

Introduction: Animal Cultures

Creative writing, transdisciplinary literary animal studies, and law-anthropology don't often appear in the same sentence, but this interdisciplinary mingling is where we as editors meet in animal studies. We were particularly enthused by discussions that emerged during the *Australasian Animal Studies Conference*, held at the University of Sydney in November 2023, providing a rich source from which to consider the conference theme: 'Animal Cultures'. Keynote speaker, Carol Gigliotti, wondered about the animal cultural research ideas that can be taken with us to 'make lives better for animals, both wild and captive'.

The 'animal cultures' portmanteau could seem misplaced and disorienting amongst the speciesist practices, language among them, that are determinative in the lives of billions of the more-than-human beings that are born, grow, and die as we journey around the sun each year. The notion of culture evolved as a way of explaining human societies, their practices, and systems of shared meaning. During the late twentieth century, as anthropological concepts and methods were increasingly drawn upon by a variety of disciplines, the ways we think about culture have evolved and expanded. As we move deeper into the Anthropocene, there is growing acknowledgement that culture may not be unique to the human species. We may witness animal cultures as they unfold before us, if we are willing to go slowly, and open our eyes.

The idea of 'animal cultures' has gained the attention of scientists and philosophers. It is also found in culturally informed scholarly perspectives and their representations of other species. Thinking through animal cultures clears a path to acknowledging the rights, subjectivities, and complex lives of nonhuman animals. Yet is it also possible that this acknowledgement and interest contains the seeds of new forms of domination? Referring to the way more-than-human beings live and die as 'animal culture' entails the risk of co-opting the lives of other species into human frames of reference and logic. We must maintain sharp reflexivity.

In *The Creative Lives of Animals*, Carol Gigliotti argues that acknowledging other species as creative compels us towards fresh considerations of sustainability. Exploring animal cultures displaces human agency as the norm and acknowledges, respectfully, the agency for nonhuman animals. It ensures we recognise the diverse flourishings, actions, and creativities of nonhuman animals. Cultural transmission has been observed in an array of species (Whiten), facilitating the acquisition of social and ecological knowledge and behaviours that influence biological and social wellbeing (Brakes et al.). Considering nonhuman animals as encultured offers new ways of thinking about their intelligence, emotional capacities, and self-awareness. Lastly, exploring questions of ‘animal cultures’ also means to consider how animals engage with and are engaged by human cultural production, for example, in the craft of writing and the visual and performing arts.

As guest editors, we have been fortunate to engage with work grappling with the cultural materialities of nonhuman animal existence and the uncertainties and opportunities mentioned above. The four papers we present here offer exploratory responses to these questions. These papers cover questions around the transference and representation of animal cultures; the need for a new theoretical language to engage with animal cultures; and relatedly, the need for innovative methods for communicating animal cultures. We introduce each scholar's response to these questions in turn.

Carrie Tiffany's evocative paper reflects on the construction of her 2012 novel *Mateship with Birds*, a novel that won her the inaugural Stella Book Prize. She approaches the novel's play with animal cultures via memories of canine companions from her own and her father's childhood, reflections that draw us into sophisticated discussions of trauma – personal, familial, spatial, and geographical. Through these deeply personal reflections, Tiffany renders a palpable appreciation of the way nonhuman animals can operate as vehicles for traumatic displacement. The animals she crafts raise questions of human desire, transference, and projection. But they also invite consideration of material animal bodies and their lived experience, an ‘embodied kinship between nonhuman animals and humans’ concluding that ‘love in human relationships with nonhuman animals can be a powerful conduit for empathy’. Tiffany's seamless melding of

psychoanalytical analysis of her writing and recollection of childhood memories and early working life memories, galvanise us to return animals to themselves, freeing them from human transference.

Questions of transference are taken from the personal to the industrial agriculture in Natalie Lis's paper. Lis highlights western culture's misrecognition of poultry as inherently grass-dwelling, pastoral animals, when they are forest creatures with a complex culture. Bringing a background in architecture to bear on the issues, Lis asserts that structures built for containing chickens influence human–chicken labour. She supports this claim by investigating chicken labour in the context of poultry farms and the types of containers used in this context. Lis draws on concepts of labour culture, from sociology, and labour history scholarship focussing on human labour to extend our thinking about humans labouring with animals and how this contributes to the continuation of animal farming. The history of chicken farming also has implications for the assumptions we make about small-scale chicken keeping. These assumptions present fertile ground for large-scale agribusinesses to market intensive chicken farming and chicken-derived products in ways that obfuscate common industrial practices.

Innovation in methods is exemplified in patrice jones' radical rethinking of rationality and anthropocentrism in 'Birds Beyond Words: Fantastic Animals and Other Flights of Imagination'. Considering Val Plumwood's query, whether that which 'has been stripped out of our conception of the material world [can] be put back?' ('Nature in the Active Voice' 124), jones' offers a call to action through art, academia, and activism. In jones' experimental yet highly practical application, we are asked to consider Audre Lorde's argument that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (110) - pushing beyond the dominating forces of reason and into a deconstructive space. Jones draws from experience as the co-founder of VINE sanctuary, as well as from art movements and artists including Afrofuturists like Sun Ra as well as dada, tropicália and surrealism, to reconceptualise Plumwood's five notions of centrist thought. jones then contributes two more – 'rationality itself' and 'ourselves' – in a practical provocation that challenges the notion of culture, and the animal studies field itself.

An example of embracing more creative modes is engaged with by Rebecca Scollen. Methods for the communication of animal cultures are further examined in her thoughtful analysis of voiced animal lives, drawing on Scott Alderdice's 2017 play *Fire*. In this discussion of theatrical representations of disaster in Australia, bush fire forms a central motif, affecting more-than-human and human lives, altering landscapes, and driving media and political agendas. The thematic impact of fire as both a life-bringing and destructive entity is also central to the 'eco-evolution' of theatre, which 'might relinquish the centrality of the human drama and restore an active role for the non-human' (Varney 15). Performance allows us to witness representations of interspecies communication beyond the issue of humans writing nonhuman language. Through this form, we might interrogate how animal anguish is embodied in theatre and its potentialities for seeing animal cultures. What makes Alderdice's play significant, Scollen argues, is that *Fire* moves beyond the physical embodiment of nonhuman animal experience through performance and attempts to decentralise human voices and even presence. As the nonhuman animal characters voice in *Fire*, 'We are Gondwana' (Alderdice, 83), with Scollen noting, '[T]here were no humans in Gondwana'. Here, Scollen allows a theoretical imagining of the deep history of nonhuman animal lives, their resilience, and the possibility of a rich cultural way of being.

The ASJ editors have brought to publication in this issue two further papers that resonate with our thematic focus on animal cultures. Franziska Trapp's paper 'Dresse-toi! Perspectives on the (Re)Valorisation of Nonhuman Animal Performers in Contemporary Circus' draws out paradoxes in the movement towards ostensibly animal-free circuses. While animals disappeared from traditional circuses, they are reappearing in the contemporary form. The contemporary circus eschews showcasing animals' 'talents' or the plays of 'human dominance' we associate with circuses of old. Instead, it engages in a project of creating 'critical, experimental artworks that comment on society and the relations between humans, animals, and technology'. Trapp focuses on the staging strategies used in *Dresse-toi*, a performance that features humans and horses and is representative of the contemporary circus.

Trapp observes that the contemporary circus introduces animals in a way that can 'open up a space for us to question, problematize, or even subvert human dominance'. For example, mastery of animal handling is required for the stereotypical forms of mastery to be questioned or

subverted within the context of performance. In *Dresse-toi*, staging strategies provoke critical readings of human-nonhuman relations during the performance and speak to the convergence of human-human dominance that played out during the evolution of the traditional circus. Regarding human-nonhuman relations, horses work in the ring without reins, symbolising liberation, though are clearly captive. Aspects of performance conjure gender politics and circus culture. Yet, Trapp concludes that the differences between the traditional and the contemporary (critical) circus are 'slight'. Trapp brings nuance and reflexivity to her analysis, unpeeling the intricacies as one would peel an apple. Her analysis is sharp (in a good way), though equally poignant and tender: rigour sewn with empathy.

Becky Tipper's short story 'All the animals' draws on data collected from a University of Lisbon-based research project on multispecies families, data that studied children's capturing of and reflections on relationships with companion animals. In this story and its exegetical introduction, Tipper is examining the 'fleshy detail of mortal relationship' (Haraway 3). By this she means, to explore the entanglement of human and animal lives, reciprocal relationships that are cherished and, paradoxically disinterested, and even dangerous. Through her craft Tipper reveals how domestic pets become entwined with an individual family's culture. The story is told in five human narrated sections, each orbiting around a central agentic companion animal subject. 'All the animals' beautifully deploys creative writing practice to articulate more than human subjectivity and their enculturated experiences within families and across generations.

This edition also includes four book reviews: A. P. A. Best reviews Elizabeth Ellis, *Australian Animal Law: Context and Critique*. Wendy Woodward reviews *Bellwether Histories: Animals, Humans and US Environment in Crisis*, edited by Susan Nance and Jennifer Marks, and Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa's *The Celluloid Specimen: Moving Image Research into Animal Life*. Esther Alloun reviews Irus Braverman, *Settling Nature: The Conservation Regime in Palestine-Israel*.

Best finds Ellis's text a powerful and critical examination of Australia's utility focused and deeply anthropocentric approach to animal protection law. In addition to examining key elements of statute and doctrine, Ellis supports her main arguments with a range of case studies. This book is a valuable addition to animal law scholarship and will attract a broad readership. Nance and Marks' edited collection establishes the need for the diverse scholarship on

Bellwether species. As Woodward argues, the book compels us to foreground animal suffering and species loss as indicators of the increasing climate devastation that will and has implicated the human species. Schultz-Figueroa's book highlights the extensive presence of animals in scientific film archives, exploring the various contexts and attitudes that surround them, and making, Woodward writes, a significant contribution to animal studies where these representations have seldom featured. Braverman deploys ethnographic methods to argue that the politics of nature management is ultimately driven by the Israeli settler state's project of expansion. As Alloun's review notes, Braverman, a Jewish Israeli who completed compulsory military service in Israel, held a special participant observer position to sensitively interrogate a site of immense violence and divisive global debate.

This issue of *Animal Studies Journal* on Animal Cultures interrogates the dangers of restrictive epistemes that flatten out the complexities of animal culture. Creativity (human and nonhuman) emerges as a crucial redress to these dangers. Collectively, the papers generate a call for respectful and empathetic reflection on the processes by which humans enmesh animals into our cultures, to consider the animal cultures we share, and to maintain awareness that animal cultures exist without and despite us.

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Guest editors.

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