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The Postcolonial Animal

Concerned as it is with the politics of historical and contemporary relations between “Western” and other cultures since 1492 or thereabouts, postcolonial studies has shown little interest in the fate of the nonhuman animal. In identifying the costs borne by non-European “others” in the pursuit of Western cultures’ sense of privileged entitlement, post-colonialists have concentrated upon “other” humans, cultures, and territories but seldom upon animals.

One reason might be the suspicion that pursuing an interest in the postcolonial animal risks trivializing the suffering of human beings under colonialism. Spiegel (1996) confronts this problematic, documenting the affinities between the colonial slave trade and the modern treatment of animals Spiegel’s opening paragraph acknowledges, “many people might feel that it is insulting to compare the suffering of non-human animals to that of humans. In fact, in our society, comparison to an animal has become a slur.” However “in many cultures, such a comparison was an honor. In Native American cultures, for example, individuals adopted the names of admired animals . . .” (pp. 15-16). Two post-colonial themes

with important implications for animal studies are illustrated here: (a) that ideas of an absolute difference between the human and the animal (and the superiority of the former over the latter) owe a great deal to the colonial legacies of European modernity and (b) that the indigenous cultural knowledges that imperialism has attempted to efface continue to pose radical challenges to the dominance of Western value systems. Of course, not all peoples subjected to repressive regimes will necessarily want, and be able, to shed their distaste for “the dreaded comparison,” even if this is only an attitude bequeathed to them by imperialistic humanism. Furthermore, although Native American cultures may consider *some* identifications with animals honorable, it cannot be presumed that all species of animal are accorded this value, nor that all other colonized cultures do the same.

Ultimately, then, such equations between the treatment of animals and humans fail to advance either postcolonial or animal studies very far.² Clearly, an alliance between the two fields must build upon other kinds of affinity. A common antagonist can be recognized immediately in the continued supremacy of that notion of the human that centers upon a rational individual self or ego. This humanist self was fundamental to the practice of European Enlightenment colonialism as a “civilizing” mission, involving the pacification (and passivation) of both savage cultures and savage nature (Fiddes, 1991). It is no accident that postcolonial critics and animal advocates share an antipathy to Descartes, whose notorious refusal to allow animals the capacity to experience even the pain of their own dissection is the necessary counterpart to his equally famous inflation of the modern humanist and imperializing ego as that which exists only because it cogitates (Birke, 1994, pp. 22-5, 31-4; Gandhi, 1998, pp. 28-41; Lippit, 2000, pp. 33-6).

From various perspectives, work in animal studies over the last two decades has demonstrated that the definition of “the animal” is inextricably bound up with the formation of other notions fundamental to the work of colonialism: “the human,” “the natural,” “the cultural” (Ingold, 1994). Several of the most potent and durable intellectual paradigms produced by European cultures at the height of their imperialist arrogance owe simultaneous debts to the colonial and animal worlds. Evolutionary theory, which helped redefine the human in relation to the animal, never could have been formulated without Darwin’s participation in the century-long tradition that put naturalists

aboard colonial exploratory and cartographic voyages. Then, in turn, reconceived as a theory of racial and cultural progress by Galton, social Darwinism gave ideological force to a whole new century of imperialist activity, from European and American eugenics to apartheid in South Africa and assimilationist state policies in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Sahlins, 1976).

In other ways, though, the animal has tended to disrupt the smooth unfolding of Enlightenment ideology. Defined as that bit of nature endowed with voluntary motion, the animal resists the imperialist desire to represent the natural—and especially the colonial terrain—as a passive object or a blank slate ready for mapping by Western experts (Birke, 1994). As critical biologist Haraway (1991) suggests in evoking the figure of the coyote, the so-called “natural world” continues to demonstrate its agency as a “coding trickster” despite all attempts to pin it down as a passive object of empirical or imperial investigation (pp. 197-201).

It follows that the question of agency—the capacity to affect the environment and history—is integral to both postcolonial and animal studies. For example, human-animal geographers have made productive use of Actor Network Theory that, rather than limiting its attention to the conscious, rational choices made by human individuals, considers agency as an effect generated in multiple and unpredictable ways from a network of interactions between human, animal, and environmental actors (Philo & Wilbert, 2000, pp. 16-17). Such an approach is consistent with how recent postcolonial critics, especially those influenced by Foucault’s (1980) notions of power and resistance, understand the effects of agency in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Bhabha, 1994; Young, 2001, pp. 349-59).

Such analyses surpass both older Marxist theories and some recent post-modern ones, which tend to dismiss agency as a delusion resulting from “false consciousness” or as a “simulation” with no correlation to reality. This paralyzing fatalism is represented in animal studies by the essays of Berger (1971, 1977a, 1977b, 1977c) and Baudrillard (1994) who describe, respectively, the “disappearance” and the “speechlessness” of the animal in the context of consumer capitalism. The same fatalism is represented in the postcolonial field by Spivak’s (1988) assertion that the subaltern (the lowest class of a colonized people) cannot “speak”—that is, cannot express its own relation to history on its own terms or cannot be heard to do so within the dominant modes of

historiography (Gandhi, 1998, pp. 1-3). But just as other postcolonial critics have attacked such theories for overestimating the omnipotence and uniformity of colonial discourse and underestimating the actions and voices of non-Western peoples (Calder, Lamb & Orr, 1999), animal studies have demonstrated that agency in human-animal interactions proves complex and irrepressible and cannot be reduced to the hollow phantasm that Berger and Baudrillard see in the figure of the pet, the zoo animal, the stuffed toy and the Disney character (Philo & Wolch, 1998; Wolch & Emel, 1998; Philo & Wilbert, 2000).³

Of course, the concepts surveyed above all have material impacts in particular times and places. The most promising collaborations between postcolonial and animal studies lie in the production of sharp, politicized, culturally sensitive, and up-to-the-minute local histories of the roles that animals and their representations have played—or been made to play—in colonial and postcolonial transactions. Eighty years before Columbus reached the Americas, the Portuguese conducted experiments in the preparation of alien territories for colonization by introducing European animals to “laboratory” islands in the Atlantic (Lewinsohn, 1954, pp. 127-128). Subsequently, explorers from Columbus to Cook routinely released breeding populations of European food animals in their newly “discovered” lands (Lewinsohn, pp. 128-310; Park, 1995, pp. 95-96; Neumann, Thomas, & Ericksen, 1999, pp. 133-152). In the wake of the explorers came whalers and fur traders and, after them, loggers and farmers—drawn to the new worlds at least as much by animal as by mineral wealth (Nadeau, 2001; Mawer, 1999). Well into the twentieth century, acclimatization societies in Australia and New Zealand still operated with the explicit aim of fostering the replacement of native fauna with that of the imperial homelands (Neumann et al., 1999, pp. 153-175).

Today, colonialism’s offspring, globalization and diaspora, produce numberless innovations in animal-human relations, from the repackaging of the wild for eco-tourists (whaling becomes whale-watching) to the strange new worlds of multicultural cities, in which hybridized cultural habitats offer new dangers and opportunities for animal citizens and the humans that live with and on them (Wolch & Emel, 1998). The virtues that collaboration between postcolonial and animal studies could bring to the analysis of these diverse locales would include respect for local differences, suspicion of theories and values that claim absolute authority, and commitment to ongoing dialogue with

formerly repressed cultural knowledge. Just as post-colonialism has to try to remember the differences between systems of thought derived from Europe and those of the other cultures it seeks to understand, animal studies must respect animals for their differences from, rather than their similarities to, the humans with whom they have to live. Encountering the postcolonial animal means learning to listen to the voices of all kinds of “other” without either ventriloquizing them or assigning to them accents so foreign that they never can be understood.

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Notes

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- ² The limits of this kind of approach are also demonstrated in *The Lives of Animals* by prominent postcolonial writer Coetzee (1999) in which a fictional novelist gives a lecture comparing the contemporary treatment of animals to the Holocaust.
- ³ Interestingly, in order to produce such analyses, some animal geographers have drawn upon another of Spivak’s notions, that of “wild practice”: “a radical democracy that includes animals as well as subaltern peoples” (Wolch & Emel, 1998, pp. 72-90).

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