Race, Place, and the Bounds of Humanity

Glen Elder
UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

Jennifer Wolch
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Jody Emel
CLARK UNIVERSITY

The idea of a human-animal divide as reflective of both differences in kind and in evolutionary progress, has retained its power to produce and maintain racial and other forms of cultural difference. During the colonial period, representations of similarity were used to link subaltern groups to animals and thereby racialize and dehumanize them. In the postcolonial present, however, animal practices of subdominant groups are typically used for this purpose. Using data on cultural conflicts surrounding animal practices collected from media sources, we show that such practices have become a key aspect of the human-animal boundary due to the radically changing time-space relations of postmodernity. Drawing on Spivak's notion of "wild practice," we propose a radical democracy that includes animals as well as subaltern peoples, and argue for the rejection of dehumanization as a basis for cultural critique, given its role in perpetuating racialization and violence toward both human and non-human animals.

French film star and animal rights activist, Brigitte Bardot, reportedly considered self-imposed exile from her homeland because she objected to the way in which immigrant Moslems slaughtered their animals. Bardot's dramatic stance, however, was unoriginal. Her role and lines were snatched from a long string of previous performers including explorers, colonialists, slave holders, modern-day racists and xenophobes, and right-wing politicians. All of these characters constructed racial difference by casting the other as savage or uncivilized on the basis of their animal practices.
Today, arguments about animals and race have become increasingly common, particularly in American and Europe. Animals and their bodies appear to be one site of struggle over the protection of national identity and the production of cultural difference. Why are animals used (and so useful) in such sociopolitical conflicts?

Practices bringing harm to animals are being used to racialize immigrant groups. On the basis of postcolonial theories of racialization and the impacts of postmodern time-space compression in a globalizing economy, this process of animal-linked racialization works to sustain the power of dominant groups over others and helps to deny their legitimacy as citizens.

Animals and Race

Animal practices are a powerful basis for creating difference and hence racialization – they serve as defining moments in the social construction of the human-animal divide. While universally understood in literal terms, the divide is a shifting, metaphorical line, built up on the basis of human-animal interaction patterns, ideas about hierarchies of living things, and the symbolic roles played by specific animals in society. Certain sorts of animals (such as apes, companion animals, or other revered species) become positioned on the human side of this metaphorical line, rendering some practices unacceptable. Yet other harmful practices are normalized to reduce the guilt or ambivalence associated with inflicting animal pain or death and justify such actions as defensible.

Norms of animal practice are not consistent or universal. Codes for harmful animal practices are heavily dependent on immediate context. The critical dimensions of context include animal species, human actor(s), rationale for and methods of harm, and site of action involved in the practice. Because animal practices emerge over time as part of highly variable cultural landscapes, place is also implicated. When distinct, place-based animal practices are suddenly inserted into new locales by immigrants, conflict erupts. Newcomers violating or transgressing the established cultural boundary between people and animals become branded as savage, primitive, or uncivilized, and risk dehumanization by virtue of their association with particular animal practices.

Driven by anxiety over declining global hegemony, economic and social polarization, and growing population diversity that threatens the country's image as white, dominant groups in the United States are waging a battle to maintain their positions of material and political power. They seek to protect a socially constructed national identity built upon particular categories of people and places that are, in part, defined in contradistinction to others (Penrose, 1994).
Racialization of those with darker skin color, for example, feeds into en-\text{trenched ideologies, stereotypes, and discursive practices, and demarcates the boundaries of national culture and belonging to place— it excludes those who do not fit. Conflicts over animal practices, rooted in deep-seated cultural beliefs and social norms, fuel efforts to racialize and devalue certain groups. Animal practices have become tools of a cultural imperialism designed to delegitimize citizenship. There are links between race, place, and animals. Violence done to animals is inevitably interpreted in culturally specific ways. How can society possibly characterize one type of harm or death as more painful or humane than another? Yet, animal suffering, agony, and death are not mere social constructions—they are only too real. A profound rethinking of all savage practices toward animals is called for. In addition, we must acknowledge the ways in which we dehumanize people as other by virtue of their animal practices. We promote a \textit{pratique sauvage}, or wild practice, in which heterogeneous others use their marginality as a position from which to pursue radically open, anarchic, and inclusive politics (Spivak, 1990; Soja & Hooper, 1993).}

\textbf{Postcolonial Animal Stories}

Unlike colonial animal stories, such as \textit{Babar}, in which animals are representations of colonists and “natives,” postcolonial animal stories focus on the treatment of animals by subaltern groups. The treatment of animals, when it differs from that deemed acceptable by the dominant culture, is often utilized to devalue immigrant and minority populations. As the maintenance of boundaries between former colonists and natives becomes a more pressing task, animal practices, interpreted as “out of place” by dominant groups, position subaltern groups at the very edge of humanity. These groups are racialized and dehumanized through a complicated set of associations that measure their distance from civilization and the ideals of white America.

\textbf{The Rescue Dog}

Late in 1995, a German shepherd puppy was beaten to death in Fresno (Arax, 1995; Sacrifice of dog, 1995). The puppy’s death created a public furor. Neighbors complained to local authorities, and the man responsible for the dog’s death was taken into custody on felony charges of animal cruelty. Later, these charges were reduced to misdemeanor cruelty, to which the defendant pled guilty. The man charged in the case was Chia Thai Moua, a Hmong immigrant from Laos who had come to the United States in the 1970s.
Moua was what the press termed a “shaman.” Interestingly, his logic for using the puppy was precisely that of so many others employing dogs to serve people – he was trying to rescue a human (in this case, his wife). He explained that he killed the dog in order to “appease an evil spirit” plaguing her in the form of diabetes. According to Hmong beliefs, “a dog’s night vision and keen sense of smell can track down more elusive evil spirits and barter for a sick person’s lost soul.” Animals, such as chickens or pigs, are sacrificed first, but if this does not solve the problem, according to Moua, “I have no other choice” but to “resort” to using a dog. Moua said that, each year, he performs a ceremony to release the souls of the animals who have helped him so that they can be reborn. According to Moua, Hmong people from the highlands of Laos “are not cruel to animals … We love them … Everything I kill will be reborn again.”

Moua’s reliance on the Hmong conception of the human-animal border, and the appropriate uses for certain animals, put him at odds with mainstream American ideas. He killed a dog. His reasons had no legitimacy within the dominant U.S. culture, which sanctions only a limited number of contexts for dog-killing. Dogs can “give” their lives to science, or they can be killed when no longer “employable” (for example, there are a large number of surplus greyhound racing dogs killed each year). But canine laboratory and entertainment “workers” do not have pet status (see Drayer, 1997; Reitman, 1992). Because Moua killed a puppy in his home, the dog was viewed as a pet.

In mainstream U.S. culture, people are expected to dote on pet puppies in their homes, lavishing them with toys, treats, and attention. They are not supposed to kill their pets unless they are “properly” killed by veterinarians or euthanasia technicians. Moua was neither. Worse, instead of using a scalpel or a syringe wielded in the name of science or kindness, Moua used a method (bludgeoning), widely seen as inhuman – a gross act of force and brutality.

An insightful head investigator for Fresno’s Humane Society claimed that he could count on his hand the actual cases of Hmong dog sacrifices that he knew of: A “lot of the false complaining is racism, pure and simple.” Nonetheless, the publicity around Moua’s dog sacrifice escalated ethnic tensions between the Anglo population of Fresno and the sizable Hmong population.

_Bambi’s Brother_

One night in 1995, four men drove into the Angeles National Forest in California. One of them immobilized a deer with a spotlight, shot the animal in the throat, and loaded the bleeding deer into the trunk of the car. Back in town, the car was pulled...
over by a police officer who, upon hearing thumping noises coming from the trunk, demanded that it be opened. There was the deer.

Veterinarians were not able to save the deer and all four men were arrested and charged. The shooter pleaded guilty to poaching and premeditated cruelty to an animal. He was sentenced to a year in jail, 100 hours of community service, and a $200 fine. The other three men were convicted of lesser charges, for which one got a 6-month jail sentence, and all were ordered to perform community service and pay fines (Williams, 1995, May 13).

The men involved were Latinos, and their photograph, portraying them as severe men with classically indio and mestizo features, appeared in a Los Angeles Times article. The caption identified them as gunman, Enrique Chavez, and his companions. The photograph and caption identified these Latino men as “gunmen” instead of a group of sport hunters because they looked wrong and acted in the wrong time and place. They were clearly not white men wearing hunting attire or driving a truck. Yet, like sport hunters, they claimed to have shot the deer for venison. But, in America, sport hunters supposedly shoot to kill. In this case, an animal was shot in the throat and left to bleed and suffer until they got home.

The hunters’ rationale for their hunting method was that it kept the meat fresh, a quality they valued. But this quality (by this method) is not embraced by the dominant culture, whose members are accustomed to meat that is not quite so fresh – severely anemic, white, crate-raised veal, for instance. In addition, by shooting a deer without a license, in a place where hunting was not in season, these men were poaching – killing the wrong animal in the wrong place and time, violating the time during which the forest is regarded as reserved for the wonderful wild creatures. Therefore, they acted illegally.

Enrique Chavez’s Anglo lawyer recommended that his client spend his community service hours in a local animal shelter so that Chavez could “learn how to treat animals better” – a sadly ironic prescription considering the millions of animals killed annually in U.S. animal shelters.

**The Bowser Bag**

In 1989, two Long Beach men were charged with cruelty to animals for killing a puppy and eating him for dinner (Haldane, 1989a). A Los Angeles area judge ruled that there was no law against eating dogs, and that the animal had not been killed in an inhumane fashion. The charges were dropped (Haldane, 1989b).

Yet, the case did not die – it spurred the introduction of a law making “pet-eating” a criminal misdemeanor, punishable by a 6-month jail term and $1,000 fine.
Pets are defined in this statute as animals kept as pets. Killing and eating livestock (poultry, pigs, cattle) or wildlife (fish, shellfish, deer, rabbits) remain legal since these creatures fall beyond the definition of “pet.”

All of this is beside the point though: Real Americans eat hot dogs, not dogs (Bishop, 1989, October 5). In the United States, the status of most pet dogs and cats as quasi-human family members makes eating one seem like cannibalism. The Long Beach puppy was killed in an apartment complex, at home – it was all in the family. And the two Long Beach men were not “American” – they were refugees from Cambodia. Trying to minimize the backlash against his community, the head of the Cambodia Association of America claimed that “Cambodians don’t eat dogs.” However, it is widely known that many Asians do eat dogs (and sometimes cats too). In the Asian context, dogs and cats are specialty meats – delicacy foods. And, while most in the U.S. mainstream society see nothing wrong with eating (sanctioned) animal flesh (including the flesh of baby animals and even taboo animals under conditions of duress), killing a cute helpless puppy for a luxury meal is another story.

As initially drafted, the pet-protection bill only covered cats and dogs. But, protests by Asian civic organizations led to an extension of the killing ban to all animals commonly kept as pets (the law disregards, however, pet turtles, rabbits, or pigeons, which are commonly eaten by Anglos). As Vietnamese-born editorial writer Lam (1989) claimed, the legislation implies that “[t]he yellow horde is at it again … the eating habits of … Asians, specifically the Vietnamese, are out of control” while “[i]t remains chic in a French restaurant to eat squab,” and it’s alright for “American fraternity boys to swallow live goldfish.”

Horses Heading for a Fall

Several localities and states have recently banned horse tripping, a traditional event performed in charreadas – Mexican-style rodeos (Puente, 1995; Rivera, 1995; McKinney & Hoffman, 1996; States move to, 1995). Charreadas have been staged throughout Mexico for several centuries, and are frequent throughout the southwestern United States (Lawrence, 1984, 1985). In this event, the legs of a galloping horse are lassoed by men on horseback. Once the lasso encircles the legs, the rope is pulled tight, throwing the horse to the ground. Horses felled are frequently injured or killed.

The spreading efforts to ban horse tripping are grounded on the argument that the event is inhumane. Horse tripping violates the deeply contradictory human-
animal borders in a dominant Anglo culture. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of horses to Anglo-Europeans (Shepard, 1995). In the United States, horses are seen both as pets (the number of working horses is now vanishingly small), and as a symbol of freedom, nobility, beauty, grace, and power.

While U.S. culture finds it acceptable to derive money from equine suffering and death in some circumstances (e.g., horse-racing, dog-food production), it disdains the entertainment pleasure some derive from watching a glorious horse being thrown violently to the ground. Yet, it seems acceptable for cattle to be hazed (i.e., roped, thrown, and hog-tied) – they’re just cattle.

In addition, the people performing the horse tripping are charros or vaqueros. Historically, vaqueros were simply Mexican cowboys working throughout the Western borderlands. But as the Anglo land grab of the frontier proceeded, American cowboys, who went on to become the most revered figures of the American West, displaced them. Vaqueros were subsequently recast by Hollywood as bad guys – racialized and heavily masculinized, the very image of cruel, macho Mejicanos, mustachioed banditos – those savage enough to participate in horse tripping.

The Blood of the Lamb

In 1987, a Santeria church announced plans to open a house of worship in Hialeah, Florida. This announcement, along with a spate of angry calls from residents reacting to “whole piles of animals, stinking and with flies,” left behind following a sacrifice, prompted the Hialeah City Council to hold an emergency meeting. The Council adopted a resolution noting that the Santeria religious group was potentially threatening public morals, peace, and safety, and passed an ordinance extending Florida’s animal cruelty laws to cover ritual sacrifice, imposing criminal sanctions on the activity. The Attorney General of Florida also expressed an opinion that religious animal sacrifice was not necessary killing and, thus, against Florida State law.

A few months later, the City Council adopted an ordinance that went further, prohibiting the possession, sacrifice, or slaughter of an animal with the intent to use them for food purposes. The prohibition applied, however, only if the animal was killed in a ritual, regardless of whether the animal was consumed for food. This left as legal the killing of animals in properly zoned and licensed establishments (Barrett, 1992; Biskupic, 1992).

The Hialeah ordinance was followed by bans in other cities. Los Angeles, for example, became the first city in the nation to outlaw ritual sacrifice (termed
“torture-killings” in one headline), and San Francisco followed with a ban of its own amid news reports about an estimated 1,000 cases of ritual slaughter. “disemboweled chickens,” and “decapitated native songbirds” (Ritualistic animal sacrifice, 1990; L.A. animal torture, 1988).

In San Francisco, Santeria high priest, Pete Rivera, claimed that only high priests, extensively trained in ritual sacrifice techniques, were allowed to kill four-legged animals: “The gringo doesn’t understand our religion.” The ban created a furor and prompted the city council to allow sacrifices if the resulting meat was to be used primarily for purposes of consumption (Espinosa, 1992; Herscher, 1992).

Ernesto Pichardo, founder and priest of Hialeah’s Santeria church, sued the city of Hialeah. In the face of protests by animal-rights groups (as well as local Catholic and Baptist clergy), Pichardo argued that the city had violated the church’s rights under the free exercise of religion clause of the Constitution’s First Amendment. Santeria sacrifices are integral to key Santeria religious ceremonies (e.g., birth, death, marriage), and used to intervene with “orishas” – minor gods believed to have powers to help people.

An action for declaratory, injunctive, and monetary relief was filed in the District Court, which ruled for the city, on the grounds that the jurisdiction had a right to prevent health risks, prevent emotional injury to children, protect animals from cruel and unnecessary killing, and restrict the slaughter of animals to areas zoned for slaughterhouses. The U.S. Supreme Court, however, thought otherwise, and in June of 1993, ruled that the city had not demonstrated a compelling interest in implementing the ban, and had unfairly targeted a religious practice (sacrifice). The Court declared the District Court ordinance void under the First Amendment (see Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc., and Ernesto Pichardo v. City of Hialeah [1993]).

The Supreme Court ruling was hardly surprising since a finding of cruelty would have threatened such long-standing religious practices as Kosher slaughter, and could have raised questions about the humaneness of conventional killing techniques practiced on slaughterhouse floors. The reaction at the local level faded away in the face of the Supreme Court ruling, but the question remains: Why was the initial local response so swift and vehement?

Animals killed in Santeria include a wide range of domestic farm animals (e.g., lambs, goats, chickens), but also turtles and snakes (and, according to some reports, dogs). Most of these animals are eaten, but it is traditional to leave remains at major crossroads, leading one observer to note that it is “not uncommon to find decapitated chickens at the intersection of 98th Street and Broadway [in New York City].”

Elder, Wolch and Emel

Society and Animals

Volume 6, Number 2
Such practices violate the human-animal border of the dominant U.S. culture (where the killing of animals occurs on a vast scale, but is almost completely hidden from view – offal is processed rather than left on the roadway to stink in the sun). But more critical is the perception that the people doing the killing and their reasons for killing are suspect, associated with threatening populations, or engaged in illegitimate activities.

The perception of suspicious behavior comes through in most U.S. media and even scholarly accounts in which the Santeria religion is described as a fusion of traditional African religious elements (mostly Yoruba), with parts of Roman Catholicism mixed in (the “Orishas” are named after the Catholic saints or “santos”). Such descriptions imply that Santeria is imported from Africa and, more recently, the Caribbean, and not indigenous. However, the presentation of history and geography in these accounts is misleading. Emerging during America’s slave trade past, Santeria is, in fact, less of an import than Catholicism or Presbyterianism, neither of which have adapted as much as Santeria to the cultural context within which they are practiced (Mitchell, 1993). Yet, Santeria is referred to as a cult rather than a religion, despite an estimated 75 to 100 million practicing Santeros worldwide. In Brazil, Haiti, and Cuba, Santeria is the majority religion.

In the United States, Santeria has spread rapidly among Latinos from Central and South America and among African-Americans. Although the religion is not a form of voodoo, it shares with voodoo certain common historical origins, thus conjuring up images of satanism, demonism, and black magic. The frequent addition of the adjective “ritualistic” to written descriptions of Santeria also implies that it is somehow primitive and, simultaneously, that modern religions, such as Catholicism, are not ritualistic. In many minds, the religion seems barbaric, backward, primitive, and irrational because of its African roots. As described in media accounts, Santeria is denied the legitimacy of a world religion. By questioning its rituals and reducing the status of its priests to below that of traditional clergy, the media devalues those involved with Santeria.

To celebrate the Supreme Court victory, Hialeah-based Santeria priest Rigoberto Zamora held a public sacrifice. The local newspaper described the event: Zamora “poked a steak knife” into the throats of goats and rams, “sawed through vocal cords and arteries until blood spurted,” and took small birds and “twisted off their heads” (Santeria priest, 1993). Media descriptions like this present Santeria sacrifice as uncivilized, while practices such as battery caging chickens, crating veal, and factory farming hogs go largely unmentioned by the press.
Postcolonial Interpretations

The animal-practice cases presented illustrate how, in the contemporary United States, racialization of others is fostered by postcolonial interpretations of the human-animal boundary or divide, under time-space conditions of postmodernity. Many forms of racialization have relied on human-animal boundaries – namely the dichotomous division of sentient beings into categories of human and animal.

The most basic and durable criteria used to fix the boundary have involved differences in kind. But, while humans and animals manifestly differ, the interspecific divide is not solely a behavioral or biologically determined distinction. Rather, like many other categorizations (e.g., race, ethnicity), it is a place-specific, social construction, subject to change over time. Depending on time and place, the reasons for assigning groups to one side of the boundary or another change.

Early on, Christian theology identified the soul as the defining feature of humanity. Despite the Enlightenment, and new ideas about animals, such as Descartes’ identification of animals with machines, the boundary has rested on the presence or absence of souls. With the rise of a more secular Western science, the key differences in kind became biological and behavioral, and criteria such as language or intentionality were employed to maintain the borders. But Darwin’s evolution theory cast a fundamentally new light on the issue. The human-animal boundary was reinterpreted in the West to involve not only differences in kind, but also differences in evolutionary progress, beginning with “lower” life forms, proceeding through stages inhabited by progressively “higher” animals, and reaching its pinnacle with white man.

This scientific, evolutionary recasting fits squarely within an interconnected set of understandings about the human geography of the colonial world, in which the discovery of races raised complex questions of human taxonomy. Categorizing exotic-looking peoples from distant lands as lower on the evolutionary scale, and thus closer to animals, it echoed and relied upon a myriad of similar divisions used to separate some humans from others (primitive versus modern, civilized versus savage, heathen versus Christian). The human-animal division, construed as a continuum of both bodily form and function and temporal stage in evolutionary progress, was used to reinforce intrahuman categorizations and interpret them in temporal, evolutionary terms rather than solely social or geographic ways.

The stubborn and threatening heterogeneity of the colonies was contained by branding others as socially or geographically different (from those of European backgrounds) but also, as McClintock (1994) suggests,
...temporally different and thus as irrevocably superannuated by history.... imperial progress across the space of empire is figured as a journey backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory. By extension, the return journey to Europe is seen as rehearsing the evolutionary logic of historical progress forward and upward to the apogee of the Enlightenment in the European metropolis. Geographical difference across space is figured as a historical difference across time. (p. 40)

In postcolonial, Western space and time, the idea of a human-animal divide as reflective of differences in kind and evolutionary progress, has retained its power to produce and maintain racial and other forms of cultural difference. The dominant uses of human-animal distinctions during the colonial epoch relied upon representations of similarity to animals to dehumanize and thus racialize particular groups. Contemporary racialization focuses on animal practices that are employed by subdominant groups and viewed by the dominant culture as cruel, savage, and inhuman. While a shift in the precise reference has occurred, the postcolonial moment continues to use putative human-animal boundaries to inscribe totems of difference. Thus, animal practices are a key aspect of the human-animal boundary that racializes and produces difference in radically changing time-space relations epitomizing postmodernity.

Just as in the colonial period, when the dimensionality of the world, as perceived through Western eyes, suddenly expanded in the wake of European exploration and discovery, time-space relationships have altered dramatically during the course of the 20th century, particularly in the last 2 decades. Indeed, a compression of time-space, or shrinking of the world’s time-space fabric, is a hallmark of postmodernity. This compression creates what Jameson (1991) termed postmodern hyperspace, which brings visible difference home instead of restricting it to a distant, exotic colonial space.

Those seeking to produce racial difference are no longer separated by vast continents and long journeys from groups they wish to dehumanize. Instead, the targets live next door (figuratively and, not uncommonly, literally), inviting an inspection of their unsettling otherness. Fanciful representations of people-as-beasts are less potent than images of people-acting-beastly toward animals. Since older evolutionary interpretations of racial difference persist within postmodern culture, not only immigrants, but also native-born people of color are sometimes identified with animal practices.
Animals and the Body Politic

Racialization is far from a monolithic or static process—it is situational and shaped by racial ideologies and stereotypes (Pulido, 1996). Exactly how and why does this postcolonial, postmodern form of animal-related racialization occur? We argue that animal bodies have become one site of political struggle over the construction of cultural difference and help to maintain white American supremacy. By scrutinizing and interpreting subaltern animal practices through their own lenses, dominant groups establish that immigrant others are uncivilized, irrational, or beastly, and uphold their own actions as civilized, rational, and humane.

In general, animals can be used to racialize, dehumanize, and maintain power relations in three key ways: 1) By using animals as absent referents or models for human behavior; 2) By imputing similarities in behavior or bodily features and/or associations with the animal world; and 3) By viewing people (and cultures) through the lens of specific human practices on animal bodies.

Absent Referents

Animals can serve as absent referents or models for human behavior (Adams, 1990). Being treated like an animal means being treated in a degrading and dehumanizing way. The specific treatments in mind here are not loving forms of human-animal interaction, but abusive violation (physical and/or emotional). The key aspect of such violent treatment that makes it dehumanizing, however, is not just the violation, it is the fact that victims are objectified and used like animals (who are commonly objectified and used). Abusive treatment of slaves by masters, for example, was modeled on how people used animals without consideration of their subjectivity (Speigel, 1988).

Imputed Similarities

People can be dehumanized by virtue of imputed similarities in behavior or bodily features, and/or associations with the animal world in general. Human identities can derive meaning and positive values from imputed similarities, of course (e.g., bravery, speed, cunning). Imputations are often made on the basis of associational representations of both humans and the animals to which they are being likened. (Colonial images of Africans as “ape-people” come to mind.)

Similarities can also be drawn on the basis of theories of human-animal continuity. For example, in Western thought, women’s bodies have been deemed
like animals due to their biological role, seemingly uncontrolled passions, and perceived irrationality. Using this logic turned on its head, queer bodies are deemed transgressive because they engage in "unnatural" behavior (animals are, supposedly, all heterosexual), thus queerness constitutes a perversion of nature.

Turning to race, historically, people of color (especially Africans) have been situated by Westerners as lower on the "chain of being" and thus in closer evolutionary and behavioral proximity to nonhuman animals (especially the great apes). Colored bodies are viewed as primitive and closer to animals. Such associations persist and are often made explicit. In contemporary pornography, for example, it is most often people of color depicted having intercourse with animals.

**Human Practices on Animal Bodies**

The least explored manner in which animals play a role in the social construction of racial difference, and the one that characterizes the postcolonial, postmodern moment, involves specific human practices on animal bodies. Such practices have been used to construct other groups as well. In Medieval Europe, for instance, women who owned cats were often regarded as witches. And, as illustrated so vividly by Simoons (1994), taboos about eating certain animal bodies (and particular body parts) are still common, with the result that outsider groups, not observing such taboos, may be viewed with disgust. Many sorts of practices on animal bodies constitute powerful weapons for the devaluation and dehumanization of people of color. Why are certain animal bodies and practices taken up in this fashion?

**Animal Practices and Dehumanization**

What makes one animal practice acceptable and another a symbol of savagery, useful in dehumanizing individuals or groups engaging in it? Humans define the boundary between themselves and other animals, in part, on the basis of their treatment of animals. Specific human-animal interactions that are legitimizied and rationalized over time, become accepted as civilized behavior. Those who do not stay within this repertoire, however, fall over the human-animal boundary into the netherworld of savagery. If practices are viewed as too far over the line, they can even be likened to cannibalism. Policing the human-animal boundary through the regulation of animal practices is necessary in maintaining human identity and sustaining the legitimacy of the dominant group’s animal practices.
It is widely recognized that in most societies, certain types of animal practices are taboo. Taboo practices may involve sexual relations with animals or killing and/or eating the wrong species or categories of animals. For example, while apes are not fully inside the human camp, eating them is widely viewed as tantamount to cannibalism, because simians occupy an ambiguous position along the human-animal boundary. Apes are perceived as inferior humans because of their physiological likeness to humans. Also, when pets are viewed as family members, eating them, like the Cambodian men did, becomes out of the question for civilized people.

Despite the importance of species or category in determining which animal practices fall beyond the bounds of humanity in any given society, practices are rarely evaluated on the basis of species alone. Species is only one part of the immediate context through which animal practices are interpreted. There are other key elements of context that define the human-animal boundary. One is the reason or rationale for harm. Was a specific harmful practice necessary for survival, or to minimize human or animal pain/death? Few humans raise objections to killing and eating taboo animals if the alternative is starvation. And, killing laboratory animals (even dogs and cats) is accepted as it is seen to prevent suffering. Euthanasia of companion animals is justifiable if it reduces animal suffering. But, when the rationale for harm is seen as unnecessary or irrational or damaging, practices may be condemned. However, what is unnecessary or irrational or damaging varies from group to group.

Another important aspect of context is the social location of the perpetrator: Was the person(s) involved appropriate? For example, if an animal was killed for human consumption, did a butcher or slaughterhouse worker perform the act? If a companion animal was killed, was a veterinarian presiding? As the case stories illustrated, problems arise when the human participant does not have the credentials deemed (by the dominant group) necessary. Judeo-Christian religious functionaries, for example, are no longer linked with animal sacrifice as they once were. Kosher butchers, not Rabbis, carry out the sacrifice of animals in the acceptable manner. In today's Western societies, Hmong shamens and Santeria priests are not seen as having the credentials to kill animals. Further, where most of the acceptable killing of animals has become industrialized, professionalized, and removed from the course of everyday life, lay people (such as the Cambodian men charged with pet-eating at home) have no legitimacy as animal killers.

A further contextual element is the means or method of harm - How was the harm inflicted? What techniques or tools were utilized? Did they fall within the
range of local convention? Or were methods seen as archaic, barbaric, or brutally employed? A puppy can legitimately lose her head in a laboratory decapitator, but bludgeoning her to death is deemed brutal. Bolt-guns are acceptable for dispatching a lamb, but the kitchen knife is not seen as humane.

Finally, the site of harm is perhaps the most crucial aspect of context in determining the legitimacy of an animal practice: Was an animal killed in a slaughterhouse, or in the backyard barbecue pit? Were rats killed in the lab, or were they disemboweled in the living room? The issue of site has two dimensions. One relates to whether the harmful action is carried out in purpose-built quarters (slaughterhouses, laboratories) or "out of site" in unspecialized places. The other is whether the action occurs in a highly visible place (street corner) or "out of sight" (factory farm). Although in traditional societies, killing animals is a quotidian experience, keeping violence toward animals out of sight is necessary to legitimize animal suffering on the vast scale required to accommodate modern mass market demand for food, medicine, and clothing.

**Place and the Borders of Humanity**

Human-animal borders and human practices on animals vary according to place. In representational politics that dehumanize people by associating them with animals, place is often used to reinforce such associations (Sibley, 1995). Places can be imbued with negative characteristics because they harbor feared or disliked animals. People who live in or near these places become associated with dirty, polluted, or dangerous aspects of the place (and its animals). For example, marginalized groups such as gypsies are often relegated to residual places (such as dumps), often inhabited by animals perceived as dirty and disease-ridden, like rats. Thus a dirty-unsafe-rats-gypsies association arises. This type of associational process has long been used to link poor or subaltern people to "dirty" animals ("pest" species). The result is typically strenuous avoidance of such animal-linked people by the less marginalized to maintain social boundaries and preclude abjection (Kristeva, 1982).

In the case of animal practices, place also plays both straightforward and nuanced roles. At a basic level, specific repertoires of animal practices evolve and become normalized in place. Such repertoires are, in part, environmentally determined, since the diversity of animal species available to kill, eat, or otherwise use is shaped by environmental factors, as are particular modes of subsistence linked to specific animals.
Cultural ideas about animals evolve in place over time due to social or technological changes, or by externally driven events such as migrations or invasions. Values and practices concerning cosmological, totemic, or companionate relations between people and animals, and the uses of animals, shift. The result is a changing, but place-specific, set of values, with animals used according to the established codes of the dominant group in a given place. When people come to new places, they encounter different human-animal boundary constructions and, if they persist in their indigenous practices, they will likely transgress the local human-animal border.

Until recently, the pace of international migration waves was relatively slow, allowing both host and newcomer groups to adjust. In earlier migration waves to the United States, the origins of immigrants were sufficiently similar to host populations, that conflict on the basis of animal practices does not appear to have been rife. With economic globalization, escalating geopolitical instabilities and conflicts, and vast international population flows, which characterize the postmodern condition, newcomers from a variety of radically different environments and cultural landscapes are suddenly living cheek by jowl.

Typically, immigrants move into the territories of more powerful host communities. Adjustment possibilities are foreshortened and, for the largest immigrant groups, the need to adjust may be obviated by the existence of relatively self-contained immigrant districts such as “ethnoburbs” (Li, 1997). In the contemporary United States, immigrants whose indigenous animal practices clash with the codes of dominant society are at greatest risk of racialization and dehumanization.

Nonimmigrant people of color are also at risk of dehumanization on the basis of their animal practices. Here, place plays a more nuanced role. Even though a person is from the United States, for example, by exoticizing their imaginary places of origin, the dominant group invokes deeply-ingrained evolutionary connotations of the primitive homelands of these others. Thus, cock-fighting among Native Americans or Chicanos, the embrace of Santeria on the part of Chicanos and African-Americans, or dog-fighting among youth in inner-city communities of color, can place all people of color on the far side of the human-animal boundary. When problematic practices occur in racialized and marginalized places, such as ghetto areas, the prospects of racialization on the basis of animal practices rise higher.

Finally, there seems to be a time-space displacement of some groups’ animal practices onto other groups located in different places. With globalization of environmental degradation and the rise of international efforts to prevent species...
extinction, some groups are racialized because of animal practices occurring in their ancestral or natal-origin countries rather than on their own behavior. For example, the rhinoceros faces extinction due to poaching and the subsequent sale of their pulverized horns to Asian consumers. Such practices may be used to devalue and dehumanize Asian-Americans, regardless of whether they support the market for such substances.

**Toward Le Pratique Sauvage**

Explicating the links between race, place, and animal practices shows how deeply ingrained ideas about people and animals have been used to produce cultural difference and devalue subaltern groups. In America, this plays into a multi-faceted and dynamic process of racialization in which immigrants who appear to threaten dominant cultural identities are excluded from American citizenship benefits. There is extreme relativity of legitimate animal body codes and practices with respect to time, place, and culture. Ironically, however, there is universality of human violence toward animals.

We are left with a dual challenge. First we must break the links between animal and racialization and stop the violence done to people racialized on the basis of their animal practices. Then, we must learn how to make the links between animals and people, and stop the violence directed at animals on the basis of their nonhuman status. Birke (1995) captures the first aspect of this challenge nicely, when she suggests that

[I]t may be true that animals suffer less if they are stunned before killing, so that animals killed according to certain religious practices are likely to suffer. But that cannot justify ... anti-Semitic attacks. No human culture is free of animal suffering ... slaughterhouses that stun are hardly repositories of kindness... We need to find ways of expressing concern about what happens to the animals that do not express ... cultural imperialism. (p. 49)

We maintain that making links between animals and people requires a rejection of dehumanization, as a basis for cultural critique. The connotations of the very term dehumanization are deeply insidious. They imply human superiority and sanction mastery over animals and nature – they suggest that violent or otherwise harmful treatment is acceptable as long as the targets are nonhuman. Dehumanization not only stimulates violence toward people, it implicitly legitimizes violence toward animals.
This does not mean that the human-animal boundary should be banished. As Plumwood (1993) argues, the denial of difference can be as just as harmful. Instead, difference – whether among human groups or between humans and animals – must be respected. Stopping the violence requires adopting recipes for what Spivak (1990) terms “le pratische sauvage” or wild practice, and extending them to embrace animals as well as people.

What changes in human thought and practice does le pratische sauvage imply? One change is that humans, especially dominant groups, must accept rather than deny some of the vulnerability that animals have always known, and reject the illusion that a devaluation of others (human or animal) empowers them or offers them protection from harm. Another is that humans of all varieties need to abandon drives for overarching control and choose a position of humility or marginality with respect to Earth that balances needs for safety and security with consideration for the needs of other life forms. Such consideration must be internally imposed (not imposed to oppress or gain power) and its costs must be fairly borne.

Finally, le pratische sauvage implies that people must actively engage in radically inclusive politics that consider the interests of the enormous array of animal and human beings. Neither human or animal lives can ever be fully known, but we are obliged to discern them as best we are able through the practices of interaction and exchange, and the exercise of all of our powers of empathy and imagination.

Notes

2. Correspondence should be sent to Jennifer Wolch, Department of Geography, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0255. We are deeply grateful to Laura Pulido for her comments on an earlier version of this article and would like to thank Chris Philo and Ken Shapiro for their suggestions.

References


