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Rasmussen, Claire 2011, *The Autonomous Animal: Self-Governance and the Modern Subject*, reviewed by Matthew Wilson

Claire Rasmussen, *The Autonomous Animal: Self-Governance and the Modern Subject*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, 210 pages, US \$25.00 paper, ISBN 9780816669578 (<http://upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-autonomous-animal>)

In *The Autonomous Animal*, Rasmussen takes as her object of study the “everyday life of autonomy” (page xiii), that is, the actual practices of autonomy as well as the ways in which the concept of autonomy is utilized to discuss political subjectivity and self-governance. She writes that autonomy has become a pre-condition for participation in a democracy, and asks: what conditions this development, politically and socially? What are the limits for a democracy staked around claims or evaluations of autonomous selves?

The argument she advances in responding to these questions is generally that the apparent paradoxes of autonomy are also tensions in the modern subject, and in this way, autonomy becomes useful in order to think about the modern political subject. Rasmussen models the one-two punch of her contribution after the governmentality literature: (1) that the governing of ‘self’ is itself a product of power, and (2) that self-critique can be productive, in the resistance to power. Therefore, it is an attention to everyday practices, following Foucault, where we see the discourse of autonomy mobilized. Most importantly, Rasmussen articulates the difference that autonomy makes and demonstrates the power relations that saturate our discussions of autonomy in society. Careful not to simply equate autonomy to power, she draws out the complex and dynamic formulations that produce subject positions within or in spite of this discourse. Being both normative and creative, the discourse of autonomy generates, “the sedimentation of or resistance to existing power relationships” (page 22).

Tacking between the universal/generalist and the particular/individualist, she throws into question our liberal stance toward the protection of children of a specific age and gender, the animal rights movement, and the war on drugs and terror. In these case studies, autonomy is interrogated as Rasmussen attempts to work through a central paradox of power: of its inescapability and figured through care as the source of political possibility. In what follows, I briefly trace Rasmussen’s discussion around four subjects, which she chooses as illustrative sites of this paradox: maturity, drugs and alcohol addiction, human-animal relationships, and fitness addiction. These sites provide rich opportunities for unpacking autonomy, and as such, I am left with still more questions about the implications for Rasmussen’s careful tracing.

On Maturity. Autonomy is learned through management of the physical body, and as Rasmussen underlines, this management is concerned most specifically with sexual urges. Successful management of the physical body grants access to participation in a democracy, thus the emphasis on the sexual development of children. However, Rasmussen demonstrates how difference (gender and class) is figured centrally into discourses of autonomy/maturity: the masturbating boy, the delinquent girl, and the lower class girl who necessarily enters the public sphere at a young age (to earn a wage by exposing herself). For her, these subjects highlight the role of difference (for instance, in the shift from explanations of male seduction to female delinquency) in the production of autonomous subjects — in the self-governance of desires as well as social and political concerns around public health and personal hygiene, identity, and normal sexual development.

Here, the production of a normative discourse of maturation/autonomy is illustrated around adolescence, sexuality, and the age of consent. However, in my read, Rasmussen stops just short of a full discussion of the paradox of autonomy, leaving out a consideration of the possibility for creative response to power. How might we conceptualize and then identify resistances in the (sexual) development of the child? In other words, what difference does autonomy make in the everyday lives of teenagers, specifically for those marked by difference?

On Drugs/Alcohol Addiction. The addict is discursively constructed as a heteronomous subject, incapable of autonomy and placed outside the political. The state both interferes with and enters these bodies, marked as threats to society, while the subjects themselves are seen as unable to circumvent their continual cravings. Here, Rasmussen draws upon two sides of bio-power: as a way, (1) to interpolate subjects into the social, and (2) to exclude more incongruous subject formations. In their inability to manage their bodies, drug addicts are cast outside, become Other through their cravings. They are foreign, un-American, and targets of state intervention. Again, Rasmussen extends this Foucauldian critique to point to the different configurations of subjects as targets: the female body as a vessel for the drug trade, the Latino body, and the bodies of children and their mothers, as the potential effects of foreign substances.

Here, the family is the site of regulation. The state’s interest in children is manifest through the concern placed on the school, to purify the school space and to regulate the space of the home through the child. Again, some subjects are delineated as becoming-autonomous and must allow their bodies to yield information about drug use, while others are constructed as always-already heteronomous and therefore are assumed violable. Autonomy is used to justify these interventions, despite the ways in which subjects are differently policed. Indeed, autonomy (or claims to autonomy) are never outside power; autonomy is not a purely liberating discourse. Instead, Rasmussen suggests, following Foucault, that “power generates resistance” (page 95). Different configurations of power are possible.

On Animals. It is at this point in the text that Rasmussen considers the productive/creative relationships formed between humans and animals as

illustrative of an opening of the space in which political subjectivities are forged. Here, she traces political theory's general approaches to the human-animal relationship as one of hierarchy, of duty, and of a nostalgic reference to a pre-civilized humanity. Rasmussen then presents a dazzling critique of the animal rights movement, to place this debate as indicative of a broader understanding of human animal autonomy. To grant animals rights is to embroil them into the "repetition of power relationships and the violence of erasing animals' particularity" (page 121). Effectively, Rasmussen demonstrates how the instability of the autonomy/heteronomy of animals' political subject-status opens a site of political engagement — an opening she insightfully argues is necessary in discussions of the modern subject. The strangeness of the animal in the encounter (as with Derrida upon seeing that his cat 'sees' him naked) is to open this space of engagement — to not necessarily *recognize* the Other, but to *acknowledge* it. This ethical position, according to Rasmussen, is meant to highlight the conditions through which an encounter becomes possible and to resist the solidification of those power relationships that produce these conditions. Rasmussen presents a kind of nomadic theory — a continual, infinite movement between registers of commensurability — an always present questioning.

Here, I was wondering where *When Species Meet* is in all of this (Haraway, 2008)? Haraway's figurations open spaces in which to encounter, to witness, and acknowledge the messiness and risks of subject formation (Wilson, 2009). More questions emerge in thinking through Rasmussen's project: How might the discourse of autonomy/heteronomy work throughout Haraway's project to articulate the emerging lines of companionship, between humans and technoscientific objects, humans and animals? How might Haraway's project align with Rasmussen's attempts to understand the creative/productive possibility of claims to autonomy? Perhaps the figure of companion species ultimately recognizes that the project of autonomy in political subjectification is bankrupt, incommensurable with the modern more-than-human subject. We are, as Haraway notes, always becoming-with. In this sense, autonomy is a strange fiction.

On Fitness Addictions. Rasmussen ends her case studies with a discussion of the fitness subject. Constituted as the flip-side to the addict — as a subject in control of its body, in service of the social whole — the fit subject can at the same time become addicted to autonomy, to care-of-the-self. For Rasmussen, this represents yet another creative/productive response, resistance to, or reconfiguration of power relationships. Aspiration, as a recognition of the continual need for self-improvement, serves to structure subject formation outside of universal norms. Here, power works to promote the unending project of self-care, to imagine differently our relationships to power. This is the productive potential realized by Rasmussen through a discussion of the masochist, as that which "sacrifices free will and submits to the other" (page 158).

In the end, the discourse of autonomy is a blunt object, and one that perhaps obfuscates the project of making political. However, Rasmussen sees autonomy as the site from which to acknowledge contestation around who/what are political subjects. As a postfoundational account, Rasmussen is to be commended for demonstrating the possibilities of critiquing power that do not render difference opaque. Yet, this project leads me to ask, 'what next?', not as the punitive critique that serves to reduce the significance of the text — but to energetically imagine what this way of thinking autonomy might allow. What is the political potential of *acknowledgment* in conditioning the adolescent or the drug addict? How might the figure of the masochist challenge/subvert disciplinary power over the un-fit body?

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References

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