

# Animals, Fiction, Alternatives

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The last year in Australia has seen the increasing exposure of animal rights and the promotion and validating of animal sentience as a crucial political issue. According to a recent animal rights promotional campaign (Animals Australia 2013: online), we have seen on print and television media and circulating on social media the exposure of puppy farm busts, pressure on retailers to go fur-free, the campaign against live animal exports and the inhumane destruction of unwanted bobby calves in dairy farming. SBS, channel 9 and 10, SBS and ABC news and ABC *Lateline* have all featured animal rights stories more frequently in the last few years. Large-scale retailers Woolworths and Coles have come to agreements with lobby and consumer groups opposed to cage eggs and pig stall factory farming. Woolworths will remove all cage eggs by 2018 and Coles took their own cage egg brands off shelves in 2013 (Animals Australia 2013: online). Not that Australia should feel particularly proud of these developments, we are merely catching up with much of the rest of the developed world, especially the European Union.

The media exposure of animal cruelty and the refusal of some of the population to accept animal suffering signify the slow movement of animal rights issues from the fringes to mainstream Australian society.<sup>1</sup> Questions of animal rights and liberation are part of a long philosophical tradition recognising the right for animals to live a life without human cruelty and without unnecessary suffering caused by human action (for twentieth century seminal examples, see Singer 1983 and Midgley 1983). In the context of humanities and social science scholarship, where this journal is situated, they also signify a shift in the academy to consider animal questions seriously. Questions on the nonhuman animal in relation to the human animal have often found focus through animal studies, which Greg Garrard defines as 'the analysis of the representation of animals in history and culture' (Garrard 2012: 146). The difference between animal rights considerations such as the prevention of puppy farming in Victoria and humanities' cultural focused animal studies concerns both philosophy and politics. Garrard points to a split between philosophical and political considerations of animal rights and thematic and historiographical exploration of animals in human culture (2012: 146). This issue of *Social Alternatives* seeks to question and suture this split; to find ways in which the philosophical, political and thematic consideration of animals in culture may lead to considerations that open up debate on questions of animal rights, animal agency and animal sentience.

In light of this, the issue, following organisations such as the Animals and Society Institute (2012), develops a more accurate and contemporary definition of animal

studies as involving the interstices between thematic and political considerations. Animal studies can be fruitfully complemented with terms such as human-animal studies and critical animal studies to include the study of relationships and interactions between humans and animals and the understanding that animals do not just play perfunctory or peripheral roles in human lives but that we exist in and interrupt their worlds and are perceived by them: Jennifer McDonell's (2013) first article in this edition and its excellent glossary provides clarification of these terms. The onus in this edition is on tracing the significance of representations of animals in human culture not just in and of themselves but in order to raise new questions and present alternatives to an oppressive human tradition of animal exploitation and objectification. To this end, each author has re-visited familiar literary and cultural expressions of human animal and nonhuman animal interactions to provide new readings and alternatives to existing scholarship. The last two articles presented in this collection reinterpret quite different cultural events. Lesley Kordecki (2013) examines an example of Shakespearean comedy and theatre in new ways and Randy Malamud (2013) examines the service animal phenomena and uses artistic representation to locate depictions where we might see interspecies communication played out.

It is clear J.M. Coetzee is an author who preoccupies our thoughts on the question of the animal and the first three articles of this edition all touch on Coetzee. This issue is by no means limited to Coetzee's work: that would have involved a far too human-focused endeavour. Each of the three articles which cover Coetzee contextualises his work in relation to specific historical animal rights phenomenon and against the other expressions of the questions raised. In very different ways Jennifer McDonell, Isobel Karremann and Paul Williams consider the overlaps between the pressing moral dilemmas and the literary experiments raised in Coetzee's work. It is clear from these articles, that Coetzee's thematic exploration of animals is both diverse and not always clear cut. As Donna Haraway asks of Coetzee, 'How do the relentlessly face-to-face, historically situated, language-defeating suffering and moral dilemmas of *Disgrace* meet the searingly generic, category-sated moral demands of *The Lives of Animals?*' (Haraway 2007: 88).

The first article written by leading Australian human-animal studies academic, Jennifer McDonell, pursues these questions well beyond the context of Coetzee. In fact, her article provides expansive coverage of two related objectives: an overview of an insight into the last decade in human-animal studies and how the questions raised in this research area might be illuminated by

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juxtaposition of literary and real life critical animal studies. The first section of McDonnell's article, entitled 'Literary Studies, the Animal Turn, and the Academy' considers in detail the significant developments in this burgeoning research area in the last ten years. The article presents the diverse literary periods and genres reconsidered under human-animal and critical animal studies, and the invaluable work done exposing past occlusions of animals in literary historiography.

McDonnell provides an introduction to various academic journals and symposium focussed on human-animal studies and also convincingly reveals the growing interest from the broader literary and cultural field in producing special featured issues on the question of the nonhuman animal in Australia and internationally over the last decade. Finally, she contextualises some of the most recent vexing questions in human-animal studies through literary and real life cases. Such questions include how outcomes for animals may be determined by cultural and lingual constructions and constrictions around race, species and breed. The two 'real life' cases considered are those of Bandit: a 'convicted' dog, destined to be destroyed for aggressive behaviour and secondly, Michael Vick: a man convicted of animal rights abuses and owner of *Bad Newz Kennels*. McDonnell scrutinises the limits of human reason and the necessity to understand the culturally fixed associations of and paradoxical connections between sentiment and violence towards animals by juxtaposing her reading of these two cases with a very different reading to the final scenes of Coetzee's *Disgrace*, particularly the scenes between David Lurie and the unwanted, limping yet favoured 'singing dog' at the animal shelter.

The reconsideration of human reason and violence and the commonalities between racial dominance and species dominance are explored in a very different way in the next article in this edition, Paul Williams' 'Hunting Animals in JM Coetzee's *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*' (2013). Williams explores Coetzee's very early works to reveal Coetzee's alternative discourse on human-animal relationships and how narrative can be used to expose the connections between human rights abuses and animal rights abuses. Williams articulates Coetzee's obfuscation of the boundary between human and animal cruelty in the extremities of the exploitative colonial encounter. In J.M. Coetzee's early novels *Dusklands* (1974) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Williams argues, war and hunting are the same things. And philosophically speaking both narratives dismantle the rational position of Cartesian dualism separating mind and body, human and animal as a delusion of colonisation's will to power. Williams completes his analysis by turning attention to another of Coetzee's works, *The Lives of Animals* (1999) to suggest humans, through the body, are revealed to be animals and fiction is the medium to transport us to these disturbing realities, to allow us to live imaginatively in the lives of animals and force us to empathy. The question of how literature aids in the reconsideration of animals is furthered by the next article in this edition, Isobel Karremann's 'Animals and the Question of Literature' (2013) which

draws out the questions raised by *The Lives of Animals* in more detail.

Karremann suggests that the question of the animal allows us to assess the value and function of literature and vice versa through comparative analysis of *The Lives of Animals* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* (2009). Her method is to focus on not only the thematic context of the literary form, but on the ways experiments in literary form themselves might present new challenges in animal ethics. This is a compelling argument, as Jennifer McDonnell establishes, as animals cannot represent themselves directly in literature and so their representation is a much more complex empowerment of agency and gaze than, say, past feminist and post-colonial revisions. The juxtaposition of *Eating Animals* and *The Lives of Animals* enables complex new questions over how we enter in that necessary sharing of animal ontology with nonhuman animals. Karremann demonstrates that complex literary form is the ideal mechanism to expose the very real intricacies involved in new imaginings of the human-animal relationship but also that the profundity of animal otherness and elusiveness pushes literature to its limits.

Lesley Kordecki looks at a very specific part of the human-animal relationship, that of love and devotion. Her article re-examines Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* filling a gap left by avoidance of animal considerations in traditionally literary studies approaches. Shakespeare's dog character, Crab, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a major character in the play in many ways, and Kordecki proves that his relationship with his 'master' Lance presents a poignant foil to the satire of conventional love presented in the play's other human to human relationships. Kordecki, like Karremann, discusses the particularities of form in displacing assumptions of human dominance; the dog playing Crab is not actually playing anything other than a dog. And his comic disruptions of human expectations and 'mute judgement' of the humour are a source of audience enjoyment but also reveal a philosophical truth about the fragility of our control over animals and the extent to which we are engaged in a completely mutually interpreted interaction. Kordecki draws on the work of Una Chaudhuri to explore the 'post-modern animal' in relation to the Crab and Lance relationship. The post-modern animal paradoxically shows animals as both part of us yet separate. Like all the authors collected in this edition, Kordecki is focusing on scenes not usually discussed in literary criticism in new ways. In so doing, she is able to discredit human assumptions of superiority and value the complexity, tenderness and sincerity in some human and nonhuman relationships.

Perhaps a human / non human relationship that embodies the complexities of human dependency and dominance and animal servility and genuine tenderness is that of guide dog and the blind human. Randy Malamud's research commentary piece in this collection provokes new thoughts on this cultural phenomenon in the history

of human / nonhuman relationships. Malamud's piece 'Service animals: serve us animals: serve us, animals' is founded in etymological tracing of some of the adjectives we apply to the animals who play significant roles in enhancing the lives of humans. Malamud provides an extensive exploration of the ways in which animals have acted as companions and 'served' human beings, and acknowledges that humans who are exposed to this service may develop a heightened sense of animal equality, while continually asking 'what's in it for the animals?' This commentary ends with a lengthy reflection on a sample of artistic representations of guide dogs and their often impoverished masters from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. These artistic renderings of animal service prompt many questions: what is the nature of this particular human / nonhuman animal relationship; is it exploitative; is it symbiotic and mutually benefitting and how might it speak to broader questions of service and reciprocity in human and nonhuman animal interactions?

The short story in this issue, 'Fossils' by Gary Crew (2013), does not deal directly with animal themes. However, 'Fossils' does evoke a sense of how the nonhuman other (in this case earth) can speak to our human self and can act as testimony to our memories and experiences. The poignant narrative is gently framed in the understanding that we are part of the visceral earth, not detached actors upon it. The reviews and general articles in this thematic issue of *Social Alternatives* all relate in some way to the closeness of humans, animals and earth and the necessity for peaceful, sustainable existence.

We are privileged in this edition to feature several specially commissioned poems embedding this academic discussion. The poetry enacts many of the questions raised in the articles, such as the potential to dissolve the human / nonhuman boundary through our common animal existence and, conversely the ways in which animals remain unknowable. Dugald Williamson's (2013) and Larry Lawrence's (2013) poems convey a sense of the complexity, fragility and beauty of our shared natural realm. John Kinsella, winner of the 2013 Prime Minister's Literary Award for best Australian Poetry for his beautiful edition *Jam Tree Gully* has provided *Social Alternatives* with ten poems capturing the embodied immediacy of animal lives (2013). The poems bear witness to the sentience and intentional existence of plovers, kites, frogs, a ram, goats and parrots; they evidence the actual horrors and potential sublimity of human proximity to nonhuman animals with meaningful sentiment and without anthropomorphic projection. The speaker in Kinsella's poems is present and personal, and how else should we talk about animals than personally, especially as we are increasingly 'disposed to treat animals as persons' (Caesar 2009: 2) with their own subjectivity. All these poems aptly frame the philosophical, aesthetic and intellectual inquiry of this edition's contributors.

This edition of *Social Alternatives* has been an exciting venture to edit and I am extremely grateful to all the contributors contained herein for the critical and creative

questioning of established evasions and oppressions of our animal peers. What problems do we encounter in locating and articulating an anti-speciesism perspective? How do we decentre our assumptions of superiority and accept and return the animal gaze? How can we use literary and artistic works to create an alternative politics based on inter-species intersections? The creative and intellectual works presented here offer significant new responses to these questions.

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## End Notes

1. Readers may like to consider a recent article in this journal on the use of social media to promote the live animal export issue as one evidence of the significance of animal right as a major political event, see Shoenmaker and Alexander 2012: 17-s21.

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