

Living with and Learning from Bed Bugs: New York and New Forms of Interspecies Sociability

Jamie Berthe

js.berthe@gmail.com

Abstract: This essay uses the subjective experience of a bed bug infestation as the starting point for thinking through the nature of parasitic relationships. Calling on recent literatures in multi- and inter-species ethnography, the author asks the following question: if, as Anna Tsing has argued, a new kind of science is being born, one whose key characteristic is “multispecies love,” can we, as individuals, and as social beings, learn to love bed bugs?

Keywords: multispecies ethnography; bed bugs; interspecies sociability; parasites; multispecies love

In 2009, my New York City apartment was infested with bed bugs. At the time, I was enrolled in a documentary filmmaking course at New York University, so I decided to make a film about the experience. The end result was *Buggin' Out* (2010), a short film that has been screened internationally and has provoked many interesting (even if sometimes uncomfortable) conversations. Because of this film and the discussions to which it has given rise, I have found myself in the perhaps unenviable position of being engaged in an ongoing dialogue about the nature of the human-bed bug encounter. One thing is certain, living through an unexpected and unwanted cohabitation with the species *Cimex lectularius* has left me a changed person. But in spite of (or perhaps in large part because of) its traumatic aspects, the radically singular and profound nature of this encounter has also expanded my ideas about inter-species sociability and about our inter-species obligations to one another.

While exploratory in nature, it is my hope that the present essay will provide readers with a uniquely literal opportunity to consider the productive potential of parasitic relationships. If, as Anna Tsing (2011) has argued, a new kind of science is being born, one whose key characteristic is “multispecies love,” my question to you (and to myself), as individuals, and as social beings, is whether or not we humans can learn to love bed bugs?

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While few would argue with Donna Haraway when she asserts that canine companions are particularly good creatures “to live with” (2008), making that case for bed bugs is a harder sell. It is difficult for many of us to conceive of insects – bed bugs or otherwise – as an integral part of our social world, even if it is true that we share social spaces and develop social habits in tandem with them. On some level, then, our aversion to bed bugs is due to a generalized “zoomorphic bigotry,” as the philosopher James Hatley might say (2011:65). But the struggle for social recognition on the part of bed bugs is compounded by the fact that they are parasites. Even the pioneering entomologist Karl von Frisch, whose respect for and interest in all things insect-related was unrivalled, began his introduction to bed bugs thus: “To avoid any misunderstanding, I should like to make it clear that I have no desire to defend the bed-bug...[I]t is these blood suckers that are responsible for the bad name the entire bug family has in respectable society” (1960:53).



Figure 1. Preparing our apartment for the first treatment – all of our belongings had to be placed in plastic bags until they could be treated with heat or discarded. © Jamie Berthe (2010)

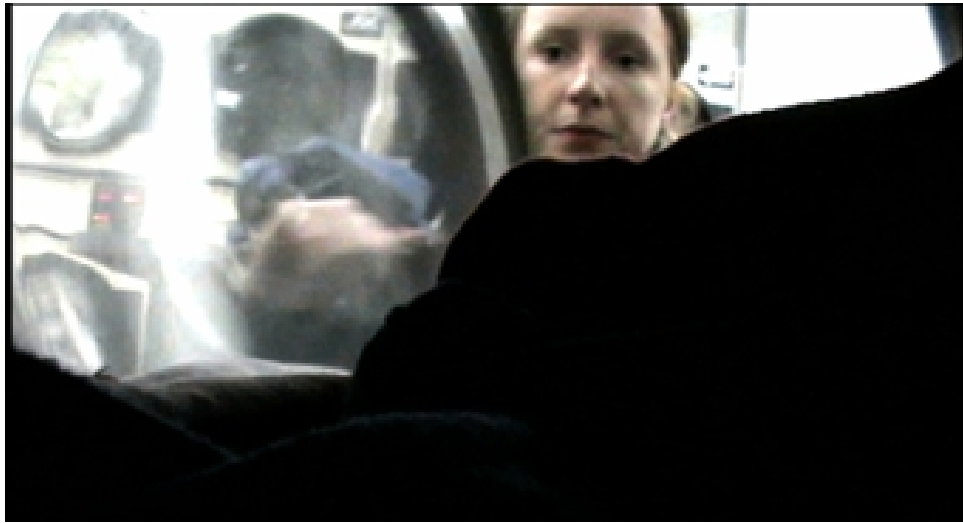


Figure 2. Putting all of our clothes and bedding in the dryer for hours. Heat kills the bed bugs and their eggs. © Jamie Berthe (2010)

We might say then, that bed bugs fall into the category of what Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren have termed “unloved others” (2011). For Rose and Dooren this term is meant to describe not only those creatures that are less likely to inspire human engagement and creativity than, for example, a dog, dolphin, or panda might, but also those entities who are “disliked and actively vilified” to such an extent that they are “specifically targeted for death” (2011:1). This is certainly the case with bed bugs; people find it easy to hate them, easy to want them dead, and, for the most part, it is easy for others to understand why.

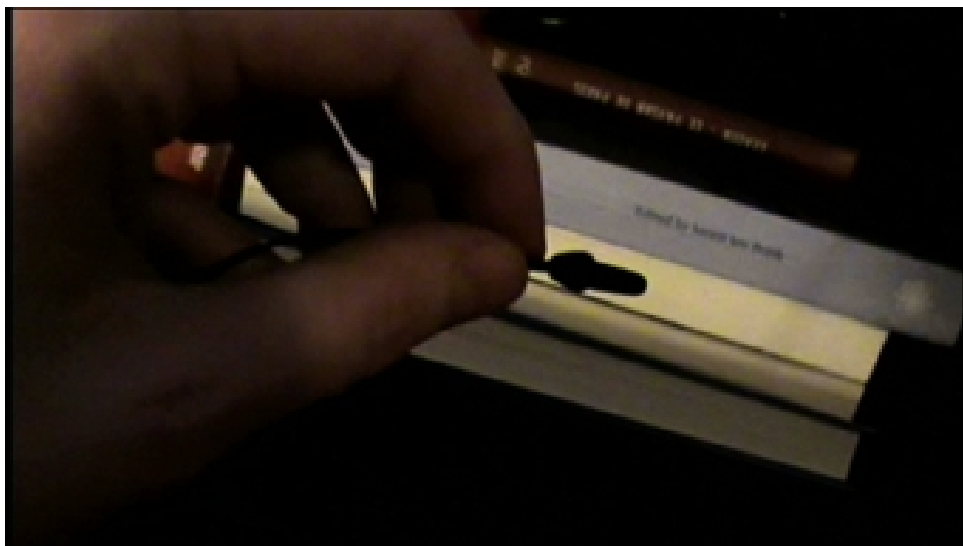


Figure 3. A close up of the thermometer in the heating device we purchased to treat our books and DVDs. The thermometer gets placed inside the books to make sure that their internal temperatures reach 120 degrees, which is sufficient to kill the bugs and their eggs.© Jamie Berthe (2010)



Figure 4. Once the books were treated, they had to be stored in plastic bags to make sure that no bed bugs could make their home inside. © Jamie Berthe (2010)

I was the same way, and evidential traces of my contempt remain visible in the film I made. More recently, however, I have found myself growing uncomfortable with the level of disdain I so frankly and casually displayed in my film. I have also started to wonder about the implications of my ferocious desire to live in an insect-free reality. Admittedly, it is much easier to entertain thoughts of this nature now that I am living in a bed bug free home. Still, it happens that this process of questioning my own human-bed bug encounter has coincided with a blossoming of literature in the area of multi- and inter-species ethnography, a coincidence that has further encouraged me to (try to) transform the way that I think about bed bugs.

The idea of forging a more sympathetic bond with creatures whose reproductive and evolutionary health depends on their access to human “blood meals” may seem contrary to common sense. In an article considering the threatened extinction of two types of ticks, James Hatley (2011) comes to the conclusion that “having faith” in parasites requires acknowledging the ambivalence that such a gesture entails for us humans, given our potential role as hosts. For Hatley, advocating on behalf of ticks means accepting their hunger for our blood as part of a natural order of things, no matter how counterintuitive this may seem. He writes: “Ticks, as off-putting as they might be, insist on our acknowledging in our very flesh the depth and uncanniness of our relatedness to them and, by implication, to all other living beings” (71). His work points convincingly towards the benefits of fostering new forms of human-parasite sociability. Unfortunately, in its focus on ticks, Hatley’s article is unable to address the kinds of emotional and psychological trauma that can result from human-bed bug encounters.

Though not responsible for the transmission of diseases like the tick, bed bugs pose an altogether unique challenge to our capacity “to love” because they come to meet us in

extraordinarily intimate “contact zones” (Haraway 2008). The idea of having insects dwell in our homes is a rather unpleasant one for most of us. But unlike domestic insects that settle in kitchens and bathrooms, the *Cimex lectularius* makes its home in and around your bed. Then, once it has found a nesting spot, it waits for the dark of night to begin its trek towards your unconscious body where, after injecting both an anesthetic and an anticoagulant into your bloodstream, it proceeds to feed on your flesh while you slumber. This is not the kind of “intimacy without proximity” that some multispecies encounters involve (Metcalf 2008) – this is very up-close and very personal. And this intimacy does not begin and end in our beds, or even on our flesh, for often times the most meaningful and powerful forms of contact we have with bed bugs occur in the deepest recesses and profoundest parts of our individual and collective psyches. Consider, for example, the national hysteria that swept the U.S. in 2010, when retail stores like Victoria’s Secret and Hollister were forced to close their stores in New York City to treat in-store infestations. Seeing the way the national media and the public dealt with those stories leaves little doubt: bed bugs strike a powerful (dis)chord in their human hosts.

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As Donna Haraway writes, “Contact zones change the subject - all the subjects – in surprising ways” (2008: 219). Whether or not we want to admit it, countless New Yorkers (and other city dwellers, for that matter) have been radically transformed by the current bed bug epidemic. To ignore this fact is to do a disservice to the power of our encounter with bed bugs. Even years after my infestation, I continue to assess the risk level of picking up a bed bug on every couch and subway seat I come across. When I find myself in furniture display rooms, hotel lobbies, restaurants, airports – essentially any public space where bed bugs could make a nice home for themselves – I still experience a significant amount of anxiety. In these ways, and in many others, my relationship to the city remains marked by my experience with bed bugs. They are a part of my daily existence, and inhabit my mental universe, even though we no longer share the same address. And I am not unique in this respect. I know people who insist on sleeping with the lights on; who refuse to check out library books, for fear of bringing home an unwanted guest hidden in the bindings; people who put second-hand clothing purchases in the freezer for weeks before transferring them to their closets, hoping that the cold will have killed off any potential parasitic threat. When the entomologist in my film (Lou Sorkin) suggests that people who have lived through a bedbug infestation often suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, it is not simply a useful metaphor. Following an encounter with bed bugs, one tends to see the world differently, and the threat of a recurrence seems to be lurking everywhere.

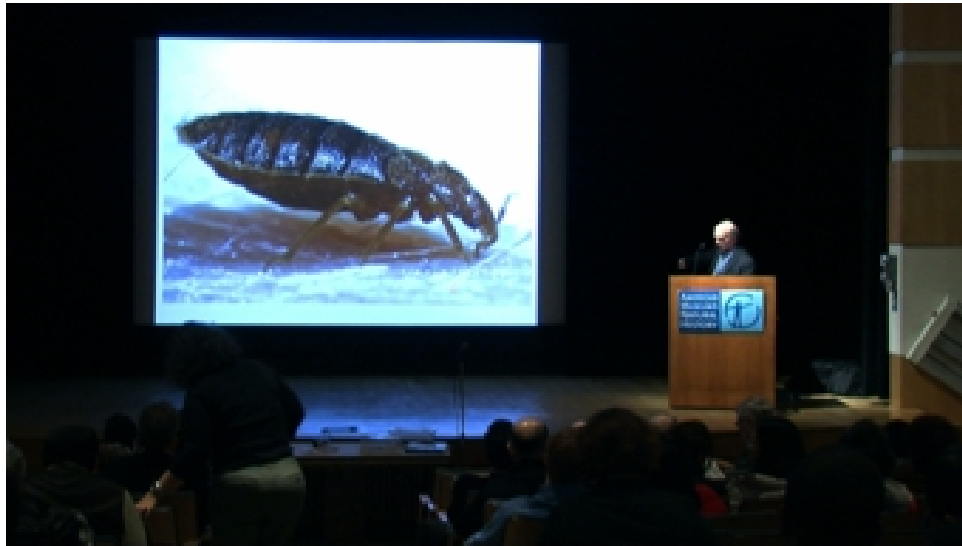


Figure 5. Entomologist Lou Sorkin gives a lecture – “What do you really know about bed bugs?” – at the American Natural History Museum in New York City. © Jamie Berthe (2010)



Figure 6. The threat of a bed bug infestation (literally) hangs over Manhattan. © Jamie Berthe (2010)

Given this, to suggest that one could or should “love” bed bugs seems problematic, if not hypocritical. And yet, I remain intrigued by the possibility. For, if I am honest with myself, bed bugs have marked me in other ways besides new forms of paranoia. It is because of their particular way of “being-in-the-world,” because they so successfully occupied my most intimate spaces and thoughts, that I began to be curious about insect life more generally. Because of this new interest, my world has become a vastly richer and more astonishing place to be. It is also because of bed bugs that I have come to reflect seriously on the implications of using pesticides in the home, and the surprising ways that biodiversity (or a lack thereof) can affect even the most seemingly urban of environments.

Donna Haraway suggests that this is precisely the kind of learning that comes as a result of caring for another species: “Caring,” she writes, “means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning” (2008:36).

As New York entomologist (and former member of Bloomberg’s Bed Bug Advisory Board) Gil Bloom has stated, “Bed bugs are not going away any time soon” (2011). Learning about what this resurgence means for the millions of people now living with or in proximity to bed bugs can go a long way in helping us understand the ways in which humans learn to (re)define their social spaces and practices in relationship to and alongside parasites. Does having these kinds of opportunities to learn from bed bugs, mean that, perhaps, with time, we can come to “love” them? While the provocative side of me would like to think so, the part of me who lived through an infestation doubts it. I keep trying to imagine how I could make a different kind of film on bed bugs, a film that would help me and my audience develop a new kind of relationship to this almost universally loathed species - a sort of Jean Painlevé (2009) moment for the *Cimex lectularius*. I do not know if I will ever have the time, strength, or vision to complete such a project, but just thinking about it makes my reality more complicated and interesting than it was prior to my encounter with these uniquely unloveable creatures. Surely that must be worth something?

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