

# The animal question and condition: intersectionality and Critical Animal Studies in the Asia-Pacific.

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*...the intersectional analysis of nature, gender, race, class, species, and sexuality is not confined to an essentialist definition of feminism or ecofeminism, but rather offers a strategic conceptual approach toward bringing about the social justice, economic and ecological democracy needed to solve environmental crises in the present moment.*

*Greta Gaard*

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The intersectional commitment of engaged and activist scholarship is a necessary feature in the evolution of animal studies and the emergence of the critical turn. The *rise* of Critical Animal Studies (CAS), which differentiates itself through focus on the question *and* condition of the animal Other, has brought to the surface a number of tensions – many of which have existed in one form or another in fields of activist scholarship and praxis. As Nik Taylor and Richard Twine note, the *critical* ‘expresses the urgency of our times in the context of ecological crisis’ (2).

Prominent ecofeminist scholars including Carol Adams and Lori Gruen have reflected on risks associated with intersectionality, a concern being that the concept is becoming ‘a bit of a buzzword amongst feminist social justice scholars and activist these days’ (7). It is a concept with a long history, rooted within critical race scholarship, and aimed at an analysis of the ‘mutually reinforcing logics of domination’. Identification of intersections of power relations and

domination across gender, class and species can be traced back as least as far as 1892 (7–8). In the 1970s feminists began locating connections between exploitation based on gender and species. Pioneering ecofeminist work on affect emerged, in direct contrast to the rationalist basis of the foundational and groundbreaking works of male scholars including Tom Reagan and Peter Singer. What emerged was an ethics of care tradition, one which has largely been incorporated in CAS scholarship.

In reflection of the ethics of care, interdisciplinary scholarship and a critical reflexivity,<sup>1</sup> this special issue of *Animal Studies Journal* seeks to further discussion and debate on the animal question and condition. Such reflexivity is rooted in a contextual (and near universalism) moral veganism,<sup>2</sup> which fosters and necessitates considered engagement with class, culture, gender, race and ethnicity. For example, whereas ‘veganism is certainly an attempt to reconceptualize the human away from habitual anthropocentrism, it is not itself immune from becoming entangled with exclusionary notions of the human, be they along lines of race or class. Such possibilities must then be part of intersectional reflexivity that shapes analysis of the contexts of moral veganism’ (Twine 197).

The central theme of this special issue – Critical Animal Studies in the Asia-Pacific: class, culture, gender and identity – also specifically locates and situates a geographic focal point. The theme presented itself through discussions with a number of emerging scholars in the region, centred on a focus for a 2014 Oceania CAS conference in Australia. Drawing on collective experiences of participating in events in North America and Europe, those involved in discussions noted that scholarship on the animal question in the Asia-Pacific was under-represented. This special issue seeks to further efforts to address this.

### **Contributions to this special issue**

In the opening paper of this issue, ‘Re-animating the Thylacine: Narratives of Extinction in Tasmanian Cinema’, Guinevere Narraway and Hannah Stark engage with representations of the thylacine (Tasmania tiger) as a cultural icon, with a focus on Tasmanian films *The Hunter* (2011) and *Dying Breed* (2008). Daniel Nettheim’s *The Hunter* is an adventure thriller based on Julia Leigh’s 1999 prize-winning debut novel, and follows a mercenary as he attempts to locate the last thylacine, kill it, and extract its DNA. Jody Dwyer’s *Dying Breed* is a horror film also

premised on a similar search, this time by a zoologist: the protagonist's sister had found a remote footprint a number of years previously, before her body was found under mysterious circumstances.

The centrality and importance of Narraway and Stark's cultural-geographical focus is explicit: 'This regional context makes *The Hunter* and *Dying Breed* fertile ground for an examination of the interrelationship of the domination of both animals and those humans situated as less-than-human.' The thylacine is a central protagonist in both films, and its importance in Australian history is indicated in the date of National Threatened Species Day: September 7, being the recorded date of the last captive Tasmanian tiger's death.

In locating the thylacine as a social and cultural construction, long before it was enthusiastically hunted into recorded extinction, Narraway and Stark highlight discursive-representative accounts of the thylacine as emblematic of Othering central to Australia's (ongoing) colonial and genocidal history. In providing further intersectional analysis, the wild and uncivilised colonial traits attributed to the thylacine are also identified with female characters in the textual representations. For example, 'Women and animals assume the position of the nonhuman in a performatively constructed logic of domination that codes them as subject to the rights of men to govern reproduction and determine species survival.' Their analysis highlights the positioning and social construction of the thylacine, and – alongside, through and in parallel – women, as both biopolitical and redemptive. In many ways *The Hunter* and *Dying Breed* embody and reflect normative speciesist and gendered attitudes in (never quite post) colonial Australian society.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Narraway and Stark explore the social construction of the thylacine in Australia, Nicholas Holm's focus is across the Tasman Sea. In 'Consider the Possum: Colonists, Pests and Foes in Paradise' Holm introduces the common brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*), 'publically decried, officially poisoned, frequently shot at, and intentionally steered towards by drivers', as anti-animal. The commodified possum, introduced from Australia to Aotearoa-New Zealand with the aim of establishing a fur-trapping industry, became too well adapted to their new environ. Holm argues that the possum has moved from being an 'unwanted ecological inhabitant to anti-animal', in large part due to the prominence of a notion of Edenic purity in representations of Aotearoa-New Zealand. We can identify here – paralleling the

analysis presented by Narraway and Stark – a redemptive settler-colonial discourse. Reflecting romanticised notions of pre-European settlement, such purity and correctness dictate the possum be eradicated to restore the appropriate natural order. The possum becomes outside of nature: killing becomes an act of protection.

Holm also raises some confronting and important – albeit routinely, almost universally, unasked – questions. In particular, the positioning and construction of the possum as anti-animal enables the displacement of implications surrounding the role of the human ‘as the number one perpetrator of environmental destruction.’ In the context of Aotearoa-New Zealand, ‘by imagining the possum as an anti-animal, pākehā discourse works to both obscure the direct role of the settler state in the fall from pre-colonial ecological paradise and serve as a means by which the pākehā environmentalist can feign to work to resolve their own culpability.’ Holm argues that such a sleight of hand enables a re-imagined settler state redeemed as being on the side of nature, one that seeks to obscure and displace ‘Aotearoa-New Zealand’s confused sense of environmental identity.’

Sharing similarities with the redemptive elements of Narraway and Stark’s engagement with the social construction of the thylacine in Tasmanian cinema and Holm’s identification of possum anti-animal in Aotearoa-New Zealand, Fiona Law explores the narratives of mourning and healing in East Asian films of the 2000s: *Quill* (dir. Yoichi Sai, Japan, 2004), *This Darling Life* (dir. Angie Chen, Hong Kong, 2008), and *Gu Gu The Cat* (dir. Isshin Inudo, Japan, 2008). In particular, ‘Vulnerability in the City: Reading Healing Narratives in Asian Animal Films’ focuses on depictions of urban human-companion animal relationships. Redemption is found in romanticised and anthropocentric recollections and representations of these relationships, which Law identifies – drawing on the work of Erica Fudge – as never really about the Other animal: they are always about the human.

Law locates the redemptive qualities of self-making and enlightenment as being achieved through grieving processes associated with the loss of a ‘cute’ companion animal. In many ways the Other animal becomes absent referent, with the ‘cause of these animals’ loss ... either evaded by or mirrored through human illness in these cinematic *bildungsromans*.’ The body of the animal becomes the means through which therapeutic self-discovery is facilitated and achieved – albeit of limited availability, with the *ownership* of Other animals in urban settings

being a marker of economic prosperity. Law concludes that whereas there is an interpretive gap in the (re)presentation of humanising potential in the films, where Other animals continue to be ‘purchased, abandoned, tortured, and euthanized’, acknowledging this unbridgeability has potential for reflection on the question and condition of the animal. The self-making explored through narratives of loss can provide for a reminding of the human as animal and the shared implications in contemporary East Asian society (and beyond).

In parallel with Law, Lara Newman engages with film, shifting in focus to the audience. In ‘“Raising awareness is not enough” : The Effects of *The Cove* and *Bold Native* on Audience Attitudes Towards Animals’, audience responses are analysed to reflect on the power of film. The focus is on two films that more explicitly engage with the question and condition of the animal Other. Newman’s aim is to show ‘that audience responses to the films are dependent upon pre-existing beliefs, and a variety of demographic factors.’

*The Cove* (2009) is a documentary film that examines the annual dolphin slaughter in Taiji, Japan. The film also has an explicit aim of ending the practice. In contrast, *Bold Native* (2010) is a fictional film based in the USA. The central protagonist liberates animals, and is being pursued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under domestic terrorism legislation for these actions. Of import to the analysis presented, *Bold Native* incorporates documentary footage taken from hidden cameras inside animal farms, abattoirs, and laboratories’.

As a preliminary Australian study with a small sample size, pre-existing inclinations were identified amongst those most likely to make (small) changes to their daily practices, in seeking to minimise their impacts on Other animals (including consumption). Of particular note, Newman identified that ‘viewer reactions to animal rights films are complex and determined by multiple intersecting influences’, in particular socioeconomic status.

The complexity in responses noted by Newman, alongside attempts to obscure and deflect personal culpability – sharing direct similarities with the positioning and construction of possum as anti-animal in Aotearoa-New Zealand identified by Holm – are also key elements of Nick Pendergrast’s analysis of the Australian live export controversy.

‘Live Animal Export, Humane Slaughter and Media Hegemony’ focuses on media coverage immediately following a May 2011 exposé aired on the Australia national broadcaster, the

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The broadcaster's flagship current affairs program *Four Corners* episode titled 'A Bloody Business' presented undercover footage captured by activists illustrating 'the conditions for cows exported from Australia to Indonesian slaughterhouses.' The dispute quickly rose to national and regional prominence with the Australian Federal government imposing a suspension of live cattle exports a week later. The period in between the exposé and the export ban was typified by heated debate regarding the *treatment of Australian* cattle by Indonesian abattoir workers.

In engaging with the controversy, Pendergrast presents a content analysis of mainstream Australian media to examine dualistic representation and framing. He identified the ABC program as 'one of the most, perhaps even the most, striking examples of the suffering of other animals reaching mainstream consciousness in Australia.' The debate that emerged provided for an examination of attitudes towards cows in Australia, and the parallel Othering of Indonesian neighbours to the countries north.

In illustrating the level of 'public revulsion and outrage' in Australia in the wake of the exposé, Pendergrast refers to an online petition of the Royal Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), a national animal welfare organisation, in collaboration with GetUp!, a progressive political advocacy organisation. Within 24 hours of its launch, a total of 65 000 signatures were received. By the end of the week this had increased to 220 000.

Pendergrast analyses framing in mainstream media coverage and associated debate, arguing that a frame of animal welfare was almost universal. The explicit focus on the treatment of the cattle in Indonesian slaughterhouses acted to displace 'any discussion of a rights based alternative.' Pendergrast identifies that outrage focused on *how* and *where* the slaughter of the cows was undertaken. Outrage about how cattle are treated reinforced normative assumptions positioning cows as food: there was effectively no consideration of the positioning of cows as commodity. Otherwise more critical animal advocacy organisations similarly limited their critiques.<sup>4</sup>

In parallel, location of slaughter became a key feature, the underlying message being that the killing of cattle in Australia is performed in a civilised way.<sup>5</sup> Relational positioning of Indonesians as Other acts to further displace any consideration of the cows. Such double displacement of cattle as beneath barbaric, less than human, Indonesians – alongside the focus on

*treatment over use* – acts to ‘erase the violence of commodification through [its] everydayness’ (Gillespie and Collard 4).

The erasure of commodification through the normativity of the animal as Other is an underlying theme in Fiona Allon and Lindsay Barrett’s “‘That dog was a Marine!’ Human-Dog Assemblages in the Pacific War.’ The social construction of dogs as Marines is highlighted in their deployment against animalised Japanese soldiers during World War II. The imposition of indentured service, agency in the actions of the individual dogs, and broader disciplinary power relations are circumscribed within ‘a striking confluence of race and animal-based orders of knowledge and orientation.’ The lurking Japanese soldier was identified as possessing similar animal-like abilities, and it would take a well-trained dog as marine, guided by its American handler, to root out such an enemy.

The use of dogs in warfare, alongside numerous other species, has a long and contested history – one which continues apace today.<sup>6</sup> Allon and Barrett reflect on Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming-animal to further engage with the notion of dogs *becoming-marine*. The authors take up the example of Kurt, a doberman deployed in the 3rd Marine War Dog Platoon and one of the first casualties and whose burial marked ‘the beginning of Guam’s Marine War Dog Cemetery, resting place of the remains of the twenty-five Marine dogs killed on Guam.’ In the act of sanctioned burial, Kurt had become Marine. Reflecting perceptions of masculine bravery and sacrifice enmeshed in the everyday of warfare and military service, routinely restricted to human conscripts, Kurt had ‘rightfully earned his place.’ Kurt was both dog and more-than-dog.

Drawing on the work of Akira Mizuta Lippit, in parallel to Kurt and other dogs-becoming-marine, Allon and Barrett identify marines-becoming-dog. One example they use is self reference as *Devil Dogs* and a masculinist disciplinary process of *devil dogging*: ‘being *chewed out* in the manner that only a Marine drill sergeant is capable.’ On specific note, the experience of such collaborative ontological process in becoming-animal is enmeshed in power relations, with the animal Other effectively disappearing.

Building on the work of Giorgio Agamben, Allon and Barrett note that ‘in the unspeakable chaos, anarchy and general madness of the island battles of the Pacific War, it seems then as if it was in fact possible for dogs to become men, just as men behaved and lived like

“dogs”, species hierarchies are inevitably reinforced. Becoming-animal – paralleling narratives in East Asian cinema, the social construction of the thylacine in Tasmanian cinema, and the possum in Aotearoa-New Zealand identified by Law, Narraway and Stark, and Holm respectively – is largely about the human. For example, wounded dogs were ‘destroyed’ (not ‘killed’), implying mechanic notions, rather than any form of recognition of dogs-become-marines as living, sentient, beings – irrespective of the depth to which marines-becoming-animal challenged the normativity of animal as Other.

Linking a breadth of themes implicit and explicit in each contribution to this special issue, Esther Alloun looks to ecofeminist theory to deepen our understandings of the animal question. In doing so, a case is made that ecofeminism has a lot to offer CAS and animal studies more broadly. In ‘Ecofeminism and animal advocacy in Australia: productive encounters for an integrative ethics and politics’, the pioneering work of Australian philosopher and feminist Val Plumwood is afforded significant attention. Plumwood’s ‘encounters with Australian landscape and wildlife (including her famous near-death experience with a crocodile) pervades much of her writing and is also testament of the strong influence living in Australia has had on her thinking.’ This locates Alloun’s paper within the regional focus of this special issue. Intersectional in approach, and ambitious in aims, a ‘more political and more ecologically grounded’ approach to animal advocacy is called for.

An overview of the history and development of ecological feminist philosophies is presented which draws on a wealth of existing engaged and critical scholarship on the animal question. Alloun identifies and challenges a number of longstanding misrepresentations and critiques of ecofeminist theory. In sympathetically critiquing and seeking to increase attention to Plumwood’s work, Alloun locates commonality across ecofeminist, political economy and CAS scholarship. Presenting ecofeminist scholarship as ‘the basis for an integrated liberatory ethics and politics’, veganism and food politics are situated as a focal point for engagement. Plumwood’s call for a ‘contextual rather than an ontological vegetarianism’ is similarly unpacked and sympathetically critiqued.<sup>7</sup> Building on Bob Torres analysis, Alloun identifies veganism as “where the struggle must start” (Torres 131), but obviously not where it ends.’

Rounding out this special issue is Marc Bekoff’s review of Annie Potts and Donelle Gadenne’s ‘landmark’ book *Animals in Emergencies: Learning from the Christchurch*



*earthquakes*. In reflecting on this ground breaking text, Bekoff identifies how, in documenting rescue and assistance efforts, Potts and Gadenne situate the impacts on individual animals as being just as important as that of the human victims. There is also explicit recognition that those animals at greatest risk are those already commodified: individuals and groups confined or incarcerated in factory farms and laboratories. In providing an account of lessons learnt, Potts and Gadenne provide a handbook for a more *just* future in disaster management.

The diverse contributions to this special issue of *Animal Studies Journal* stretch across disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Collectively they provide a contribution to the further engagement with the question and condition of the animal – with a specific focus on the Asia-Pacific region, and its regional paradigms and particularities. Each contribution presents some form of intersectional analysis, and their collective presentation in this special issue provides an attempt to illuminate a commonality of power relations and its affects-effects across the diverse foci of each analysis. Such an approach is considered as crucial to broader social change, and it is hoped the contributions included here add in some way to the ‘productive development within critical theorizations’ which the turn towards intersectionality has cultivated (Deckha 266).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Kay Peggs on the role of reflexivity, and a more critical reflexivity beyond the human, as a key mechanism in CAS.

<sup>2</sup> See Twine 205.

<sup>3</sup> See Jane Haggis, Colin Salter 2013, on Australian society as being (never quite post) colonial

<sup>4</sup> Such pragmatic approaches are not uncommon, and noted in the actions of mainstream animal advocacy groups in the USA in the wake of the passing of legislation framing activists as terrorists. See Salter 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See Wadiwel, cited in Twine 197.

<sup>6</sup> See Colin Salter, Antony Nocella and Judy C Bentley.

<sup>7</sup> See Plumwood 289.

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