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## Animal Borderlands: An Introduction

Dominic O'Key

In 2019, two major science fiction films were released to UK audiences that stage parallel scenes of human-nonhuman confrontation in the far-out darkness of space. Claire Denis' *High Life* and James Gray's *Ad Astra* are two similarly lonely, claustrophobic and meditative movies. They both also feature intense sequences in which their human protagonists find themselves – suddenly, shockingly and distressingly – imperiled by an animal. *High Life* is a film which imagines how the carceral state machine might extend the prison industrial complex into the solar system. Robert Pattinson plays a death-row inmate, Monte, who is imprisoned as a test subject on '7', a spaceship destined for a black hole. Towards the film's end, Monte locates a vessel similar to his own, an almost identical ship, that is silently floating adrift. Curious but cautious about the possibility of making contact with other humans on board the ship, Monte docks the two vessels and slowly climbs aboard. He finds that the ship is humanless but not unpeopled. It is full of dogs: dead dogs, living dogs, and their excrement. The dogs are hungry, loud, sick. The strong have eaten the weak. Monte backs away and closes the door, refusing to rescue a timid smaller dog that hangs back, frightened. In *Ad Astra*, a loose interplanetary and oedipal reimagining of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Brad Pitt's Roy McBride travels from Earth to the Moon to Mars to Neptune in order to hunt down his rogue astronaut father, played by Tommy Lee Jones. While rocketing towards Mars, his ship receives a distress signal from a Norwegian research station and animal testing laboratory. Reluctantly, McBride and the ship's captain venture out to respond to the mayday call. But again there are no humans in sight. Instead, two baboons – enraged and floating in zero gravity – attack them, killing the captain. Later, in the monologue that narrates the film, McBride reflects that he understands the baboon's anger: 'I see that rage in my father, I see that rage in me.'

These twinned scenes of cross-species antagonism dramatise a radical disparity and, at the same time, a profound closeness between the human subject and its putative animal others. In these two 'last-man' science fictions, the technological feats of intergalactic travel come to mark the masculine subject's further transcendence and alienation from the animal. Like much SF before them, *High Life* and *Ad Astra* present space travel as a technofix for capitalism's destruction of planet earth, and thereby as an expression of human exceptionalism and isolationism. And yet, because space exploration is founded on the continued domination of nonhuman forms of life – the dogs of *High Life* are a group of Laikas, rocketed up towards the black hole as a trial-run; the baboons of *Ad Astra* are research objects, studied and probed as part of a cosmic vivisection regime – the animal will always haunt and follow the subject, forever throwing off modernity's claim to have left behind animality. Both of these scenes therefore serve as a future remembrance of animality, foregrounding not just the fact that humans can be prey to other animals, but that the human is still an animal among other animals.

This special issue of *parallax* aims to explore this concomitant radical disparity and profound closeness between species. It does so by bringing together six essays, written from different critical positions and using different disciplinary methods, that offer new responses to the question of the animal. As I see it, one of the most important critical insights and intellectual advances of animal studies – as a particular and developing interrogation of human-animal relations – remains its vigilance towards the ossified ahistorical categories of ‘the human’ and ‘the animal’, and thereby its attendant insistence that we must think through not just the human/animal binary itself but also the historical circumstances which produce situated common sense about what it means to be ‘human’ and not ‘animal’. By destabilizing the supposedly fixed, supposedly inevitable categories of species difference – that is, by fracturing the opposing identities of humanity and animality – animal studies disrupts the polar opposites of the human and the animal, and, in doing so, conceives of human/animal difference as existing within shared borderlands, borderlands that are under constant negotiation, navigation, and contestation. Even if animal studies relies rhetorically on these antithetical categories in order to make its critique intelligible, it cannot be understated just how much pressure it applies to the assumed borders of the human and the animal.

The ‘borderland’ becomes an instructive concept, then, because it conceptualizes the dialectical method of animal studies critique at its strongest and sharpest. On the one side, animal studies constantly draws attention to what is shared between species. In its foundational assertion that the human *is* an animal, the discipline aims to dislodge the structural violences of human exceptionalism. Such human exceptionalism is often termed ‘anthropocentrism’ in much animal studies literature. But from here on out we might better understand this as ‘anthroponormativity’, in that the kinds of exceptionalism that animal studies challenges are not simply ‘centered’ but rather produced and reproduced as a norm. Yet on the other side, it makes this argument while emphasizing and foregrounding difference. Thus at the very moment in which animal studies commits to identifying what joins species together, it does not lapse into a reductive and simplified identitarianism, but instead positions the borderland as a terrain of difference. The borderland is not imagined as a space of equivalence or reduction. It is neither a zone of human-animal sameness, nor of equality. Rather, the borderland is conceived of, as Jacques Derrida would have it, as a space of ‘limitrophy’,<sup>1</sup> in which the anthroponormative subject’s limits (its ends, its borders) are doubly ‘delimited’: delimited as in drawn, as in making the boundaries known and visible, yet also de-limited as in exceeded or destabilized. Animal studies’ dialectical approach can therefore be understood as a practice of limitrophy in which differences between and within species are extrapolated and multiplied. In Derrida’s words: ‘Everything I’ll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply.’<sup>2</sup> Animal borderlands, then, is a metaphor which theorizes the ongoing production, deconstruction and multiplication of humanimal differences.

In 2018, when I wrote the call for papers for this special issue, I did so because I wanted to draw wider attention to the ways in which animal studies was developing as a field of critical inquiry. Animal studies, as Lori Gruen has recently pointed out, ‘is almost always described

as a new, emerging, and growing field'.<sup>3</sup> But it is also the case that animal studies is constantly being *made new*. For its critics are committed to interrogating the very premises, logics and lacunae of the field itself. In the past decade especially, critical reflections on animality have delimited and de-limited the boundaries of animal studies. Critics have troubled the concept and self-fashioning of the 'human' as a hegemonic norm. They have investigated how apparatuses of anthropocentrism produce and police a zone of inclusion and exclusion in which certain humans are dehumanized, animalized, or never seen as fully human, while certain nonhumans are interpellated into subjectivity, sentience or even legal personhood. Scholars have argued that the logic of species, or speciation, is conjoined with logics of coloniality, race, gender and dis/ability. They suggest that a narrow but mutable concept of 'humanity' defines itself against innumerable human and nonhuman animal others. And they have argued that capitalism's specific organization of nature, including its commodification of animal life, has alienated many humans from their animal neighbours. They have therefore interrogated in order to re-draw the assumed disciplinary borders of animal studies.

By paying increasing attention to what I am describing as the 'borderlands' between humans and animals, a shared terrain of difference and imbalanced relations, these new contributions to animal studies have called for and theorized a thoroughgoing *intersectionalization* of the field. By this, I mean that recent work in animal studies asks us to think how the structural domination of many humans is conjoined with the domination of animal life. In turn, recent contributions to animal studies have re-enchanted and sharpened the argument that our liberation and flourishing must be multispecies. Neither human liberation nor animal liberation can be thought of alone: they both need each other. While these recent intersectional contributions have rarely been written in direct conversation with the work of Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw,<sup>4</sup> they have nevertheless offered thoughtful and rigorous engagements with difference and positionality. Sunaura Taylor's recent book *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (2017) is a case in point. One of the key premises of Taylor's monograph is that mainstream animal rights discourse has tended to rely on pernicious claims about the relationship between disability, personhood and sentience. In Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975), for example, the foundational text of contemporary animal rights movement, Singer writes that because humans and nonhuman animals both possess the capacity to suffer, both should be given equal consideration. If we can understand that causing suffering is morally wrong, Singer suggests, then surely we have a moral obligation to stop killing animals for food, caging "exotic" species in zoos, experimenting on mice and chimps in the name of scientific progress, and pushing more and more species across the planet towards extinction. And yet Singer also writes that there are some animals who are more sentient and cognisant than others. In fact, there are some nonhuman animals that we might even think of as being just as sentient as some human beings, if not more so. This is where Singer's argument becomes particularly vicious. Infants and 'severely intellectually disabled' people are, for Singer, granted a kind of partial-personhood that is also attributed to great apes. We wouldn't want to inflict unnecessary suffering on disabled people, Singer suggests, so why do we continue to harm nonhuman animals?<sup>5</sup>

Throughout *Beasts of Burden*, Taylor foregrounds how Singer's provocations have driven a wedge between disability and animal activists. Because Singer denies the full humanity of disabled people, and because his ideas have been taken to exemplify animal rights philosophy, it is no wonder that disability activists have rejected or scoffed at the suffering of animals. In a debate between Singer and the late Harriet McBryde Johnson, the lawyer and disability rights activist, McBryde Johnson draped fur over her chair and proclaimed her 'blissful ignorance' about industrial animal agriculture. For Taylor, then, the most important questions become: how can we build a bridge between animal and disability liberation? What sort of language do we need to more fully comprehend the ways in which capitalist and colonial modernity exploits disabled animals, whether those animals are human or nonhuman? How can we revitalise and redeem animal liberation discourse from its longstanding ableism? 'If animal and disability oppression are entangled', Taylor asks, 'might not that mean their paths of liberation are entangled as well?'<sup>6</sup> Thus what emerges come the end of the book is the idea that veganism is one important tactic as part of the fight against ableism. As Taylor puts it, 'When animal commodification and slaughter is justified through ableist positions, veganism becomes a radical anti-ableist position that takes seriously the ableism embedded in the way we sustain our corporeality – socially, politically, environmentally, and in what we consume'.<sup>7</sup>

The intersectionalization of animal studies has deepened the field's understanding of dehumanization and oppression across species lines. It has nuanced and re-enchanted animal studies' commitments to human liberation while also offering a persuasive case for why humanist thought must attend to the animal. Beyond Taylor's powerful monograph, the teamsheet of these intersectional contributions must also include Bénédicte Boisseron's, Alexander Weheliye's and Che Gossett's analyses of blackness, racialization and animalization, which bring afropessimist thought into productive dialogue with critical posthumanism; Megan H. Glick's monograph on personhood and race science in twentieth-century America, which tracks how ideas concerning biological difference rely on shifting constructions of the human-animal boundary; Karen M. Morin's research into the trans-species carceral geography of contemporary life, which allows us to think of how prison abolition might be generatively linked to animal liberation; Kim TallBear's and Billy-Ray Belcourt's work on indigenous life, interspecies relations and cryopolitics, which contend that anthropocentrism is the anchor not just of capitalism and speciesism, but also of settler colonialism; Lori Gruen and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey's feminist analyses of the relationship between gender, animality, and the projection of 'madness' onto feminized subjects; Joshua Specht's industrial history of United States cattle, and Anthony Weis's writing on the meatification of modernity, both of which uncover how capitalism is wedded to the industrialization and intensification of meat farming; Troy Vettese's writings on natural geo-engineering, half-earthing, and the re-wilding of agricultural land in order to plan an organic vegan agriculture; and Claire Jean Kim's work on how white supremacy and speciesism are integral to nation-making in the US, and how this plays out in, for example, the antagonistic relations between predominantly white animal activists and Chinese-American workers in San Francisco. Many of these contributions do not consider themselves to be motivated by the major critical and ethical foundations of animal studies. But this is, in fact, part of their

appeal. For it is often research conducted at the borders of animal studies that offers new ideas of how animality challenges the hegemonic genres of the 'human', making possible 'new genres' of life that unsettle the colonality of Being, as Sylvia Wynter would have it.<sup>8</sup>

The six essays collected together in this special issue are additions to and reflections on this co-implication of human and animal liberation. They showcase the developing methodologies and analytical strengths of animal studies, and in doing so offer critical responses to the concept of 'animal borderlands'. Guy Scotton's essay 'Taming Technologies' explores how crowd control tactics and technologies – from fences and cages to non-lethal weapons – are conjoined with the policing and management of animal species. Scotton reveals how the border-industrial complex and the animal-industrial complex are interlinked, thus highlighting how the fight for freedom of movement and assembly is a multispecies struggle. In 'Managing the Borders', Zoi Sutton and Nik Taylor bring sociological analyses to bear on the Australian state's culling of so-called 'problem' species. By studying Australian print media's construction of species difference, especially the differences between so-called 'native' and 'invasive' populations, Sutton and Taylor argue that the 'management' of species – in a word, mass culling – revolves around a nostalgic ideal of an originary and static nature. How, then, to break with this nostalgia, and to think animals anew? Philip Howell's essay, 'The Trouble with Liminanimals', offers responses to this question, as it examines how scholars have differently mobilized 'liminality' as a new way of conceptualizing animal borderlands. But as the essay's title implies, these writings on liminality – and, indeed, *liminanimality* – raise their own questions, as well as presenting new and unforeseen contradictions. Howell thus delivers a rigorous analysis and critique of the ways in which animal studies scholars have theorized liminality as concept that opens out onto multispecies contact zones and shared spaces. But this is not to say that liminality should be abandoned. As Carmen Nolte-Odhiambo's essay on 'petophilic hospitality' makes clear, the borderland of liminality is generative for contemplating the figure of the pet, the house-animal that – under the conditions of anthroponormative modernity – is always becoming-child but never becoming-adult. Focusing especially on the dominant temporalities of Western human development, what she calls the 'aetotemporal' order, Nolte-Odhiambo envisions both the pet and the child as potentially liberatory figures that break with the humanist and agential logics of aetotemporality. The final two essays of this special issue interrogate how different aesthetic forms can mediate human-animal borderlands. Sarah Bezan's essay, on the relationship between dodo extinction and literary forms, turns to Harri Kallio's speculative photo-project *The Dodo and Mauritius Island: Imaginary Encounters* (2004) in order to explore the symbolic logic of extinction imaginaries. For Bezan, anthropogenic extinctions are senseless acts. Thus she proposes that the absurdity of nonsense literature – from Lewis Carroll to Thomas Pynchon, and to Kallio's work itself – offers innovative literary techniques for making sense of the senselessness of species loss. And in 'Difficulties', Tom Tyler questions how video games participate in and reproduce dominant ideas of who or what is normal, or 'normate'. Focusing in particular on the paradigmatic game-playing modes of 'Easy', 'Normal' and 'Hard', Tyler argues that difficulty settings not only construct an anthroponormative 'implied player', but that in doing so they also dis-able other potential subjects from playing. By bringing disability studies and

animal studies into a productive dialogue, Tyler shows how video games construct a privileged ideal of normative human agency that sits in opposition to human and nonhuman ‘lack’.

The ambition of this special issue is to expand and concretize some of the many insights of animal studies. At the same time, though, I hope the essays collected here also offer moments of deep reflection on animal studies itself – its own limits and premises, its own borders. Only this kind of scrutiny will do if we are to actualize the multispecies relations that are necessary for the future liberation on this planet. What we need, to paraphrase Rosa Luxemburg, is ‘a thousand new forms and improvisations’ of the human and the animal.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gruen, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>4</sup> See Anthony J. Nocela II and Amber E. George’s *Intersectionality of Critical Animal Studies: A Historical Collection*, which brings together essays on animal studies and intersectionality.

<sup>5</sup> Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 20. Also see Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, xv.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>8</sup> Wynter, 260, 331.

<sup>9</sup> Luxemburg, 70.

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