium enthusiasts toward queerness can be described as a distanced, exoticising fascination. Representations of strong, dominant femininity in spiders, ants, and praying mantises, gender diversity among beetles, alternative reproductive models in snails and stick insects, and many other queer traits of invertebrates, although they attract interest, do not seem to change the attitude toward human gender and sexuality. If anything, they tend to serve a distancing role – the sexuality and gender of invertebrates are perceived as behaviours of alien, non-human others. Though exotic and exciting, they are the opposite of decent human behaviours, and thus, instead of deconstructing heteronormative framework, they cement it. This exemplifies the hegemony of the heteronormative narrative, which effectively incorporates elements that could potentially destabilise it. In her work Donna Haraway makes use of the term "making kin," which is the slogan and subtitle of her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.[24] Kin, in the sense used by Haraway, is beyond only genealogy. It brings attention to deep connections that bind critters living on earth. It recognises the common "flesh" (lateral, semiotic but also genealogic) that is shared by them. This perspective is opposed to human exceptionalism and is closely related with the concept of Chthulucene – the epoch of sympoiesis, where new kinds of multispecies solidaries are born.[25] She also introduces the concept of tentacular thinking – thinking with non-human others, and their networks that refute human exceptionalism. One can hardly find any tentacular thinking in the hobby. Invertebrate keepers build a barri-

[24] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durkham: Duke University Press, 2016), 99–103.

[25] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30–57.

er between themselves and their pets, much more durable than the glass from which the terrariums are made. In this respect, invertebrates are not "relatives," but rather strangers against whom the enthusiasts construct their own identity.

Accepting the kinship and closeness between terrarium enthusiasts and terrarium-dwelling creatures could have a transformative potential in terms of sexuality and gender norms as well. The mutuality of our different materialisations, as Eva Hayward describes in her articles about starfish[26] and corals,[27] lies at the foundation of cultural meanings that constitute our identities. Just as starfish are capable of transformations and regeneration, human bodies and identities are built in continuous interaction between the material and the cultural. Understanding ourselves not in opposition to invertebrates, but rather through nurturing similarities, connections, and closeness with these metamorphosing, multiple, subversive relatives could be a prerequisite for forming a dynamic, heterogeneous, queer identity. Queer or non-conforming humans could possibly form multispecies alliances[28] with invertebrates who are restricted by the same norms. They share a struggle, both in the way in which heteronormative framework restricts them, and in the way in which their queerness and non-conformity is being capitalised on and appropriated for the sake of profit. Queer sexuality of invertebrates is embedded within economic realities and capitalist frameworks – sexual activity is desirable when it can be capitalised upon, and unwanted when it is non-functional, expressive, or uncontrolled. Thus, gender and sexuality are disciplined to meet the criterion of productivity. Heteronormativity is ingrained in the epistemological framework of breeders, while deviations from it are accepted when they can be commodified. By reversing gender norms and featuring dangerous dynamics that sometimes end in the male's death, spider sex becomes an exotic and exciting spectacle.

The queerness of invertebrates is often a problem for the keepers, because it is a force that resists containment, two of the most prominent examples being stick bugs and snails. Many species of commonly kept stick bugs are able to reproduce through parthenogenesis. It means that sooner or later, with adequate conditions, every stick bug will rapidly multiply and overcrowd the enclosure that it is kept in. The keeper has to make a choice between using direct violence, and finding someone who will take care of the excess animals or release them into the wild. Discarding the eggs is also an option, but in many cases the eggs are thrown in the garbage hatch and populate new territories (Indian stick bugs in California and Republic of South Africa). There is a similar case to be made for snails. When the snails

[26] Eva Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, nos. 3–4 (2008): 64–85.

[27] Eva Hayward, "FINGERYEYES: Impressions of Cup Corals," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 577–600.

[28] Beilin and Suryanarayanan, "Milpa-Melipona-Maya," 469–500.

multiply – and it can also happen through parthenogenesis – they lay hundreds of eggs. The popular species measure up to 20 cm and weigh 250 grams so keeping that many snails is usually not an option. Because of that, the snail eggs are usually destroyed in the hundreds.

The opposite would be a female spider eating many of her mates before they can copulate with her. In doing so, she is denying the keeper slings (spiderlings), and rebelling against her role as a mother. The spider is then referred to in terms usually used to put down women who resist gender norms, for example, bitch or hag, because it failed to perform the assigned role of a woman – despite radical differences, it is likened to women who do the same.

Discussion

So the question becomes – what are the invertebrates saying with their behaviour, and are they listened to? Colling states that in a social and political sense, animal resistance is the animals' struggle and bid for freedom against their captivity or other oppressive conditions, by transgressing or retaliating against human-constructed boundaries, namely, the ones of very narrowly defined sex, gender, and reproduction – that is the "refusal to accept or comply with something," which is one of the definitions of animal resistance provided by the author.[29] In some of the cases I have encountered, the resistance was not very effective in changing the keepers' perception of gender roles in general. The reason for it was mostly the radical distancing from invertebrates, and using misinterpretation as the way of assimilating queer behaviours into the heteronormative framework. The power reasserts itself through ridicule and exoticisation of non-conforming invertebrates. Another strategy that is employed is the interpretation of invertebrate behaviour and biology in a way that serves the purpose of incorporating their behaviour into the norm. So the very act of existing might be an act of subversion, and it certainly is in some of the cases of invertebrates. If captive invertebrates exercise their agency through resistance, do their keepers listen?

I hear the invertebrates speak about diverse, multiple ways of thriving. They speak about their personal attitudes, motivations, and goals. And I hear them opposing the bastardised understanding of "nature" and "evolution," and its appropriation used to limit them. I am sure that what I hear is influenced by my position as an anthropologist, my cultural background, and more than anything my biology as a vertebrate mammalian primate. But I believe that by considering these

[29] Colling, *Animal Resistance*, 13.

inequalities rather than assuming my pre-conceptions as universal and being open to difference instead of ridiculing it, more just relationships can be formed.

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