



HAL
open science

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and the Erotohistoriography of Pets

Emma Thiébaud

► **To cite this version:**

Emma Thiébaud. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and the Erotohistoriography of Pets. Marleen Reichgelt; Sandra Swart; Iris van der Zande; Kirsten Kamphuis. *Gender and Animals in History*, 42 (1), Amsterdam University Press, pp.157-171, 2024, Yearbook of Women's History, 9789048565290. 10.5117/9789048565283_thiebaut . hal-04540401

HAL Id: hal-04540401

<https://hal.science/hal-04540401>

Submitted on 10 Apr 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and the Erotohistoriography of Pets

Emma Thiébaud

Abstract

In 'The Cat' (1901), the American regionalist Mary E. Wilkins Freeman attempts to retrace an affective history of domestication, while coming to terms with the increasing regulation of queer affects that was taking place at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This leads her, this chapter argues, to experiment with a corporeal, sensuous method of doing history that queer theorists have since called 'erotohistory'. Domestication and queerness sit at the intersection of private and public history, of feelings, corporeal sensations, and human politics – and Freeman's feline tale reveals the importance of what the history of one could teach us about the history of the other.

Keywords: queer studies, erotohistoriography, regionalism, pets

Recently, queer theorists such as Elizabeth Freeman have developed a more corporeal, intimate, haptic, and private approach to public history: erotohistoriography, which can be defined as a sensory mode of apprehending history. Erotohistoriography, this chapter argues, may be an important tool when it comes to the history of pets, which finds itself at the intersection of private relationships between humans and animals and public animal history. By investigating what pet historian Katherine Grier calls the 'domestic routines' (mutual gestures, tools, sensations), which have been developed in human–animal couples or families and have produced the bodies and identities of pet and pet owner over time, this 'erotohistory' of pets will embody both the history of affects and domesticity and the history of domestication. It will also, we hope, reignite a desire and passion for such

a history, simply by reimbuing it with the pleasure (or hurt) that can be derived from pet–human relationships.¹

Because queer and interspecies couples or pairs have in common a lack of recognition, legal records, and established written codes for the expression of love, physical intimacy, and domestic arrangements, the historiography of one will benefit the other. As a case study, this essay takes into consideration an early attempt at an erotohistory of pets in the work of the once famous but long forgotten writer Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930, no relation to Elizabeth Freeman). J. Samaine Lockwood has shown that Freeman belonged to a group of friends – artists and writers – who attempted to produce an erotohistory² of the New England ‘spinster’ by trying to find traces of alternative modes of coupling and of experiencing pleasure in the history of New England women (particularly of queer women).³ These artists and writers themselves were queer women, proto-lesbians, and, like prominent lesbian writer of historical novels Sarah Waters in the twenty-first century, wished to find themselves and their attraction to other women reflected in the record of past history.⁴ This led them to examine those women’s domestic routines, in the context of a nationwide attempt to regulate women’s bodies and temporalities. We might say today that they performed some early germination of Elizabeth Freeman’s erotohistoriography.

This chapter argues that M.E.W. Freeman and her friends were ‘resisting’ historians, who read the past with a desire for a silenced queerness.⁵ For most of them, this erotohistoriography began and ended with women. For M.E.W. Freeman, it included cats. This may read to some like historical revisionism, and it is. Such revisionism is not equal to reparation, but their oriented use of historical fiction interrogates the limits of history as practiced then and now.

1 Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 58.

2 Not as such. Lockwood, to avoid putting the name of a recent concept on nineteenth-century amateur history and therefore committing the crime of historical revisionism, called what M.E.W. Freeman and her friends were doing ‘intimate historicism’. J. Samaine Lockwood, *Archives of Desire: The Queer Historical Work of New England Regionalism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015). Since M.E.W. Freeman does herself indulge in historical revisionism, and I am promoting her approach, I will cautiously embrace the term ‘erotohistoriography’.

3 . Lockwood, *Archives of Desire*, 8.

4 In the nineteenth-century, the term ‘lesbian’ referred to a pornographic trope that Freeman and her friends did not reclaim for themselves. It is difficult to inscribe their love of other women in modern taxonomies of sexualities and affective identities, hence my use of ‘proto-lesbians’.

5 See Fetterley’s concept of ‘resisting reader’ in: Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978).

As Freeman's correspondence shows, cats were an important part of her domestic life with her female companion, Mary Wales.⁶ The two Mary's and their cats formed a more-than-human Boston marriage, and both in her fiction and in her letters to her friend and beloved editor Mary Louise Booth, Freeman used cats to explore non-heterosexual feelings.⁷ In fact, she took as much interest in investigating the love of one woman for another, as she did the love one can have for cats. It is therefore no surprise that, when she began writing texts about felines, focused on the loving relationship between a pet keeper and his or her cat, she used the techniques elaborated by her group for erotohistoriography and repurposed them for an even more experimental form of eroto-pet-historiography.

In 'The Cat', the opening story of her 1901 collection, *Understudies*, devoted to both animals and plants, her human and feline characters enact rituals of affection, played out against the backdrop of a historically changing environment. This paper argues that the feelings that emerge from this (hi)story are queer, and allow domestication to be felt and conceptualized through a queer framework. In this respect, Freeman's approach of interspecies history is much closer to that of Katherine Grier or Marjorie Garber, who investigate the love that humans have for their pets, than to that of Erica Fudge or Kathleen Kete, who view the industry of pet-keeping through a much more social and critical lens. While affective approaches to animals have been criticized, particularly by Susan McHugh, I will defend some of their merits. This chapter seeks to retrieve this history of pets and domestication in 'The Cat' (1901 [1900]), her most accomplished example of eroto-pet-historiography.

Queer readings of M.E.W. Freeman's texts abound, but animal readings are rarer. My analysis owes much to Cécile Roudeau's ecocritical analysis of 'The Cat', in which she proposes a 'trans-temporal' discussion of Freeman's feline tale to emphasize its relevance in the field of environmental humanities.⁸ I hope to further her reading by examining how queerness is what renders

6 Freeman and Wales lived together for almost twenty years, before Freeman reluctantly married Charles Freeman and moved from her home with Wales in Massachusetts to New Jersey.

7 Queer feelings of course not being limited to sex or to romance, as we will see.

8 See in particular J. Samaine Lockwood in *Archives of Desire*; H.J.E. Champion in "'Preposterous Fancies' or a 'Plain, Common World?' Queer World-Making in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's 'The Prism' (1901)," in: M. Drizou, S. Palmer, and C. Roudeau, eds., *New Perspectives on Mary E. Wilkins Freeman: Reading with and Against the Grain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 60–75; Cécile Roudeau in "Untimely Freeman," in: M. Drizou, S. Palmer, and C. Roudeau, eds., *New Perspectives on Mary E. Wilkins Freeman: Reading with and Against the Grain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 253–71.

possible a spectral (both continuous and disjointed) conception of time. To do so, I will inscribe ‘The Cat’ in the historiographical discussions initiated by Elizabeth Freeman and add a sharper focus on pets, which by their very nature (as animals to stroke, hold, fondle) bring to life and touch the concept of eroto-pet-historiography. Moreover, because I am defending Freeman’s approach to history, I will use a method inspired by erotohistoriography to read her text, and allow my desire for a queer history of human–cat couples guide my analysis.

A Love (Hi)Story of Mutual Domestication

During the first decades of her career, Freeman was primarily known for writing stories about rebellious or pathos-inspiring country women who feel bridled by an uncompromising society, obstinate husbands, and abstruse conventions, and find the inspiration to revolt in American history. *Understudies*, in that respect, is quite a turn: the first half of it is constituted entirely of animal stories, in which men as well as women find companionship with a cat, a monkey, a parrot, or a horse. It is underwritten both by an interest in the practice of petkeeping and by a curiosity for the up-and-coming zoological theories of Darwin, then almost fifty years in the public eye. However, this sudden interest in animals is not as much of a surprise to the careful reader of Freeman’s cat stories, who knows how Freeman lavishes those purring creatures with narrative attention. ‘The Cat’ is a story of love and domestication. A cat, abandoned by his master in a sturdy but uncomfortable cabin in the mountains for the whole of winter, briefly welcomes a stranger who has suffered among men and needs to find some respite from their relentless and threatening presence. The cat tames the man by offering him a rabbit, and the man proves his tameness by cooking it for both of them. The two males then enjoy a winter idyll, before the stranger leaves and the cat’s initial master returns – to the disappointment of the cat who had come to love the affectionate stranger.

There is a distinct (a-)historical consciousness to this story. The beginning of the text is marked by a conspicuous absence of any traces of industrialization, a grotesquely aristocratic organization of animals, and the presence of a pre-domestication cat who lives on his own in the wild and brutally preys on smaller animals. All of this suggests a premodern state of living.⁹

9 I will use ‘Modern era’ or ‘modernity’ to refer to what is usually termed ‘late modernity’, because, in the works of the New England regionalists I will discuss, the great historical shift is often the Civil War, the Second Revolution, and other events that marked the beginning or

Then, through the apparition of oil and tobacco in the cabin and continuous changes in the cat's behaviour, which reveal his progressive domestication, the text enters the Modern era. But social history is conspicuously absent. For Christopher Nealon and quite a few early queer theorists, history is 'the name we give to the impossibility of reconciling personal life with the movements of a total system' – society.¹⁰ In 'The Cat', social history appears only in the ellipses of the text. For instance, the cat's temporary companion carries with him 'the memories of wrong' from a past among men that has left him feeling misanthropic, but light is never thrown upon this past. Likewise, the cat's master is said to leave for the city during the winter, but the city is never described. The mountains and the cabin delineate a sort of state of nature, over which human society has no power – making the text feel curiously ahistorical.

Yet, there is history in 'The Cat'. It just happens to be animal history. The feline hero of Freeman's tale is also its main focalizer. The internal focalization allows the cat's thoughts, frustrations, and desires to be expressed. And while the cat's master is away, the text is free to abandon the anthropocentric, chronobiological time regulated by hours to adopt instead a more feline temporality.¹¹ The furry creature understands time as the pending satisfaction of his desires, as the lapse between his experience of desire and its satisfaction. His most important want, his lack and need of a master or partner, is what structures the chronology of the text, which can be divided as follows: desire for a master unsatisfied, desire satisfied, and desire for a partner unsatisfied. Interestingly, the (in)satisfaction of the cat's desires comes from the changes in seasons. The text begins during the winter, which forces the cat's master to leave the cabin, and ends in the spring, at which point the master returns.¹² The tension existing between seasonal time and the cat's personal life is (nonhuman) history, and the cat is a historical subject who experiences in his life through different (although cyclical) eras. This tension, I suggest, is particularly reflective of a queer experience of history.

the middle of the nineteenth -century. What I call 'premodern' is the regionalists' somewhat idealized vision of what New England was before these events.

10 Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 13.

11 Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 9.

12 Likewise, in what I interpret to be a malicious nod to the superiority of natural history over human history, products of the distant human society (oil, windows ...) are quickly exhausted or broken while natural resources (preys, flowers ...) are replenished once spring comes.

Elizabeth Freeman, Heather Love, Dana Luciano, and Peter Coviello have all addressed history in affective terms, trying to answer the question of what history feels like to a queer person. For Heather Love, the marching forward of the heteronormative society of nineteenth-century America, which began pathologizing and re-outlawing homosocial sexual relationships, caused umpteen amounts of hurt to sexually non-normative individuals.¹³ For them, 'history' (as I defined it earlier with Nealon) might have felt like heartbreak, loneliness, and frustration. This is exactly what it feels like to our feline hero. At the scale of the cat, history is one of thwarted queer love. And at the scale of the text, history is one of mutual domestication. Pets, in late nineteenth-century America, belonged to the domestic and affective sphere of life. Many anti-cruelty campaigns and animal biographies were predicated on the belief that domestic cats had feelings, moods, and emotions.¹⁴ Imagining that a pet would be affected by the coming and going of humans in its life would be a comforting thought for nineteenth-century pet owners. Fiction allows us to take a step further and ask whether the lack of synchrony between human obligations and feline desires be, to the heights of an animal's life, history.

The love story between the man and the cat, when replaced in the context of the transition from the premodern to the Modern era, becomes a history of (mutual) domestication, at the intersection of the private and the public, where domestication sits. It uses a queerly feeling of frustration, hurt, and maladaptation to transition from a human consciousness to a more animal one. The cyclicity of seasons echoes the cyclicity of nineteenth-century domestic times, and the cabin, with the rituals that take place within it, stands as a domestic space. In the cabin, the cat and the man change, as a result of a process of domestication. The feline creature we encounter in the first paragraphs is a fierce hunter, who lives on his own in the wild and brutally preys on smaller animals. When a human intruder comes into his cabin, the reader might expect him to attack. And yet, he instead decides to offer him the rabbit he has just killed:

The Cat came out from under the bed and leapt up on his lap with the rabbit. The man gave a great shout and start of terror, and sprang, and the Cat slid clawing to the floor, and the rabbit fell inertly, and the man

13 Heather Love, "Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett's Spinster Aesthetics", *ESQ* 55 (2009), 305–34, 310.

14 Grier, *Pets in America*, 174–75.

leant gasping with fright, and ghastly, against the wall. The Cat grabbed the rabbit by the slack of its neck and dragged it to the man's feet.¹⁵

This offering of food is a crucial moment in the evolution of the cat's relationship with the man. In the mountains, prey is scarce. Yet, the cat shares his hard-earned meal, and the stranger cooks it for both of them. From an anthrozoological perspective, the tolerance of proximity to people and the reliance of animals on humans for food and shelter are key elements of domestication, and anthrozoologists often consider a major change of diet to be a proof of achieved domestication – a fact that M.E.W. Freeman, like Kipling and many others, seems to have been intuitively (although approximately) aware of.¹⁶ The cat's willingness to share his humble abode with his human companion and to eat cooked meat works as evidence of his domestication. In just a few paragraphs, the wild cat has become domestic, and even turned into a pet who is stroked and coddled. Strikingly, however, the domestication is mutual and initiated by the cat in M.E.W. Freeman's story. *He* (the cat) offers the rabbit, and as a result of the domestication process the misanthropic man learns to live with the loving feline and becomes more humane. The man's cooking of the rabbit might be considered as proof of the successful domestication of humans (here, by cats). This view, which belongs both to a romanticization of species relations and to a narrative of defiance against human stewardship, foreshadows more contemporary claims regarding the agency of social animals and particularly of cats in the history of domestication.¹⁷

The Erotohistoriographic Project

M.E.W. Freeman's historical project in 'The Cat' starts as an exploration of non-heteronormative affects and a radical re-imagining of interspecies relationships. J. Samaine Lockwood has described the writerly group

15 Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "The Cat," *Understudies* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901), 10. While *Understudies* is currently out of print, a digitized version is available on The Internet Archive at: <https://archive.org/details/understudiesshooofreegoog/page/n29/mode/2up?view=theater>.

16 Carlos A. Driscoll, David W. McDonald, and Stephen J. O'Brien, "From Wild Animals to Domestic Pets, an Evolutionary View of Domestication," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 106 (2009), 9971–78, 9972.

17 See Eric Baratay in "Eric Baratay, historien : 'Les chats ont toujours été dans les foyers des hommes'," *Les Têtes Chercheuses*, France Culture, August 22, 2015. Susan McHugh, "Literary Animal Agents," *PMLA* (2009) 487–95.

Freeman was part of as 'self-aware historicists' trying to engage intimately with the past (particularly as experienced by women in their private lives) and to weave the public history of New England with the more intimate history of its inhabitants.¹⁸ Elizabeth Bishop Perkins, Sarah Orne Jewett and others, for instance, developed a fascination for old houses and the way women had corporeally related to them, or the relationships they had maintained within them.

Like Perkins and Jewett, M.E.W. Freeman used the domestic space as a stage where 'sequence[s] of embodied gestures and accompanying sensations' happen or are performed to figure a corporeal experience of history.¹⁹ In other words, they saw houses as spaces in which the intimate history of women could be re-enacted, and these re-enactments were, for them, a source of (physical) pleasure. To write about the 'intimate historicism' of the regionalists, Lockwood borrows from the queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman the concept of 'erotohistoriography'. Erotohistoriography conceives of the past as something that does not need to be brought back to the present because it already inhabits it and can be felt by performing certain acts and feeling certain sensations. Erotohistoriography is a particularly apt tool for the preservation of the history of queer affects and relationships, as it allows queer people to maintain the (corporeal) memory and urgency of their past independently and without relying on the tools of traditional, written history. Queer and animal histories share a lack (not an absence) of historical sources encoded in a language easily translated into the language of history. M.E.W. Freeman and her group of amateur historians sought to remedy that problem by reading bodies, senses, and postures. Thus, in a transhistoric Maine, Sarah Orne Jewett's characters form blissful homosocial domestic partnerships, carrying through the ages a form of premodern queer relation to the domestic space and to other individuals.²⁰ Similarly, some of M.E.W. Freeman's most emblematic heroines revel in the spinsterly pleasure of ordering their house without the bothersome presence of a husband.

'The Cat' retraces a history of love and physical affection between humans and their animal companions from a non-specific premodernity to the industrially Modern era. An immanent and transhistoric relationship is created by the regular performing of such rituals as sharing a meal and

18 Lockwood, *Archives of Desire*, 8.

19 *Ibid.*, 9.

20 Premodern queerness here refers to loving affects that do not fit into heteronormative courting, flirting, or marriage, and that have not yet been reduced to the then very disparaging (and unfitting) term 'homosexuality'.

sleeping together. Coviello's remarks in his introduction to *Tomorrow's Parties* are useful here: about Jewett, he writes that, to avoid being flattened out by the heteronormative driving force of late nineteenth-century history, Jewett's texts take place at the margins of history, in rural areas that Modern society supposedly has not reached yet.²¹ This is presumably one of the reasons why 'The Cat' takes place at the edges of the human world.

M.E.W. Freeman and Jewett inscribe their narratives in a premodern time where the medicalization and criminalization of queer relationships has yet to happen – and, for 'The Cat', where the exploitation of animals by humans is almost inexistent. Upon hearing that an unknown man is about to enter the cabin, the cat seems to know he will not be attacked and offers 'comradeship', as if he lived in a utopian world where species differences have not yet been attached to an anthropocentric order. M.E.W. Freeman is and has always been considered a realist. Yet, she creates in 'The Cat' and other stories alternative temporalities: out-of-time moments that allow radically different, very imaginative ways of living with others and with the nonhuman world. For all the grizzly realism of 'The Cat', the temporal parenthesis of the love story between the title character and a human stranger is also a beautiful tale of anti-speciesism, anti-anthropocentrism, and queer love.

M.E.W. Freeman and Jewett do not simply try to recover history. Drawing on the work of Cécile Roudeau's 'Untimely Freeman', I will argue that they also conjure up 'broken-off, uncreated futures' of radical interspeciesism.²² When the cat's initial master returns, change has happened, as if the history of the house was interspersed with different eras. However, this history is silent, almost spectral. The master finds his tobacco box empty, his stove lid broken, his window repaired, his firewood exhausted, and his oil can also empty. Donna Haraway might call these traces of the past 'material-semiotic' remnants.²³ All of these objects point toward the domestic routines ('sequence[s] of embodied gestures') that the cat and the man have shared and to the sensations that have accompanied them: the pleasure of smoking, of cooking and eating together.

These archives tell us of the story of the interspecies couple's intimacy. But what is most interesting about them is their absent presence: the

21 Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 81.

22 Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties*, 20. These words are quoted by Cécile Roudeau in "Untimely Freeman."

23 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 413.

master understands that change has happened because what should be there ... is not. Absence, or rather what is missing, is the only trace of the loving relationship that the cat and his temporary companion had. To use Haraway's words: 'We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love. This love is a *historical aberration* and a natureculture legacy' (my emphasis).²⁴ Freeman's very desirable past is anachronous, never really realized, aberrant. It is what could have been and maybe what should have been. Instead, M.E.W. Freeman and we are left with the fleshly wound of this unrealized possibility of radical interspecies love and relationships. This is what Roudeau calls the 'untimely present', a constant dialogue or tension between different temporalities: M.E.W. Freeman's, the reader's, what was and what could have been.

M.E.W. Freeman's characters feel this unrealized past vibrating in their bodies – and this is where the 'untimely present' becomes entangled with erotohistoriography. The way the old master discovers or recovers the traces of the cat's relationship with the winter visitor is linked to corporeality. When he comes back home after his long absence, the master 'searches for'²⁵ his tobacco. The verb is imprecise enough to refer both to sight and to touch, and the passage does not entirely clarify the use of this verb for us. Moreover, the man is characterized in a way that ties his emotional insensitivity to a dulled sense of touch (the polysemy of 'sensitivity' is important). The man is 'callous', both in his soul and in his senses.²⁶ Just as New England regionalists engaged with history through their bodies, the master engages with the past of his house, with the (pseudo-)history of domestication, and with the love story of the cat, through his senses. He feels the absence of things in his house. Roudeau, referring to the complex temporalities of deforestation in M.E.W. Freeman's sylvan tales, speaks of a 'spectral temporality of embodied loss'.²⁷ What M.E.W. Freeman's present lacks and what her characters miss, she suggests, is a physical and emotional bond with trees – 'entanglement'.²⁸ Upon his old master's return, the cat regrets the former's 'affection' for him.²⁹ M.E.W. Freeman writes: 'He never

24 Ibid., 16. Words quoted by Roudeau in 'Untimely Freeman', 265.

25 Freeman, "The Cat", 16.

26 Freeman, "The Cat", 15.

27 Roudeau, "Untimely Freeman," 265.

28 Ibid.

29 Freeman, "The Cat", 15.

patted him like that gentler outcast'.³⁰ They neither eat nor sleep together. The loss of the intensely close and affectionate relationships the cat and his companion had is corporeal, sensual, embodied – even for the master who does not quite understand what has happened in his absence and cannot fathom what is truly missing from his life. Our senses, the text suggests, contain the memory of an unrealized past made of interspecies entanglements.

In her first reading of 'The Cat', Roudeau laments that the story seemingly ends very conservatively, as the cat and the master retreat to their initial, separate positions in the cabin: 'Finally he *gave it up*. He sat down beside the fire, for May in the mountains is cold; he held his empty pipe in his mouth, his rough forehead knitted, and he and the Cat looked at each other across that impassable barrier of silence which has been set between man and beast from the creation of the world' (my emphasis).³¹ Giving up implies that the man ultimately refuses to try and understand the past he can feel through his dulled senses. Once the reader has been told the story of the cat, however, when they can sense what is missing in their life, the radical interspeciesism of the text is within literal reach. The story creates such heartbreak that one can only rebel against its conclusion. In a pre-Foucauldian understanding of the history of affects and affective identities, M.E.W. Freeman creates a 'feline continuum' that she then uses to explore alternative ways of being-with other creatures.

Queer and Interspecies Futurities

I propose that we do not take the conclusion of M.E.W. Freeman's story at face value. Instead, we might want to let the above-mentioned angered disappointment and the desire for interspecies love guide our second reading of the text. H.J.E. Champion, an avid spotter of queerly references in nineteenth-century American literature, has read some of M.E.W. Freeman's stories as imaginings of what José Esteban Muñoz calls 'queer futurities' (but without the interspecies focus I am bringing).³² For her, the gaps, leaps, and delays that can be found in Freeman's work, and most particularly in 'The Prism', a tale of female sexuality grown 'sideways', disrupt the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 16; Roudeau, "Untimely Freeman," 258.

³² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

chrononormativity of nineteenth-century reproductive futurism.³³ To put it differently, they allow characters not to obey the heteronormative timeline that consists in courting or being courted by a member of the opposite sex and marrying them, before begetting children and therefore contributing to the perpetuation of American society (and, at a species level, to the perpetuation of humanity).

If the future is not reproductive, then, how or what is it? For Munõz, a queer future is a ‘the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality’, moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one’s past, present or future.³⁴ It is non-linear, reflexive, and it is vibrating with what could have been or what could be. Champion insists on that last part, presenting queer futurity as a horizon of liberation. In the case of ‘The Cat’, a queer future could be the end of an anthropocentric humanity (or a return to what appears as a utopian and revisionist pre-speciesism of shared animality, influenced both by Darwinism and by nineteenth-century feelings of attachment to pets, depending on what vantage point we adopt in the non-linear temporality of queerness). After some of the most important queer theorists, Champion defines ‘queerness’ as resistance to a norm – a definition that accounts for the entire evolution of the signification of the word ‘queer’ during the nineteenth-century, from simple peculiarity to nonnormative sexualities.³⁵

Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse find both in Freeman’s stories: characters who develop strange obsessions or abnormal behaviours (peccoliarities), and characters who experience and practice a sexuality that is not heteronormative³⁶ – because sexuality, in M.E.W. Freeman’s work, takes on manifold appearances: a compulsive desire to clean one’s house, a very intense love for one’s pet, a childlike attachment to an object, a close proximity to nature ... M.E.W. Freeman writes what Peter Coviello has termed ‘the varied passions’ of the nineteenth century, which include the love for or desire of the non-human (be it animal, vegetal, or material).³⁷ In that wide array of ‘deviant’ love- and desire-related affects, subjects, and objects, to care about animals (like the heroine of the eponymous tale ‘Christmas Jenny’) and to have intense affection for one’s pet (like the human companion in ‘The Cat’) is one form of queer love or queer sexuality.³⁸

33 H.J.E. Champion, “Preposterous Fancies,” 65.

34 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1, 32.

35 Champion, “Preposterous Fancies,” 61–62.

36 Fetterley and Pryse, *Writing Out of Place*.

37 Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow’s Parties*, 4.

38 Freeman, “Christmas Jenny,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, December 22, 1888, 872–73. A digitized version has been preserved by the Cornell University Library at: <https://reader.library.cornell>.

In Freeman's oeuvre, the love of one's same-sex domestic partner and the love of animals are expressed in the same language as two equally non-normative affects. In 'The Cat', the winter visitor and his feline lover are queer subjects having a queer relationship – and their relationship has no reproductive futurity. But what about queer futurity? The end of 'The Cat' need not be the end of the relationship. As we have seen with Roudeau, there is a non-strictly linear temporality in the text: what could have been or could be spectrally remains. The cat is able to meditate from different vantage points on all the episodes of his life. The future of this interspecies couple might even be the horizon of liberation described by Champion in her analysis of 'The Prism': the end of the perpetuation of species through reproduction, and therefore a (darkly) posthuman world where the only way to perpetuate one's species is to spread it horizontally, to make (odd)kin with cats, dogs, birds, to enter what Roudeau terms 'queer assemblages'.³⁹

Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse rightfully suggest that we include 'Christmas Jenny' in the list of Freeman's queer stories, for its oddity. I contend that 'Christmas Jenny' is queer because it presents the caring love of animals as a personally valuable alternative to marriage, and also because it blurs the border of species to the point of creating a community of non-normative humans – Jenny, the bush-woman; Jonas, the man who only produces animal groans; a deaf and dumb boy who lives among the birds and rabbits that Jenny shelters; and Mrs. Casey, who flutters like a bird when she has to defend Jenny, but also speaks on her behalf as if she was a nineteenth-century animal activist.⁴⁰ The members of this community are neither only human nor only animal. Instead, they exist in an ontological flux of humanimality. 'Christmas Jenny', however, appears as a much more straightforwardly hopeful story than 'The Cat' – in part because Jenny offers shelter to what seems to be an abandoned orphan. That creature, a boy dressed in girl's clothes who lives among animals and can neither speak nor hear (which makes him as unintelligible as his nonhuman friends) is the future of Jenny's interspecies community. The two lovers of 'The Cat', on the contrary, have not been blessed with an adoptive offspring. M.E.W. Freeman's feline tale is infused with a sense of doom even as spring returns. And yet, it causes a desire to love, touch, and hold.

edu/docviewer/digital?id=hearth4732809_1455_051#page/3/mode/1up.

39 Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

40 Speaking for those who supposedly did not have a voice was the leitmotiv of the animal activist movement of the second half of the nineteenth-century in the United States and in England.

The sense of doom that pervades several of M.E.W. Freeman's queer texts, such as the crime story 'The Long Arm' (1895), might have to do with the growing homophobia that queer people like M.E.W. Freeman were facing in the late nineteenth-century, in the wake of the trials of Oscar Wilde and of the medicalization by German and French psychoanalysts of 'inverts' and 'homosexuals'. In 'The Cat', the relationship between the feline creature and the human visitor can be read as a metaphor for a (male) same-sex couple. The gendering of the two lovers, the blurring of gender roles in their distribution of the domestic space, and the cryptic references to the visitor's past point in this direction. The cat's loneliness and frustration are not only the feelings of a pet confronted to the loss of a master, but also that of a queer person experiencing the repression of 'homosexual' behaviours. In that respect, this story by M.E.W. Freeman foreshadows the later works of twentieth-century authors such as J.R. Ackerley, who, as Susan McHugh highlights, drew parallels between the increasing intolerance affecting the sexuality of pets and the criminalization of gay relationships.⁴¹

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's 'The Cat' weaves together queer and interspecies affects and uses the latter to lament and counter the criminalization of the former. At the end of the nineteenth century, 'The Cat' explored the possibility of a queer and interspecies approach of history, using romantic narratives as a template for an affective history of affects. It proposed a new epistemology for the exploration and narrativization of a field yet to come. To some historians, maybe the most important contribution made by 'The Cat' to a history of pets is its use of contemporary knowledge of evolution and processes of domestication (still very much in progress for cats in 1901), as well as the testimony it offers to the affective discourse that then guided understanding of animals. In that respect, it is a very interesting source to examine in relation to such histories of pets as Katherine Grier's. Yet, I have tried to show that its peculiar methodology, which pertains both to case analysis and to presentation of results, is what most deserves our attention. Borrowed from the contiguous queer erotohistoriography of Freeman's friends, it contributes to what I tentatively call a 'utopian history of pets and queerness' and begs important questions about the role and value of history in seemingly futureless times.

41 Susan McHugh, *Narrating across Species Lines* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2011), 131.

About the Author

Emma Thiébaud is a PhD student at LARCA (Université Paris Cité). She studies the representation of pets in the work of nineteenth-century American authors from a queer perspective, trying to determine how queer and interspecies affects might intersect. She contributed to the organization of the international conference 'Freeman in Paris' held by LARCA at Université Paris Cité in 2022, and presented her latest work on Mary E. Wilkins Freeman at the 2023 annual conference of the American Literary Association.