

A Historiography of Great Animal Massacres

Jonathan Saha, University of Durham

Department of History, 43-46 North Bailey, Durham, DH1 3EX

jonathan.saha@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

One of the most lasting influences of Robert Darnton's famous essay 'The Great Cat Massacre' is perhaps its title. Numerous journal articles, book chapters, and monographs have knowingly alluded to it in their own titles. Michael Vann's 'The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre', Nancy Jacobs' 'The Great Bophuthatswana Donkey Massacre', Ying-Kit Chan's 'The Great Dog Massacre in Late Qing China', Ian Jared Miller's book chapter, 'The Great Zoo Massacre', and Hilda Kean's *The Great Cat and Dog Massacre* are a few prominent examples. Yet, in spite of this reoccurring reference, the term 'massacre' itself has not been historicised in these studies. In this essay I use this conceit to interrogate the linkages and divergences between the mass killing of humans and of animals. I argue for animal historians to think through the political implications of naming episodes of the mass killing of animals 'massacres'.

After Darnton

As animal history has 'come of age' as sub-field within the wider discipline, one title has reoccurred over and over again. It originated with Robert Darnton's landmark essay, 'Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin', published in his 1984 book *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. The essay is justly famous for its innovative engagement with cultural anthropology, being an early exponent of 'thick description' in history

writing.¹ It is also a lively and vivid piece of historical interpretation, although, as I discuss below, a narrative drafted entirely from the view of human actors.² No doubt in part because of its historiographic fame, animal historians have recycled his arresting title for their own studies. Writing in *The American Historical Review* in 2001, Nancy Jacobs entitled her essay about the apartheid state's violence in one of its quasi-independent 'Bantustan' territories, 'The Great Bophuthatswana Donkey Massacre'. Shortly after this appeared, in a study of the failings and unanticipated consequences of colonial sanitation systems in French Hà Nội, Michael Vann published a short article with the subtitle, 'The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre'. This contribution has gone on to have an unusual career, becoming a graphic novel with the altered title, 'The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt'; a title that still betrayed its roots in Darnton's work. This has then been followed by S. Hoon Song's edited chapter, 'The Great Pigeon Massacre in a Deindustrializing American Region', Yin Kit Chan's article, 'The Great Dog Massacre in Late Qing China', Ian Jared Miller's chapter, 'The Great Zoo Massacre', in his monograph on Ueno Imperial Zoological Gardens in Tokyo, Michael Pettit's essay, 'The Great Cat Mutilation', and Hilda Kean's book, *The Great Dog and Cat Massacre*.³

¹ Thick description is the attempt to capture in a richly detailed descriptive narrative participating actors' subjective understandings of the meaning and context of their social actions. Clifford Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight', *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): 56–86.

² Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 79–106.

³ Nancy J. Jacobs, 'The Great Bophuthatswana Donkey Massacre: Discourse on the Ass and the Politics of Class and Grass', *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (2001): 485–507; Michael G. Vann, 'Of Rats, Rice, and Race: The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre, an Episode in French Colonial History', *French Colonial History* 4, no. 1 (2003): 191–203; S Hoon Song, 'The Great Pigeon Massacre in a Deindustrializing American Region', in *Natural Enemies: People-Wildlife Conflicts in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. John Knight (London: Routledge, 2013), 212–29; Ying-kit Chan, 'The Great Dog Massacre in Late Qing China: Debates, Perceptions, and Phobia in the Shanghai International Settlement', *Frontiers of History in China* 10, no. 4 (2015): 645–67; Ian Jared Miller, *The Nature of the Beasts: Empire and Exhibition at the Tokyo Imperial Zoo*

There are no doubt other studies that have riffed off Darnton's title that I have overlooked. However, beyond the title and the presence of the mass killing (or harming, in Pettit's essay) of animals, there is little that holds these studies together in terms of either their methodology or deeper philosophy. As a result, the reoccurrence of the title should prompt some reflection on what work the designation of an event as a 'great massacre' of animals is doing. Taking Erica Fudge's important historiographic intervention in 2002 as a point of departure, the return to Darnton's essay would seem an ill-conceived choice. Fudge argued that animal historians should write from the position of losers, to choose to identify with animals, and to expose the brutality intrinsic to the history of human relations with animals.⁴ Darnton's essay breaks much new ground, but it does not show much care for the cats, either their wider lives in early modern Paris or their experiences of this bloody event. Instead, Darnton uses an episode in which apprentices kill cats as 'joke' to protest their poor treatment at the hands of their masters, in order to tease out the symbolic resonances of felines as metonyms for class privilege. This was a history of humans' subjective experiences of marginalisation.⁵ As Dominick LaCapra pointed out in his analysis of the immediate controversies that followed its publication, the debates that erupted did not explore the possibility of a reading that made 'room for the excluded perspective of the cat', let alone the 'species imperialism' sustained by the violence that Darnton exposed.⁶ Darnton's essay then, is more about the motivations and the worldviews of the perpetrators of the

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 120–64; Michael Pettit, 'The Great Cat Mutilation: Sex, Social Movements and the Utilitarian Calculus in 1970s New York City', *BJHS Themes* 2 (2017): 57–78; Hilda Kean, *The Great Cat and Dog Massacre* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁴ Erica Fudge, 'A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals', in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 3–18.

⁵ Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 79–106.

⁶ Dominick LaCapra, 'Chartier, Darnton, and the Great Symbol Massacre', *The Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 1 (1988): 95–112.

killings than it is about the mass death of sentient creatures. His analytical work offers the reader a view into a world in which it is funny, even cathartic, to kill a cat. It is a move that leaves human mastery over other living beings uninterrogated—reduced, in a sense, to a repertoire of symbolic resources.

The authors of the essays and books cited above go far beyond Darnton in recognising the presence, and on occasions the agency and subjective experiences, of animals in the past. It would seem that the reason for the recurring use of ‘massacre’, prefixed with the adjective ‘great’, may be the authors’ desire to give a knowing rhetorical flourish to their titles, rather than stemming from any affinity with the essay’s approach. Certainly, the implications of the framing of an event or, as Darnton would have it, episode in animal history as a ‘great massacre’ have not been rigorously considered. Indeed, in the essays that deploy this language in their titles, quite different types of violence are actually being connoted. In the essays of Chan and Vann, the killings of dogs and rats are largely bureaucratised and routinised.⁷ In Jacobs, Kean and Miller’s work, these are exceptional episodes of material and symbolic import in times of widespread human conflict.⁸ Without deeper consideration, the uncritical use of ‘great massacre’ as a turn of phrase can have two unwanted effects. It can detract from the use of the term ‘massacre’ to connote excessive, collective lethal violence deployed by humans against their conspecifics.⁹ And it can also deflect from the everyday, routine, and legally-sanctioned mass slaughter of animals in human societies.¹⁰ Historicising moments when the mass killing of animals was deemed by contemporary human actors as

⁷ Vann, ‘Of Rats, Rice, and Race’; Chan, ‘The Great Dog Massacre in Late Qing China’.

⁸ Jacobs, ‘The Great Bophuthatswana Donkey Massacre’; Miller, *The Nature of the Beasts*, 120–64.

⁹ Joanna Bourke, *What It Means to Be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2011), 164–201.

¹⁰ Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, ‘The War Against Animals: Domination, Law and Sovereignty’, *Griffith Law Review* 18, no. 2 (2009): 283–97.

excessive and worthy of comment can enable historians to avoid these potential misreadings. Contextualising so-called ‘great animal massacres’ in the wider necropolitical regimes that humans deployed against animals and alongside the use of excessive violence between humans provides us with a methodology for better comprehending when and why animals’ suffering haphazardly enters into human public consciousness.¹¹ Finally, LaCapra’s critiques still rings true. A thorough historicization of massacres must also give space to engage with the impact on the animal victims themselves, so far as is possible, through their own perspective.

The Great Crow Massacre of Colonial Rangoon

In 1920, the Rangoon Municipal Committee sanctioned the killing of crows, many of whom had built their nests in the tree-lined environs of the city’s hospital. This came after several years of frustration among white British residents in the city, whose writings exposed a hatred of the birds, citing baseless assumptions concerning the nameless but myriad diseases that they were said to spread. Prior to 1920, the white members of the Municipal Committee had their plans—to launch a concerted campaign to systematically destroy crow nests, eggs, and chicks—blocked by representatives of the city’s Hindu and Buddhist communities. That Asian religious sensibilities could be extended to crows was, for some white commentators, a racially-coded sign of the colonised population’s overly sympathetic attitude to animals.¹² These concerns were neatly captured in 1914 by one G.C. Buchanan writing in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*:

One of the greatest trials, and probably one of the most lively carriers of disease, is the common crow. This abominable bird has been allowed to increase and multiply until it has become a veritable plague, and its filthy habits and raucous voice have caused the medical officers of the town to

¹¹ Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.

¹² Jonathan Saha, ‘Among the Beasts of Burma: Animals and the Politics of Colonial Sensibilities, c.1840-1950’, *Journal of Social History* 48, no. 4 (2015): 933–55.

urge upon the municipality the necessity for a sustained effort in the way of destruction of eggs and young... unfortunately... an agitation headed by some Hindu and Burmese gentlemen, whose religion enforces a respect for life, ended in a complete victory for the crows...¹³

In 1920, for reasons that were not stated in the annual report for the municipality, the Committee was now minded to push ahead with the eradication of the ‘crow nuisance’ in spite of opposition from Hindu and Buddhist communities. The question that remained was how best to eliminate them. The Committee sought the expertise of the amateur ornithologist and colony’s Conservator of Forests, C. J. Hopwood, as to the most effective method of killing them. Hopwood furnished them with a plan to deploy poison gas in the tree tops. This led the Committee to approach Lieutenant-Colonel S. J. M. Auld, who worked for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and who had, alarmingly enough, a reputation as being an expert in poisonous gases. His reportedly detailed and lengthy response to the question led, ultimately, to the crude and blunt conclusion that destroying nests and killing the young through direct physical violence was the most cost effective and efficacious method open to the municipality. Turning, as the organs of the British colonial government so often did in Myanmar, to the lowest cost option available to them, the Municipality employed three gangs of Indian labourers, totalling 78 individuals, to carry out the destruction.¹⁴

There is no doubt a great deal that could be read from this brief episode through a Darnton-*esque* ‘thick description’. The juxtaposition of a place of human physical recuperation and the flocking of supposed avian vectors of disease calls to mind Mary Douglas’s universalistic claim of the perennial importance of notions

¹³ G. C. Buchanan, ‘The Port and City of Rangoon’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 62, no. 3207 (1914): 534.

¹⁴ *Report on the Working of the Rangoon Municipality For the Year 1920-21* (Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1921), 18.

of purity and danger.¹⁵ The ‘plague’ of crows in a region of the city dominated by grand red-brick buildings intended to display imperial authority, not just the hospital but also the general jail, indicates an underlying attempt to police animal presences in modern urban geographies.¹⁶ And the clash between white British sensibilities and the religious mores of Hindu and Buddhist populations can be read against the secularist architecture and planning of the colonial city.¹⁷ But it suffices to contrast the discussion of the killing of crows with the lack of discussion regarding the killing of other animals mentioned in the report, whose deaths were unremarkable and reduced to perfunctory sentences. For instance, under the heading ‘The Destruction of Pariah Dogs’, the report unceremoniously noted ‘Two dogs poisoners were employed throughout the year. The dead bodies of 7,338 dogs in all were collected and brought to the carcase crematorium.’¹⁸ The killing of 345,750 rats during the year was passed over even more cursorily. And the operation of licenced slaughterhouses was more focussed on revenues than death rates.¹⁹ The religious dimension to the opposition to the campaign to kill crows is likely what made their deaths more noteworthy in the report. Such reformist political agitation was of interest to the report’s authors. The presence of the All-India Cow Conference and their advocacy of cow protection was blamed for the falling off in the slaughter of oxen in the city.²⁰ In other words, what made the killing of crows an exceptional deployment of mass lethal violence for human

¹⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Psychology Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Chris Philo, ‘Animals, Geography, and the City: Notes on Inclusions and Exclusions’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13, no. 6 (1995): 655–81.

¹⁷ Alicia Turner, ‘Colonial Secularism Built in Brick: Religion in Rangoon’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2021): 26–48.

¹⁸ *Report on Rangoon Municipality 1920-21*, 17.

¹⁹ *Report on Rangoon Municipality 1920-21*, 3–17.

²⁰ *Report on Rangoon Municipality 1920-21*, 16.

commentators at the time were the tensions between religious communities in the city.

The killing of the city's crows was noted in the nationalist vernacular press. *Sūriya* (The Sun) newspaper's regular gossip column, 'Town Gossip by Town Mouse', mentioned the event, albeit in a highly circuitous and mediated fashion.ⁱ The eponymous 'Town Mouse', as the pseudonym was given in the accompanying English title—it was *krvak* 'cut 'krī'' meaning 'Big Shrew' in the Burmese script—mostly wrote observational pieces drawing from their human writers' experiences of day-to-day urban life in the city. The small mammal penname enabled the human authors to adopt the position of a candid commentator, one embedded among of the city's denizens but also at a remove from the affairs of the humans they describe. Their article of 20 April 1920, which discussed the municipal government's sanctioned destruction of nests, eggs, and nestlings was an atypical one. Rather than reporting on conversations that occurred between the city's *Homo sapien* residents, in this longer piece Town Mouse reported on a conversation between two cows (they were clearly gendered as female oxen in the Burmese, *nvā''ma*). The two cows were munching grass in the heat of the early summer sharing sorry tales of the abuses suffered by animals in the colony. They start with the sufferings of Rangoon's crows relayed to them by a female crow (*kyī''ma*) and a female greater coucal, or crow pheasant (*bhut'ma*). They reported how after an Indian man, referred to pejoratively as a 'coringee kalar' (*gorñ'gyī kulā''*), was defecated upon by a crow, the destruction of eggs began. They relate to the crows how gangs of 'kalar' were ordered to kill crow fledglings (*kyī''pok'ca*) in their nests. The cows then go on to discuss their own fears for Burmese new year, *sakran'*, in which Burmese children would twist the tales of oxen, singe them with torches, and eventually drive them into the hands of 'kalars' and their slaughterhouse (*kulā''lak'ron''luik'lui'* | *nvā''sathat'rum gon''rarhā pā ro*). The cows hatch a plan to avoid this fate by escaping with their friends, the goats, pigs, and ducks, to the safety

of those who follow the eight Buddhist precepts (*upus 'choṇ' 'tai' lūsū*) and practice meditation (*kammaṭhān' 'bhāwana lup*).²¹

The article was entitled 'Save Us!' and was accompanied by a cartoon which juxtaposed celebrating Burmese youth, with weeping pigs, ducks, sheep, and goats circling a chopping block with a large knife lodged in the top. The message was clear, even through the layers of animal ventriloquism at work in the piece; human authors using a small mammalian pseudonym reporting on a conversation between two cows recalling the experiences of a crow and a coucal. It was a plea for the implicitly Burmese Buddhist reader to behave in a more ethical way towards animals. It achieved this on the one hand by exposing the complicity of the reader with 'kalar' or Indian cruelty towards animals, and, on the other, by indicating the salvific role of devout Buddhists.²² In the context of the interwar years, the perceived dangers of the growing presence of non-Buddhist foreigners, particularly Indians, and the desire to preserve the teachings of the Buddha through reforming the behaviour of lay people, both fed into the emergence of Burmese nationalism and remained central concerns within it.²³ These two crucial internal elements of Burmese nationalism were clearly present in Town Mouse's article. It was one of a number of newspaper articles that wrote from the perspective of oxen pleading with human readers to treat them better and to refrain from eating them, part of a broader cow-protection movement that was emerging in the colony in the interwar years.²⁴ In the case of the killing of crows, the colonial municipal government's cost-cutting decision to override the religious objections of Buddhist and Hindu communities

²¹ *Sūriya*, 10 April 1920, 13–4.

²² For a more detailed analysis of this article see: Jonathan Saha, *Colonizing Animals: Interspecies Empire in Myanmar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 132–42.

²³ Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 75–109; Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 120–42.

²⁴ Turner, *Saving Buddhism*, 91–93; Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

and employ Indian labourers to destroy the birds' nests as well as their young and unborn offspring, played into these emerging nationalistic rifts. By the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, violence against Indians and Muslims in Rangoon—a city in which Burmese people were a minority—was a frequent occurrence as intercommunal tensions were heightened by a febrile political climate, the gradual separation of Myanmar from British India, and a marked economic downturn. Thousands of Indian people started to leave the city, fearing for their personal safety in the colony.²⁵

The mass killing of nestling crows and the destruction of crows' eggs in Rangoon during 1920 gained visibility not because of the intrinsic horror of such an episode in terms of the loss of avian life, but because of the racial and religious politics of the time. It was a small episode in the rise of anti-Indian xenophobia that resulted in pogroms in the city during the 1930s. The prominence given to the event in the annual report on municipal governance was disproportionate to the coverage given to the routine yet widespread eradication drives against stray dogs and rats, or the everyday slaughter of cattle for human consumption. In Town Mouse's article in *Sūriya*, to the contrary, the episode was an opportunity to surface up a wider set of cruel practices against animals, appealing to their readers to adopt a more Buddhist ethics towards other creatures—albeit in the process setting up Indian populations as a threatening other to this reformed Buddhist self. Attunement to these dynamics allow us to see how contemporary writings came to see this anti-corvid violence as exceptional and even, in the case of *Sūriya*, excessive; something

²⁵ Rajashree Mazumder, "I Do Not Envy You": Mixed Marriages and Immigration Debates in the 1920s and 1930s Rangoon, Burma', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 51, no. 4 (2014): 497–527; Matthew J. Bowser, 'Partners in Empire? Co-Colonialism and the Rise of Anti-Indian Nationalism in Burma, 1930–1938', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49, no. 1 (2021): 118–47; Matthew J. Bowser, "'Buddhism Has Been Insulted. Take Immediate Steps': Burmese Fascism and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1936–38', *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (2021): 1112–50.

that we might identify as a massacre. But there is still the ‘excluded perspective’ of the crow to attend to,²⁶ a perspective for which recent scientific scholarship provides a basis for reasoned conjecture.²⁷

Crows thrive in the ecological niches produced through human urbanisation. The easy sources of food and favourable habitation provided in cities makes the birds perennial urban denizens across the globe.²⁸ Their intelligence is famed, and now firmly established in scientific literature. Their memories, tool-use and adaptation, ability to learn, and capacity for social communication has led to a complete reappraisal of the structure of birds’ brains in general.²⁹ Most pertinent to the history uncovered in this chapter, crows respond to the deaths of their conspecifics in diverse but marked ways. In stark contrast to the corpses of other birds, when confronted with their own dead crows are reluctant to touch the remains. They have been observed watching over their dead in small groups. Whether this is the result of an emotional connection to the deceased individual, or

²⁶ LaCapra, ‘Chartier, Darnton, and the Great Symbol Massacre’.

²⁷ For compelling examples of the use of scientific knowledge for engaging the subjective experiences of animals in the past, see: Erica Fudge, ‘Milking Other Men’s Beasts’, *History and Theory* 52, no. 4 (2013): 13–28; and Michael John Glover, ‘Cattle and Colonialism: An Animal-Centred History of Southern Africa, 1652-1980s’ (PhD Thesis: University of the Free State, 2021), 52–65; for an attempt at a similar approach, which tries to simultaneously embed a critique of science, see: Jonathan Saha, ‘Do Elephants Have Souls? Animal Subjectivities and Colonial Governmentality’, in *South Asian Governmentalities*, ed. Stephen Legg and Deana Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 159–77.

²⁸ John M. Marzluff and Erik Neatherlin, ‘Corvid Response to Human Settlements and Campgrounds: Causes, Consequences, and Challenges for Conservation’, *Biological Conservation* 130, no. 2 (2006): 301–14.

²⁹ Alex H. Taylor, ‘Corvid Cognition’, *WIREs Cognitive Science* 5, no. 3 (2014): 361–72; Andreas Nieder, ‘Inside the Corvid Brain—Probing the Physiology of Cognition in Crows’, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, Comparative cognition, 16 (2017): 8–14; John Marzluff and Tony Angell, *Gifts of the Crow: How Perception, Emotion, and Thought Allow Smart Birds to Behave Like Humans* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 11–41.

whether it is an attempt to learn from the manner of their death, being confronted with the lifeless remains of a fellow corvid is likely a stressful event for them. The hormonal releases in these confrontations would trigger heightened awareness of their situation. In addition, there is some evidence that would suggest that crows experience anger at the deaths of close relatives, lashing out at other crows perceived to be at blame.³⁰ They are also highly responsive to the dangers posed by humans—not just as a group but even down to identifying dangerous individual humans—and adapting their behaviours accordingly.³¹ All of this observed behaviour in crows today tells us that, at a minimum, this concerted campaign to destroy their homes and kill their nestlings would not have been unnoticed by the crows themselves. It would likely have been a distressing experience, leaving the birds anxious, afraid, and angry. They may have even changed how they lived in the city as a result of the trauma of the event; the effect that this orchestrated violence was trying to bring about.

Neither Sacrifice nor Scapegoat

There is a tendency, of which Darnton's essay represents the most obvious example, for the mass killing of animals to be understood as a synecdoche for some larger historical process. For Darnton, the killing of cats was *really* about the rumbling class conflict of early modern Paris. For Jacobs, the massacre of donkeys was revealing of the wider intertwined environmental, religious, class, and racial politics of apartheid. For Vann, the vain attempt to eradicate rats revealed the limits and self-defeating ideologies of French imperialism. For Miller, the sacrifice of Ueno

³⁰ Marzluff and Angell, *Gifts of the Crow*, 137–55.

³¹ Heather N. Cornell, John M. Marzluff, and Shannon Pecoraro, 'Social Learning Spreads Knowledge about Dangerous Humans among American Crows', *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 279, no. 1728 (2012): 499–508; Barbara Clucas and John M. Marzluff, 'Attitudes and Actions Toward Birds in Urban Areas: Human Cultural Differences Influence Bird Behavior', *The Auk* 129, no. 1 (2012): 8–16.

Zoo's animals was a response to, and public display of, the escalating demands of total war. For Chan, the campaign to kill potentially rabid dogs was about the spatial regulation of the modern urban environment in colonial Shanghai. I could go on. In each example, the massacres are interpreted to simultaneously elucidate why they happened, and for what they can tell us about wider social relations—relations mostly, but by no means solely, between humans. These are important concerns to address. Episodes of mass lethal violence against animals evidently make illuminating lenses for examining past historical conjunctures. They also make compelling narratives for micro-historical studies that lend themselves to thick descriptions of layered cultural meanings. But as well as reading these episodes as a means to understanding a larger whole, they can be historicised as acts of violence in themselves. This entails engaging with the production of the archive.³² Why were certain acts of human violence directed against animals deemed worthy of remark and record in a context of routine violence against animals? This question forces us to not lose sight of what Dinesh Wadiwel calls the 'war' for sovereignty over animals.³³ It pushes us to read even the documents decrying excessive violence against animals as simultaneously upholding speciesist hierarchies; documents marked by the barbarity at the heart of human dominance over other species, as Erica Fudge has put it.³⁴

As well as situating violence deemed by contemporaries as excessive within its contingent historical context of human domination over animals, this process of historicization must be attuned to the use of collective violence against humans. As many of the articles that adopt the 'Great Massacre' motif in their titles show, the killing of animals was intimately bound up with the differentiation of humans on

³² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Commonsense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

³³ Wadiwel, 'The War Against Animals: Domination, Law and Sovereignty'.

³⁴ Fudge, 'A Left-Handed Blow'.

grounds of race and gender. This insight can be pushed further. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has persuasively argued in her recent book on animals and antiblackness, the connection between animalisation and racism is not primarily one of unjust exclusions from the category ‘human’—a framing that exposes the liberal humanism still lurking in some posthumanist scholarship. Her work details how notions of animality have been mobilised by colonizers against both black(ened) bodies and nonhuman animal bodies through intersecting but irreducibly specific historical practices. To undo the effects of these intersecting histories, she provides an unruly counternarrative through the texts of African diasporic writers whose work reveals the ongoing violence of colonialism in *making* that speciesist divide.³⁵ Underscoring Jackson’s insights, a focus on the mass killing of animals that does not also acknowledge the intersecting history of racialisation misses how animal massacres often served to differentiate and dominate other humans.

Finally, greater attention being paid to the archive also facilitates the historian’s excavation of the material presences, and even subjective experiences, of the nonhuman creatures who fell victim to human deployments of lethal collective violence. The written record contains within it the traces of the animals themselves. Their actions and behaviours shaped what humans observed about them, albeit in ways often submerged beneath layers of colonial discourse. They were necessary to the production of human-authored texts, informing its content. Acknowledging the generative presence of animals within the archive means these ‘traces’ can be identified, thereby creating space for historians to creatively attempt reconstructions of their subjective experiences.³⁶ Histories that fail to attend to the

³⁵ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

³⁶ Etienne Benson, ‘Animal Writes: Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace’, in *Making Animal Meaning*, ed. Linda Kalof and Georgina M. Montgomery (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 3–16; Brett L. Walker, ‘Animals and the Intimacy of History’,

experiences of the animal victims of these massacres risk reproducing the same relations of dominance over animals intrinsic to the very violence that they study. But animals were not just sacrifices or scapegoats caught up in human affairs, or rather, not *only* sacrifices and scapegoats. They were complex, sentient, and sensate beings in their own right. Recognition of their rich lives and experiential worlds cut short in acts of blunt, indiscriminate violence transforms these episodes into crooked mirrors for the present. They can provide a view of human dominance over animals in the past that unsettles the historian and their readers in their continued place at the apex of interspecies power relations.

Endnotes

ⁱ I have transliterated the Burmese script according to the American Library Association – Library of Congress standards.

Bibliography

- Benson, Etienne. ‘Animal Writes: Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace’. In *Making Animal Meaning*, edited by Linda Kalof and Georgina M. Montgomery, 3–16. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011.
- Bourke, Joanna. *What It Means to Be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present*. London: Virago, 2011.
- Bowser, Matthew J. “‘Buddhism Has Been Insulted. Take Immediate Steps’: Burmese Fascism and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1936–38’. *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (2021): 1112–50.
- . ‘Partners in Empire? Co-Colonialism and the Rise of Anti-Indian Nationalism in Burma, 1930–1938’. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49, no. 1 (2021): 118–47.

History and Theory 52, no. 4 (2013): 45–67; Angela Cassidy et al., ‘Animal Roles and Traces in the History of Medicine, c.1880–1980’, *BJHS Themes* 2 (2017): 1–23.

-
- Braun, Erik. *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Buchanan, G. C. 'The Port and City of Rangoon'. *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 62, no. 3207 (1914): 531–46.
- Cassidy, Angela, Rachel Mason Dentinger, Kathryn Schoefert, and Abigail Woods. 'Animal Roles and Traces in the History of Medicine, c.1880–1980'. *BJHS Themes* 2 (2017): 1–23.
- Chan, Ying-kit. 'The Great Dog Massacre in Late Qing China: Debates, Perceptions, and Phobia in the Shanghai International Settlement'. *Frontiers of History in China* 10, no. 4 (2015): 645–67.
- Clucas, Barbara, and John M. Marzluff. 'Attitudes and Actions Toward Birds in Urban Areas: Human Cultural Differences Influence Bird Behavior'. *The Auk* 129, no. 1 (2012): 8–16.
- Cornell, Heather N., John M. Marzluff, and Shannon Pecoraro. 'Social Learning Spreads Knowledge about Dangerous Humans among American Crows'. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 279, no. 1728 (2012): 499–508.
- Darnton, Robert. *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Psychology Press, 2003.
- Fudge, Erica. 'A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals'. In *Representing Animals*, edited by Nigel Rothfels, 3–18. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.
- . 'Milking Other Men's Beasts'. *History and Theory* 52, no. 4 (2013): 13–28.
- Geertz, Clifford. 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight'. *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): 56–86.

-
- Hoon Song, S. 'The Great Pigeon Massacre in a Deindustrializing American Region'. In *Natural Enemies: People-Wildlife Conflicts in Anthropological Perspective*, edited by John Knight, 212–29. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Ikeya, Chie. *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011.
- Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. New York: New York University Press, 2020.
- Jacobs, Nancy J. 'The Great Bophuthatswana Donkey Massacre: Discourse on the Ass and the Politics of Class and Grass'. *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (2001): 485–507.
- Kean, Hilda. *The Great Cat and Dog Massacre*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2017.
- LaCapra, Dominick. 'Chartier, Darnton, and the Great Symbol Massacre'. *The Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 1 (1988): 95–112.
- Marzluff, John, and Tony Angell. *Gifts of the Crow: How Perception, Emotion, and Thought Allow Smart Birds to Behave Like Humans*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013.
- Marzluff, John M., and Erik Neatherlin. 'Corvid Response to Human Settlements and Campgrounds: Causes, Consequences, and Challenges for Conservation'. *Biological Conservation* 130, no. 2 (2006): 301–14.
- Mazumder, Rajashree. "'I Do Not Envy You': Mixed Marriages and Immigration Debates in the 1920s and 1930s Rangoon, Burma". *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 51, no. 4 (2014): 497–527.
- Mbembe, Achille. 'Necropolitics'. Translated by Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.
- Miller, Ian Jared. *The Nature of the Beasts: Empire and Exhibition at the Tokyo Imperial Zoo*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.
- Nieder, Andreas. 'Inside the Corvid Brain—Probing the Physiology of Cognition in Crows'. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, Comparative cognition, 16 (2017): 8–14.

-
- Pettit, Michael. 'The Great Cat Mutilation: Sex, Social Movements and the Utilitarian Calculus in 1970s New York City'. *BJHS Themes* 2 (2017): 57–78.
- Philo, Chris. 'Animals, Geography, and the City: Notes on Inclusions and Exclusions'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13, no. 6 (1995): 655–81.
- Report on the Working of the Rangoon Municipality For the Year 1920-21*. Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1921.
- Saha, Jonathan. 'Among the Beasts of Burma: Animals and the Politics of Colonial Sensibilities, c.1840-1950'. *Journal of Social History* 48, no. 4 (2015): 933–55.
- . *Colonizing Animals: Interspecies Empire in Myanmar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- . 'Do Elephants Have Souls? Animal Subjectivities and Colonial Governmentality'. In *South Asian Governmentalities*, edited by Stephen Legg and Deana Heath, 159–77. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Commonsense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Taylor, Alex H. 'Corvid Cognition'. *WIREs Cognitive Science* 5, no. 3 (2014): 361–72.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Turner, Alicia. 'Colonial Secularism Built in Brick: Religion in Rangoon'. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2021): 26–48.
- . *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014.
- Vann, Michael G. 'Of Rats, Rice, and Race: The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre, an Episode in French Colonial History'. *French Colonial History* 4, no. 1 (2003): 191–203.

Wadiwel, Dinesh Joseph. 'The War Against Animals: Domination, Law and Sovereignty'. *Griffith Law Review* 18, no. 2 (2009): 283–97.

Walker, Brett L. 'Animals and the Intimacy of History'. *History and Theory* 52, no. 4 (2013): 45–67.

Index

Page	Terms
1	Robert Darnton, Great Cat Massacre
2	Robert Darnton
3	Dominick LaCapra
4	Burma, Rangoon
5	Rangoon, Crows
6	Dogs, Rats, Cattle
7	Newspapers, Nationalism
8	Newspapers, Nationalism
9	Buddhism, Xenophobia
10	Crows' Behaviour, Crows' emotions
11	Robert Darnton, Archives
12	Dinesh Wadiwel, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson
13	Animal Traces



Citation on deposit:

Saha, J. (2024). A Historiography of Great Animal Massacres. In *Animals as Experiencing Entities: Theories and Historical Narratives* (163-177). Springer Nature Switzerland.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-46456-0_7

For final citation and metadata, visit Durham Research Online URL:

<https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/output/2395315>

Copyright statement: <https://www.springernature.com/gp/open-research/policies/accepted-manuscript-terms>