

Consider the Possum: Foes, Anti-Animals, and Colonists in Paradise

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***Abstract:** The brushtail possum is not treated like other animals in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Publically decried, officially poisoned, frequently shot at and intentionally steered towards, the possum is a despised animal. Indeed, as prior writers on the subject have noted, in order to be a New Zealander, it is almost compulsory to hate the possum (Isern, Potts). Building on that prior descriptive work, this article takes up that hatred of the possum in terms of larger discourses surrounding colonialism and environmentalism in order to make sense of the ideological work of possum-hating.*

Beginning with the observation that those who are most committed to animal preservation and protection are those who hate possums the most, I argue that in Aotearoa-New Zealand the possum can be understood as ‘anti-animal’: an animal that needs to be destroyed, not protected in order to conserve nature. Hence, whereas environmental discourse normally foregrounds the protection of animals and natural environments generally, anti-animals represent the inversion of that logic whereby certain animals must be destroyed in order to conserve nature. The concept of the anti-animal is developed with reference to political theorist Carl Schmitt’s notion of the enemy/foe distinction, where the foe is an enemy who must not be simply defeated, but actively and personally hated and then eventually destroyed. In the second part of my article, I argue that the possum’s status as anti-animal is a function of its existence at the crossroads of postcolonial and environmental ideologies. Commonly presented as an invasive and destructive entity, whose existence leads to the destruction of native wildlife, I argue that the possum works to distract from the environmental destruction directly wrought by pākehā colonists in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

I thus suggest that possum-hatred acts to resolve the contradiction between the vision of a pristine natural environment that informs Aotearoa-New Zealand's wide range of conservation practices, from species restoration to border security, and the continued existence of the settler state.

Keywords: *possums, Aotearoa-New Zealand, environmental management, anti-animals, species extermination, ecology, enemy / foe, colonialism*

'Whoever wants to annihilate me is not my enemy, but my satanic pursuer'

(Schmitt 'Glossarium' 36)

For those familiar with the environmental attitudes of Aotearoa-New Zealand, it is neither secret, nor a surprise that the common brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula* or more frequently just 'possum') is not treated like other species. Publically decried, officially poisoned, frequently shot at, and intentionally steered towards by drivers, the possum is a despised animal. Indeed, as prior writers on the subject have noted, in order to be a New Zealander, it is almost compulsory to hate the possum: Annie Potts suggests that 'to live in New Zealand is to experience a sustained and vigorous campaign against the brushtail possum; it is unpatriotic to question, let alone resist, the demonization of possums in this country' (1), while Thomas Isern more succinctly declares 'everyone hates possums' (245).¹ To be a possum in Aotearoa-New Zealand is to be an unusually, perhaps even unnaturally, unpopular animal.

In this paper I am concerned with accounting for the violent unpopularity of the possum and how it might be understood in relation to larger questions regarding the intersection of Aotearoa-New Zealand's colonial history and environmentalist ethos. In particular, I aim to address how assessments of the ecological impacts of possums become entangled with postcolonial anxieties regarding the natural world and thereby frequently overflow what might

be considered the legitimate grounds for controlling possum populations. This overflow, I will suggest, is tied up with transformations in the environmental status of the possum as an animal. Despised and derided, the possum is denied many of the protections normally afforded animals in the context of ecological and environmental discourses and therefore becomes what I refer to as an ‘anti-animal’: a creature outside of, and even opposed to, the natural world. Drawing on the political theorist Carl Schmitt’s notion of the enemy/foe distinction, I argue that the category of the ‘anti-animal’ marks an inversion of usual ecological attitudes towards wild animals, whereby they become the subject of persecution and extermination rather than protection and conservation. With the purpose of determining how it is that the possum has been assigned this unenviable designation as the poster child for fallen nature, I thus suggest that it is the possum’s close historical affinity with pākehā (European) New Zealanders that ultimately underpins the persistence presence of anti-possum hatred.²

Learning to Hate the Enemy

A possum is a small, furry, nocturnal, tree-dwelling marsupial that is roughly the size of a large domestic cat (with which possums frequently come in conflict in suburban settings). Possums have long, bushy tails, pronounced snouts and large pointed ears, which give them the fox-like appearance from which they derive their Latin name. Their plush coat comes in a variety of colours, such as grey, brown and black and is the reason for their presence in Aotearoa-New Zealand, to which they were intentionally introduced from Australia in 1837 with the goal of establishing a fur trade (DOC ‘Possums’). Those plans went somewhat awry, however, when possums proved strikingly well-adapted to their new environment and flourished due to a lack of any real predators, ample food supplies and only limited competition from the native bird life. As a consequence, possum numbers exploded during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the animals spread from a limited number of initial release sites to establish habitats throughout almost every one of the country’s diverse ecosystems. Despite subsequent and long-running attempts at population control since the 1940s, recent estimates suggest a current population of 48 million possums: equivalent to roughly twelve possums for every human inhabitant of Aotearoa-New Zealand and one and a half times the number of sheep (Warburton, Cowan and Shepherd 9, Statistics New Zealand ‘Sheep’).

Given the massive possum population, there is little mystery behind the rationale for possum-hatred at the level of dominant environmental ideology: possums strip bark and new growth from native trees and compete with endangered bird species for habitats and food (and sometimes eat eggs and young birds). As a result, possums have been held responsible for major environmental impacts, including highly-visible instances of localised canopy dieback and the more subtle and long-term process of gradual depletion of particular favoured feed species, which can lead to shifts in ecological make-up of forests (Nugent 1–2). Due to both indirect competition and direct predation, possums have also been identified as a major obstacle to the successful reintroduction and recovery of rare native bird species, such as the kiwi and kōkako (Innes 1). In addition to these environmental implications, there is also a strong economic rationale for anti-possum sentiment according to the dominant logic of the agricultural sector, wherein animals are largely reduced to means for the generation of profit. From such a perspective, possums serve as a vector for bovine tuberculosis, which can lead to severe illness and death in herds, as well as reduced dairy and meat production (Ramsey and Coleman 1–2, Zinsstag et al. 90). Consequently, for those seeking to ensure either the success and flourishing of native forests and bird species or the maximum profitability for cattle farmers, there exist well-established ecological and economic reasons to wish death upon those small, furry arboreal marsupials: these clear and well-defined threats that form the basis for the development and crystallisation of anti-possum sentiment, which manifest in both state-official and popular discourses.

At the level of the New Zealand state, anti-possum impulses have given rise to an interconnected web of legal, governmental and institutional structures. Operating under the euphemistic banner of ‘possum management,’ the large-scale extermination of possums has been official government policy since the 1960s and since then has been the subject of extensive on-going research and public funding. This commitment to possum extermination was codified in the 1993 Biosecurity Act, a ‘world first’ piece of legislation (MAF 2), that, under the subheading of ‘pest management’: ‘provide[s] for the eradication or effective management of harmful organisms that are present in New Zealand’ (Biosecurity Act 5.54). Operating within broad parameters, the act grants extensive powers to government agencies such as the National Pest Control Agencies, or NPCA (formerly the National Possum Control Agencies), in order to ensure the maintenance of biosecurity, including extensive powers of seizure, vaccination,

destruction and even the declaration of a state of biosecurity emergency. In addition to the development, refinement and implementation of possum elimination techniques, the NPCA is also responsible for anti-possum education, including the production and distribution of state-official anti-possum publications, with names like ‘The Possum Busters Are Coming’ and ‘A Plague of Possums’ (NPCA.org).

Moreover, despite its official status, the NPCA is far from the only institution in Aotearoa-New Zealand dedicated to the elimination of possums (and other vertebrate ‘pests’).³ The most recent and currently most high-profile possum extermination project is the Predator Free New Zealand charitable trust, which was launched in 2013 and has quickly established itself as the key advocate for the new goal of total possum elimination.⁴ Bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders – including not only anti-possum stalwarts such as DOC, but also conservation groups, the national farming lobby, several philanthropic trusts, four different universities, and private sector representatives, including information technology and management companies – the Predator Free initiative represents an entanglement of environmental, governmental, academic and commercial interests. The breadth of support for the Predator Free initiative is thus indicative of not only the reach of anti-possum sentiment in Aotearoa-New Zealand, but also of a novel fusion of public-interest conservation driven by private-interest profit-seeking with the explicit goal of ‘attract[ing] commercial interest by raising awareness of the opportunities, both national and internationally’ (PFNZ.org). Alongside this new corporate model, the Predator Free project also ushers in a new ultimate manifestation of anti-possum sentiment: whereas previous anti-possum awareness campaigns focused on control and reduction, Predator Free has no qualms about calling outright for the elimination of all possums and other invasive predatory species. Speaking in revealing language about the project’s goals, one of the key trustees of Predator Free, Charles Daugherty, has even referred to the project as a ‘military operation’ (Gross n.p.). Understood in such terms, Predator Free NZ thus represents a previously inconceivable escalation in anti-possum actions as it brings together an alliance of state management and corporate profit in order to conduct a military style extermination of an undesired species.

Nor is such sentiment out of place in the wider cultural context of Aotearoa-New Zealand, where state-official opposition to possums is replicated at the level of popular discourse, where it often manifests in similarly extreme forms. Potts documents at some length

the various discursive strategies by which possums are represented in the different popular media of Aotearoa-New Zealand, including what she refers to as the ‘foreign threat narrative,’ whereby possums are cast as dangerous alien invaders (4), ‘the revenge narrative,’ that seeks to punish possums for their slights against the nation (7), and ‘the “cute, but...” narrative,’ by which the public is dissuade from sympathising with the animals (13–5). The sum of these ongoing discursive interventions is not so much a public baying for possum blood, but more of a general acceptance that possums not only do die, but *must* die as part of the larger national project. The casual acceptance of possum death manifests in multiple ways beyond official public awareness campaigns: from newspaper editorials in support of extermination efforts (Macdonald n.p., Martin n.p., Stirling 5) to the ‘Great Father’s Day Possum Cull’ held at a rural school in 2013 (Rodney News) and a government-sponsored mobile game called ‘Possum Stomp’ where ‘the player helps the Stompy the Kiwi [sic] to run around and stomp on the zombie possums before they steal his eggs. The zombie possums represent all invasive pests and the kiwi represents New Zealand’s indigenous biodiversity’ (Landcare). A 2014 road safety advertisement nonchalantly asserts that ‘it’s us or the possum’ (NZTA), thereby indirectly evoking the ‘game,’ no doubt familiar to most New Zealand motorists, of ‘possum or cat,’ whereby motorists attempt (in a responsible manner and in accordance with relevant road rules) to determine whether road-kill is worth grieving or not, while, in an uncanny echo of America’s ‘War on Terror,’ possums have even become the subject of drone surveillance as part of what is frequently referred to as the ‘War on Possums’ (Graham). Such examples begin to suggest the diversity and depth of anti-possum sentiment in a range of popular media and fora.

Across the media landscape of Aotearoa-New Zealand, possums thus routinely recur as that animal whose death is sometimes celebrated, often ignored and never really ever grieved. While recent discourse on possums might be less openly and aggressively blood-thirsty than that documented by Isern in the 1990s and Potts in 2009 in terms of both state-official and popular discourses, possums continue to be animals that can be killed with impunity and their deaths celebrated without apology. There are few laments for road-kill possums or repressed shudders at the sight of possum traps: unlike other animals, especially other furry vertebrates, possums are killed openly and frequently with few compunctions and little public outcry. Hence, although grounded in particular environmental and economic concerns, anti-possum rhetoric and practice has expanded out beyond those initial rationales and now takes on a self-

perpetuating and self-legitimizing logic that exceeds any sober assessment of possible possum damage. Instead, anti-possum sentiment now naturalises fatal opposition to the possum in constant and total terms, which increasingly come to be seen as not only unwanted, but also unnatural animals.

Responsibility to Kill: The Possum as Anti-Animal

One of the main consequence of all this hatred, both state-official and popular, is that possums are not only subject to unending attempts on their lives, but that they also enter a paradoxical state whereby those who are usually most committed to animal preservation and protection are also those who hate possums the most. Writing for the *New Yorker*, Elizabeth Kolbert singles this inverted attitude out as a distinguishing feature of Aotearoa-New Zealand's conservationism, which she declares a 'bloody bloody, biophilia,' and illustrates by way of a quote from an anonymous volunteer co-ordinator: 'We always say that, for us, conservation is all about killing things': more precisely, this particular mode of conservation is about killing possums, and other affiliated introduced pests (Kolbert n.p.). Such an impulse stands in clear contrast to what can be understood as the customary 'common sense' purpose of environmental action, and particularly conservationist efforts, which in broad terms are usually committed to the preservation and protection of non-human life. In the peculiar case of the possum, however, this conservationist purpose is inverted such that possums are not only not protected, but instead become the subject of a sustained campaign of extermination. The presence of possums in Aotearoa-New Zealand is thereby branded an absolutely unwanted presence, its forms of predation and competition are judged to be vicious and unfair in comparison to those of other species, and its flourishing is interpreted as a sign of the failure of the natural order, rather than success. Transformed in this way, the possum thereby becomes what I refer to as an 'anti-animal': an animal that reverses usual environmental logic because it needs to be destroyed, not protected in order to conserve nature.

This concept of the anti-animal builds on an earlier category of the 'non-animal,' which I developed at some length in an earlier article with reference to squirrels and other urban animals (Holm 72–86). Non-animals are animals that have lost the right to live and thrive normally guaranteed by the logics of environmentalism and conservationism and can therefore

be curtailed, persecuted and even killed without repercussion or guilt. In the squirrels' case, they become 'non-animals' because they flourish, rather than suffer, in urban environments and thereby contradict environmental truisms about which spaces are more 'natural' and thereby more suited to supporting non-human life (Holm, 72–78). When we acknowledge squirrels as animals, we must consequently acknowledge that the urban environments they inhabit are not damaged or 'non-natural,' which in turn implies that projects commonly understood as restoration or conservation are not a transition from non-nature to nature, but a choice between different forms of nature, each of which implies its own ecosystem and set of species. Moreover, as bad as things are for non-animals like the squirrel – a category which in the context of Aotearoa-New Zealand could accommodate all manner of creatures seen as 'pests,' such as rock pigeons, hedgehogs and even some types of gulls – things are markedly worse for anti-animals, such as the possum, (but which also includes the other affiliated, one might even say supporting, pests I've been gesturing to throughout, such as rats, weasels, stoats and ferrets). This is because whereas the non-animal has voided its right to protection by thriving where it should not, the offense of the anti-animal is an order of magnitude greater – its flourishing is understood in direct opposition to that of a correct and proper environmental arrangement – and is such that the animal needs to be utterly eradicated in order to return a sense of purity and correctness. Hence, whereas non-animals like squirrels exist outside of the assumed environmental order, anti-animals like possums live in opposition to it. Consequently, anti-animals act as a limit case: whereas the non-animal is no longer guaranteed protection, the anti-animal is guaranteed persecution. Thus, as I briefly suggest in my earlier article, while non-animals might be productively compared to Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'homo sacer' – that figure who is excluded from the law and therefore can be killed with penalty – the anti-animal corresponds to another archetypal figure of political theory: Carl Schmitt's concept of the 'absolute enemy' or 'foe' (Holm, 89 n.4).

In order to understand how the concept of the 'absolute enemy' can help us appreciate the consequence and contexts of anti-possum hatred, it is necessary, however, to delve somewhat deeper into the idea of the enemy as developed in the work of Schmitt and his key interpreters, George Schwab and G.L. Ulmen. The importance of the 'enemy' emerges out of Schmitt's conception of politics in terms of the 'friend-enemy distinction.' As morality distinguishes between good and evil, and aesthetics between beautiful and ugly, for Schmitt the

sphere of politics is properly concerned above all else with the distinction between friend and enemy ('Concept' 26–27). Thus, to be political is to distinguish between friends and enemies (and vice versa): a distinction that Schmitt attests is entirely communal and public, rather than psychological and individual, such that the hatred for the enemy is not a 'personal' hatred ('Concept' 27–28).⁵ It follows for Schmitt, that while politics certainly often makes use of other distinctions for support, there is no reason that the enemy needs to be seen as ugly or evil or even as an economic competitor: in the purest political sense, the enemy is the enemy because he/she is not a friend ('Concept' 27). In order to illustrate the friend-enemy distinction, Schmitt refers the practice of war during the *jus publicum Europaeum*: the era between the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and World War I, during which a shared, clear law divided Europe into distinct, but equal states (Ulmen, 'Introduction' 10–11). During this period, European states would engage in regular armed conflict with one another, but they did so in a way that acknowledged the humanity of the other side as a matter of course. As a result, war was a *relatively* 'civilised' endeavour bound by rules, declarations and treaties, and premised on the belief that the opponent was a legitimate enemy rather than a criminal (Ulmen, 'Return' 189). Such instances of conflict demonstrate how an enemy can be conceived apart from economic, moral, aesthetic or other concerns, in other words, in purely political terms as an enemy *qua* enemy.

What, though, is the relevance of the conduct of war in nineteenth-century Europe to the environmental politics of contemporary Aotearoa-New Zealand? The applicability of Schmitt's framework to the current discussion arises out of his second distinction – which accompanies the rise of militant political ideologies in the early twentieth century (Schwab, 'Introduction' 10) – between the 'real enemy' and the 'absolute enemy,' or the 'enemy' and the 'foe.'⁶ Whereas the enemy, as discussed above, is recognised as an equal and legitimate opponent and therefore is engaged with according to certain predetermined rules, the enmity felt towards the foe is such that one 'does not recognise any limits to the struggle' (Schwab, 'Enemy' 201). The foe, unlike the enemy, is regarded as an opponent not simply in terms of politics, in Schmitt's sense, but also in terms of economics, aesthetics, and especially morality. They are not therefore simply different from oneself and one's group, but are also competitors, inferiors, slights against god, against justice, against the right and proper order of the world: the

foe is not just the immediate opponent, but ‘the last enemy of mankind’ (Schmitt, ‘Theory’ 92). Consequently, conflict is elevated from political to transcendental grounds with the result that:

Such a war is necessarily unusually intense and inhuman because, by transcending the limits of the political framework, it simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categories and is forced to make of him a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed. (Schmitt, ‘Concept’ 36)

As interpreters and commentators of Schmitt have pointed out, this transformation of war has a myriad of consequences. Schwab contends that, in the battle against the foe, distinctions are no longer made ‘between combatants and non-combatants, or between combat and noncombat areas’ (Schwab, ‘Enemy’ 195) and war becomes potentially perpetual (Schwab, ‘Enemy’ 199). Ullmen refers to this new situation – which is also an old situation that corresponds to the medieval world prior to the ‘epoch of the state’ (‘Return’ 188) – as an era of “total war” [that] can only be defined in terms of total enmity,’ and that ‘knows no limitations, legal or any other’ (‘Return’ 190, 192). Above all else, whereas the goal was to defeat the enemy, the purpose in conflict with the foe is annihilation: ‘the existential negation of the [absolute] enemy’ (Schmitt ‘Concept’ 33). In such conditions, conflict shifts from the realm of the political to the realm of the theological (Schmitt qtd. in Ullmen, ‘Introduction’ xviii): self-interest and identity is abandoned in favour of universally-conceived cleansing.

During this account of Schmitt’s concept of the foe, many readers will no doubt have ascertained how some connections might be drawn between this political category and the possum understood as anti-animal. Both the foe and the anti-animal as they have been presented so far are the subject of campaigns of extermination driven by a perception that they contravene a perceived natural order and are therefore not the equal of the aggressor or other similar groups. As combat against the foe necessitates the suspension of the rules of war, ‘combat’ against the anti-animal transcends the usual practices of environmentalism. However, whereas Schmitt presented the ideas of the foe and total war as challenges to the post-war Liberal order (‘Concept’ 69–73), the idea of the anti-animal manifests in the markedly different terrain of contemporary environmentalism and conservation. Hence, although frequently characterised in the metaphorical language of war and military conflict, human-possum engagements should not be mistaken for an actual war: possums, after all, do not shoot back.

Nonetheless, the concept of the foe can help illuminate aspects of environmental practice in Aotearoa-New Zealand, not least in the manner that it draws out connections between ethical and emotional investment, the nature of conflict and the perception of an enemy. In terms of such a parallel, the regular practice of environmental management can be considered the loose equivalent of Schmitt's vision of the 'civilised' wars of nineteenth-century Europe: in both cases, death (be it of citizen-soldiers or unwanted species) certainly occurs in a regular and potentially horrific manner. However, in both cases such deaths are understood to be an unfortunate and regrettable part of a larger structural struggle and thereby worthy of mutual mourning. In contrast, the conflicts against foes and anti-animals allows no such mourning: their deaths are not regretted, they are celebrated. To be clear, this comparison is not meant to present war as a civilised activity. Indeed if there is any point to this comparison, it is that environmental management, even when it does not involve anti-animals, involves the privileging of certain forms of nature over others and therefore almost always also involves the death of species (Holm 74–78). However, in the context of the current argument, such a state of affairs is shockingly benign when compared to the gleeful species extermination that takes place in terms of an anti-animal, like the possum. Consequently, rather than considering how the struggle with possums exceeds the bounds of politics and politically-driven military conflict, I will instead take up Schmitt's model within the framework that substitutes the idea of the 'laws' of environmentalism for the laws of war. While the parallels are not perfect, the overlap between the two scenarios is such that one can help us better understand the other, so long as we do not seek to apply every aspect directly and literally.

The defining feature of Schmitt's foe is that he/she is the opponent who must not be simply defeated, but actively and personally hated and then eventually destroyed. By turns both apocalyptic and utopic, this discourse is clearly reflected in Aotearoa-New Zealand's approach to possums, which regards their presence as evidence of ongoing catastrophe and presents their extermination as the path to an environmental wonderland. The possum must not be simply controlled or contained: the only acceptable outcome is utter elimination without quarter or mercy. This attitude towards the possum is perhaps most clear in the Predator Free initiative, which marks an escalation in anti-possum sentiment to the extent that the complete elimination of all possums (and affiliated pests) is presented as a viable and desirable goal that ensures the safety of endemic species. Moreover, Predator Free's commitment to possum destruction does

not arise in a vacuum, and needs to be understood in the context of the government's long-standing and wholesale public education campaign that seeks to cast the possum as an invasive monster, rather than as an animal that has arrived in Aotearoa-New Zealand thanks to the contingencies of global environmental history. Such an interpretation of the possum is starkly evident in cases such as the 'cute, but...' narrative described by Potts, which acknowledges and actively seeks to thwart a tendency to regard possums as animals eligible for human sympathy (13–15), and the literally monstrous depiction of 'zombie possums' in *Possum Stomp* (Landcare). Thus transformed from regular animal to monster, the possum emerges as an anti-animal that must be destroyed in order to allow nature to resume its rightful course.

Framed as a messianic struggle against anti-animal monsters it thus makes sense from this perspective that there are no apparent limits to the anti-possum crusade within Aotearoa-New Zealand. This is as true in terms of economics – with one expert estimating the cost of the Predator Free project at 'a conservative \$25 billion' (Macdonald) compared to a national GDP of \$230 billion (Statistics NZ 'Top') – as it is in terms of ethics: the most common extermination method being the aerial dropping of the highly controversial 1080 (sodium fluoroacetate) poison. Employed as the ecological equivalent of a weapon of mass destruction, the wide-scale distribution of 1080 poison is widely regarded by most environmental authorities and organisations as the most cost-effective and efficient method of possum extermination, but has provoked ongoing debate for two reasons. First, the ingestion of 1080 poison leads to what is, by most accounts, a gruesome and painful death characterised by 'vomiting, involuntary hyper-extension of the limbs, convulsions, and finally cardiac and respiratory failure' (Gupta 705). These symptoms are almost never discussed in the official literature, which focuses on efficiency rather than physiology in a manner that downplays the potential for a consideration of suffering. Second, the aerial dropping of 1080 poison has also been linked to the death of native birds, such as kea and weka, as well as the indirect poisoning of dogs (DOC '1080', *Forest & Bird*, Wright 43–54). Taking into account these consequences of 1080 use, the designation 'weapon of mass destruction' is therefore not simply hyperbole, but instead follow Schmitt's contention that use of 'weapons of mass destruction' goes hand-in-hand with the waging of total war and total enmity due to implicit devaluation of enemy life when such weapons are used (Schmitt, 'Theory' 93–94), and the inability to distinguish between combatants (possums) and non-combatants (collateral native birds and dogs) that comes with mass poisoning.

The magnitude and ferocity of the struggle against the possum thus exceeds that waged against other ‘pest’ species: a designation which might include introduced animals such as the aforementioned rock pigeons, rabbits and hedgehogs as well as introduced species of ant, and even some native species like sandflies. For example, whereas white-footed house ants and Argentine ants are recognised as ‘invasive’ pests, the efforts taken to eradicate such ants are carried out in a piecemeal and low-key manner. There are no high-profile government extermination campaigns, or anti-ant public awareness campaigns, despite an awareness that ‘invasive’ ant species represent a clear and immediate ecological risk (Ward et al., 607). In this sense, in ecological terms the difference between ant and possums corresponds to Schmitt’s distinction between enemy and foe, because while the ant is understood and engaged with as an opponent, there is little talk of outright extermination: such an objective would seem outside the realms of possibility. Rather than being cast in terms of annihilation, ‘conflict’ with ants largely takes the form of attempting to remove them from domestic spaces, where they are encountered as an invader. In contrast, despite the immense difficulties involved in practice, possum extermination is almost official government policy and the desire to control and limit possum populations has been superseded by dreams of outright elimination. In addition, unlike the case of the ant, there is no sense that the possum should be pushed back into its own proper ecological space, because no such space is possible in the bounds of Aotearoa-New Zealand. Hence whereas other ecological interventions take on the character of regulated war – with clearly defined boundaries and ends – the crusade against the possum is of a different order and can only end in utter elimination. Contrary to other introduced species, the possums’ function as ‘pest’ has therefore relatively little to do with what the possum does, but rather has become tied to its very life and existence – feeding and breeding and being – which are constituted as acts of ecological total war.

Invading Paradise: The Possum as Colonist

What is it about possums, though, that leads them to be especially singled out as the target for such complete and utter hatred? The purpose of invoking the Schmittian notions of the enemy, foe and total war is not simply to re-theorise the status of the possum, which is not a useful project in itself, but to do so in order to try to make sense of how this peculiar state of enmity

operates. In particular, Schmitt's conception of the foe as an opponent who operates across multiple registers of value in excess of the political – registers such as the economic, aesthetic and moral – can serve as motivation to examine possum enmity in wider ideological terms. For, just as the enemy becomes the foe when enmity exceeds politics, the hatred of the possum can be productively considered in terms that exceed the strictly ecological. This intermingling of nature and politics is not however a realisation of Bruno Latour's notion of 'political ecology,' which through its practice brings the clear separation of nature and politics into question (20–21). Rather it is the opposite: the category of the anti-animal does not realise the 'intrinsically political quality of the natural order' (27), but rather smuggles politics into nature and in doing so gives it the force of apparently incontrovertible scientific fact. Nature is not revealed as political: politics is played out in the guise of ecology. By characterising the hatred of possums in terms of anti-animals, the prevailing environmental discourse of Aotearoa-New Zealand transforms political values into scientific facts. My goal here is thus to recover the social and culturally specific origins of those values prior to their transformation into ostensible scientifically ecological principles. Such an approach thereby broadens our investigation to address how possums are implicated not only in ecological and environmental discourse, but also are subject to other, wider ideological structures that transform them from undesired invader to anti-animal. In this final section, I will therefore propose that the possum's position as anti-animal can be best understood in terms of the wider ideological context of Aotearoa-New Zealand: in particular, the peculiar intersection of environmentalism and post-colonialism.⁷

Shaped by a long history of interaction between indigenous Māori and settler-invader pākehā populations, and official government policy of indigenous-settler biculturalism, it is almost a truism that Aotearoa-New Zealand is a postcolonial nation. The ongoing consequences of colonialism are evident in almost all aspects of twenty-first century Aotearoa-New Zealand, including language, religion, health, education and state politics. Although not often discussed in such terms, the same is also true of environmentalism, which is shaped, above all else, by a distinction between endemic and introduced species. Thus, even though not often acknowledged as a postcolonial concern, the measure by which ecological value – in effect, the difference between protection and persecution – is bestowed according to whether species precede or follow European settlement (and to a lesser and even more contentious extent, Māori settlement) indicates environmentalism's entanglement in postcolonial questions. This is

particularly evident in the case of the possum which is a post-colonial animal through and through. As mentioned earlier, the possum was initially brought to Aotearoa-New Zealand as part of an archetypically colonial plan to realise profit through the transformation of the local environment in order to establish a fur trapping industry. As a consequence of its method, moment and purpose of introduction, the possum is inescapably bound up with the changes wrought by pākehā settlement.

Thus figured as a thoroughly colonial species, the possum thus comes to exist in opposition to the other key feature of Aotearoa-New Zealand's postcolonial environmentalism: the concept of pre-settlement ecological paradise. With pre-European Māori settlement only occurring in the thirteenth century, Aotearoa-New Zealand retains a felt connection to an imagined pre-human history in marked contrast to the long-established communities found in almost all other parts of the world. Consequently, Aotearoa-New Zealand has an unusually strong sense of a prior people-less existence: for example, the canonical *Penguin History of New Zealand* opens with a chapter dedicated to pre-human ecology (15–26). Tellingly, evocations of this relatively recent prehistory as a paradise resound in popular ecological accounts: 'paradise' is consistently evoked in the promotional material for the flag-ship Zealandia conservation project (Zealandia); writing for the *Atlantic*, Rachel Gross refers to pre-possum Aotearoa-New Zealand as a 'green Eden' and 'original avian paradise'; and passing references to paradise consistently recur in accounts of local environmentalism from *Paradise Saved* (Butler, Lindsay and Hunt) to 'Paradise Squandered' (Joy). What is often left unsaid, or only implied in such accounts, however, is that this environmental paradise was brought to an end by European settlement: the equation of pre-settlement Aotearoa-New Zealand with paradise conjuring up a complementary narrative where the colonial arrival of humans onto the scene precipitates an ecological catastrophe that is here equated in quasi-Biblical terms of humanity's fall from a state of grace. The intersection of environmental and postcolonial discourses thus establishes an implicit contrast between the existing settler state and the imagined pure natural state that preceded it.⁸

How though does the possum fit into all this, especially the possum conceived as an anti-animal? The answer is that the possum here becomes the subject of a discursive sleight of hand whereby they potentially resolve a conflict for pākehā produced out of the entwinement of

postcolonial and environmental discourses. One of the consequences of the widespread equation of settlement with the fall from a state of environmental Eden is that the pākehā settler subject is positioned as the agent of that fall by virtue of their colonial status. This presents a striking dilemma for those pākehā who would seek to identify with environmental and ecological priorities: arguably a majority of the population in what has been called ‘the most nature-loving nation on the planet’ (Kolbert). For if this logic of environmentalism were to be followed through to its ultimate and obvious conclusion, the best way to restore Aotearoa-New Zealand to this ostensibly desired pristine state would be to undo the process of colonisation: it would be for pākehā society to pack up and leave. After all, humans, and in particular pākehā colonists, are responsible for by far the most directly damage to the environment of Aotearoa-New Zealand where the construction of farms, roads and cities has had substantially more environmental impact than the introduction of invasive species. Such a dilemma reflects a common impasse in attempts at postcolonial reparation where the apparently most fitting response – the divestment of power from the settler state back to indigenous groups – proves politically unthinkable to settler majority populations (Johnson 187, Maddison 696). The same logic is borne out here, but now in the terms of a potentially suicidal ecological commitment: the goal of achieving the Edenic purity sought after in national environmental discourse is only realisable with the annulment of the settler state itself.

This is where possums come into the equation, and the moment at which they are transformed from unwanted ecological inhabitant to anti-animal. 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. Rather than confront the ultimate contradiction of Aotearoa-New Zealand’s postcolonial environmentalism – whereby environmental purity can be regained only by dismantling the settler state – the focus is thus instead placed upon the possum who is thereby reimagined as the ultimate and most crucial obstacle to the realisation of pristine nature: never mind that in terms of destructive competition, direct predation and habitat destruction, pākehā have the possum beat hands down. The focus on the possum thereby acts to short-circuit the potentially suicidal logic of deep-ecology that is presumed by the aspiration of a Predator Free New Zealand when the most successful and voracious predator is human beings. Thus, the possum, which is as much a

consequence of settler colonisation as an agent in its own right, comes to replace the human as the number one perpetrator of environmental destruction in the context of this postcolonial environmentalism.

The major consequence of this re-imagining of possums as anti-animals – entities which stands against nature rather than as a part of it – is that it permits pākehā environmentalists to fight vigorously and violently on behalf of what is imagined as benighted nature. In such a context, the usual environmental meaning of the extermination of wild animals is thus reversed by the category of the anti-animal: to kill a possum is to protect nature, rather than injure it. In such a model, the settler state no longer stands against nature, but instead envisions itself as helping the non-human world become ever more pristine, ever more natural, through the extermination of anti-animals. The ideological inversion of the anti-animal thereby allows practitioners of settler-environmentalism to elide their own role in the ongoing degradation and transformation of the non-human world in Aotearoa-New Zealand. In doing so, the crusade against the possum allows the pākehā inhabitants of the settler state to imagine a pristine environmental state in pre-colonial terms without having to come up against the logical conclusion of their own incompatibility with such a dream: the settler-state is re-imagined as existing on the side of nature, by virtue of its predation of the possum, and the implication of that state in the destruction of the non-human world is thereby repressed in favour of a more self-aggrandising narrative.

Possum-hatred (and the hatred of other ‘invasive’ species) act to resolve a key ideological contradiction produced by the confluence of postcolonial and environmental discourses, which would otherwise lack conceivable solutions within the current context of Aotearoa-New Zealand. It is for this reason that the hatred of the possum passes from the realms of enemy to foe, from ecological-invader to anti-animal, because the extreme enmity felt towards possums is not simply a reflection of its potential for ecological destruction, but arises out of larger desire to retain both the dream of a pure state of nature and the settler state as it currently exists. The hatred of the possum as anti-animal is so fierce because it is motivated by more than ecological concerns: instead, possums are made to bear the burden of Aotearoa-New Zealand’s confused sense of environmental identity and national project with the consequence that the more vicious and vitriolic the enmity felt towards the possum, the more effectively it obscures the relatively minor role of that animal in the wider project of settler environmental

destruction. Faced with such a situation, it is therefore imperative that if we are to assess the environmental impact of possums in a careful and considerate manner, we must also come to terms with the deeply intertwined legacies of settlement and environmental transformation that have shaped Aotearoa-New Zealand over the last century. In the absence of an accounting for the distorting influence of colonial environmentalism, the possum will continue to act as an anti-animal: despised, denigrated and exterminated without regret in a manner out of all proportion with their ecological impact as just another non-human species subject to historical forces beyond their control. If we are to seek a productive assessment of the ecological fortunes and future of Aotearoa-New Zealand, we must therefore first seek to disentangle postcolonial prejudice from environmental engagement and in doing so transform the possum back from demonic anti-animal to no more and no less than just another animal.

Notes

¹ This situation exists in clear and often-noted contrast to attitudes towards possums in their native-country of Australia, where they are commonly regarded as, at worst, a minor nuisance and, at best, cute and desirable co-inhabitant. In some parts of Australia, possums are protected species.

² To be more precise, I am referring to pākehā anti-possum hatred in this article. As is the case in many areas of life in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and postcolonial societies more broadly, Māori voices are largely absent and informally excluded from mainstream ecological discussion.

³ While the designation ‘pest’ is often used in environmental management discussions as if it applied to a clear and natural category, pest is not a technical term and is not meant as such in this article. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere, pest is a designation ‘open to any animal that is perceived to be annoying, disruptive, or unwanted. In this sense, the category of ‘pest’ can be understood as analogous with Mary Douglas’s notion of dirt as “matter out of place ... [which] implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order” [35]. Likewise ... pests are animals out of place, and the system they contravene is the natural system of order, organization, and hierarchy that holds sway in the state of nature’ (76). While I will be dropping the quote marks around the term in other usage in the article for the sake of simplicity in formatting, this skepticism as regards the quasi-objective nature of the category of pest is retained.

⁴ Contrary to what a literal interpretation of the name might suggest, the purpose of the initiative is not to eliminate all predatory behaviour, which would almost undoubtedly lead to catastrophic ecological collapse. Instead, the more limited, but still herculean task, is to exterminate all introduced vertebrate predators from the main islands of Aotearoa-New Zealand by 2040. The opposition to predation expressed in the name, is thus best understood as a rhetorical strategy indicative of oddly moralistic attitudes towards ecological systems that will be explored later in this essay.

⁵ Despite Schmitt’s objections, however, subsequent interpreters have called into question the extent to which Schmitt’s schema can be entirely distinguished from psychological models of in-groups and out-groups (Balbus 22–D4).

⁶ This second linguistic distinction was introduced into Schmitt's writing following the influence of his English-language translator George Schwab. Whereas German has only one word, 'fiend' (Feind), and can therefore not distinguish between legitimate and lawless opponents (Ulmen 'Translator's Note' 89, n.90) the synonymic flexibility of English allows the same idea to be expressed more directly and elegantly and with greater attention to the etymology of the distinction (Ulmen 'Return' 187–8). For this reason, I will be following the second usage.

⁷ The other promising ideological co-ordinate is the economic, which has been touched on earlier, but which there is not space or evidence to explore in sufficient depth here. From a classic Marxist perspective, there is certainly grounds to assert that the development of possum-hatred is partially motivated by the possums' function as a vector for bovine tuberculosis, which presents a direct economic threat to not only the farming sector, but also the larger Aotearoa-New Zealand economy which is reliant upon the agricultural industry. In this interpretation Aotearoa-New Zealand's environmental consciousness can be read as no more than a super-structural epiphenomena of the economic priorities of the agriculture base. Faced with a potential threat to the state's primary industries, there consequently arises a clear incentive over and above ecological considerations to encourage widespread public enmity towards possums in order to secure their support and assistance for possum elimination. Moreover, the recent shift from a language of (somewhat reluctant) control to aspirational annihilation coincides with the investment of technological and logistics companies in the Possum Free initiative who openly state their interest in developing new marketable tools and techniques through their participation in mass extermination. Such an explanation, however, potentially overestimates the ability of economic influences to over-determine public attitudes – there is a large gap between specific economic interests and the ecological inversion of attitudes towards potentially charismatic animals – and a more rigorous and detailed analysis would be necessary to advance such an approach beyond speculation.

⁸ As has been frequently observed in post-colonial investigations of ecological and environmental thinking, perhaps most famously in the work of Carolyn Merchant in books such as *Reinventing Eden* and *American Environmental History*, indigenous people and perspectives tend to drop out of the discussion once an opposition has been established between the colonial project and the natural environment. Writing on the Australian context, Adrian Franklin notes that the absence

of indigenous views on introduced species works in favour of environmentalists, because Aboriginal groups do not share their sharp distinction between native and introduced species, or their hostility to the second category (169).

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