

## Conclusion

### Is Animal History Still Radical?

Erica Fudge's 2002 essay, "A Left-Handed Blow", stakes out a powerful claim for animal history as a radical practice. Juxtaposing the then emergent field with the tradition of social history from below, Fudge acknowledged the absence of an animal voice in the archive. Animal history could not replicate the humanistic approach of recovering the lived experiences of oppressed groups. But this was not a limit to its radicalism. Rather it made it more radical. Although there was an archival gap between humans and animals, animals were central to human history in unacknowledged and sometimes unsettling ways. Fudge argued that the very definition of what it meant to be human in different time periods and contexts was constituted through definitions of what humanity was not supposed to be: animal. She advocated for animal historians to side with the animals, to refuse to write histories from the position of the distinct and discrete human figure, to use the animal to disrupt and dislodge this figure, and to expose the history of barbarity at the heart of human relations with animals in the past and in the present.<sup>1</sup> It remains an elegant and persuasive piece of writing.

This posthumanist mode of writing animal history, which Fudge was outlining, was until recently the dominant conceptual framework. So much so that over the last decade or so articles reviewing the state of the field have recurrently made the accusation that animal history had been a text-focused game of discourse

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<sup>1</sup> Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow."

deconstruction that failed to adequately recognize the materiality of animals.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the more explicitly materialist approaches that have followed have built upon these antecedents while opening up the field, bringing new questions and agendas to the fore. Fudge's own historical practice has shifted. She has broken new ground in drawing both critically and creatively from contemporary animal science to explore bovine subjectivities in the past.<sup>3</sup> These innovations have invigorated animal history and have contributed to its move from peripheral and derided niche, to becoming an established and respectable area of historical scholarship. Joshua Specht has described this as animal history's "triumph".<sup>4</sup> This triumph raises questions about the continuing relevance of the radical imperatives so compellingly laid out in Fudge's essay. She called on animal historians to read the archive like the losers and forsake the arrogance of humanism. She argued, following Walter Benjamin, that it was animal history's ability to strike a blow from unexpected places that endowed it with radical force. Can animal historians still write like losers and strike unexpected blows now that the field has triumphed?

Part of the source of animal history's radicalism, at least in the approach outlined by Fudge, can be located in what I am calling its "politics of negation". By this I mean the analytical move, briefly described above, of refuting the historical stability of anthropocentric assumptions. This worked through revealing how the distinctions made between humans and animals were always historically contingent. For Fudge,

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<sup>2</sup> Swart, "'But Where's the Bloody Horse?"; Walker, "Animals and the Intimacy of History"; Nancy K. Turner, "The Materiality of Medieval Parchment: A Response to 'The Animal Turn,'" *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 71, no. 1 (2018): 39–67.

<sup>3</sup> Erica Fudge, "Milking Other Men's Beasts," *History and Theory* 52, no. 4 (2013): 13–28.

<sup>4</sup> Specht, "'Animal History after Its Triumph.'"

this was a radical strategy for denying anthropocentrism. It attempted to rob the figure of the human of its claims to transhistorical universality by emphasizing its fluidity and its contingency. Through this, all attempts to define humans as categorically separate and superior from other forms of sentient life could be undermined. Wherever a dividing line was drawn there was always another species who crossed it, or a human group who could not, or a historical moment when that line did not exist. It was in the negation of ahistorical definitions of humanity that the radical potential of animal history lay. It opened the possibility of new ways for humans to live with animals.

Through this analytical move animals were brought into the centre of analysis. Centring animals' presences in the past served to uncover the how they had implicitly supported essentializing definitions of the human.<sup>5</sup> Through this animal historians have exposed the racist, misogynistic and ableist assumptions of attempts to define what it meant to be human.<sup>6</sup> This centring of animals also allowed scholars to emphasize the value of animals in their own right, rather than solely in relation to humans. The radical imperative of negating the claims of post-Enlightenment Western humanism in animal history has not been lost with the emergence of new materialist approaches.<sup>7</sup> The figure of the human is still denied its splendid isolation from other lifeforms and has been

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<sup>5</sup> Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am"; Ritvo, "On the Animal Turn."

<sup>6</sup> Bourke, *What It Means to Be Human*.

<sup>7</sup> This is the form of humanism implicitly under-attack in Fudge's work, one that as Foucault notes is not reducible to the Enlightenment but harnessed to its narrative, see: Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, ed. Paul Rainbow, New edition (London: Penguin, 1991); This the humanism that is also the target of post-colonial theorists, see: Robert Young, "Colonialism and Humanism," in *Race, Culture and Difference*, ed. James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage, 1992), 143–52.

grounded in ecologies.<sup>8</sup> Its co-constitution with other species has been recovered.<sup>9</sup> Co-evolutionary continuities with nonhuman creatures have been acknowledged.<sup>10</sup> But the radical import of animal history has become less apparent. We have new agents, actants and entanglements that decentre humans in history. However, the articulation of the change animal history is seeking to engender in the discipline, and in society, is less clear.

Of course, the political context has changed. The discipline of history is confronting daunting challenges thrown up by our planetary ecological crisis; or, at least, by the wider recognition of the imminence of cataclysmic transformations and the resultant urgency of political action. In this context, the emergence of new materialist approaches in animal history is perhaps a symptom of a wider interdisciplinary cross-pollination between history and the hard sciences, particularly climate science and biology. Crucial to this has been the popularization of the claim that humans have become a geological-epoch-defining force. This claim is as much an historical one as it is a scientific one.<sup>11</sup> The grounds for identifying this new epoch, that has been dubbed by historians and scientists alike as the “Anthropocene”, are rooted in historical arguments and analysis. The concept is rests upon interpretations of the

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<sup>8</sup> Nash, “The Agency of Nature or the Nature of Agency?”

<sup>9</sup> Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*.

<sup>10</sup> Lorimer and Whatmore, “After the ‘King of Beasts.’”

<sup>11</sup> Libby Robin and Will Steffen, “History for the Anthropocene,” *History Compass* 5, no. 5 (August 1, 2007): 1694–1719; Will Steffen et al., “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369, no. 1938 (2011): 842–67.

surviving evidence of the past to establish periodization and trace change over time.<sup>12</sup> The world itself is read as the archive for this history. Atmospheric carbon dioxide, oceanic waste plastics, sea levels, tree rings, the remains of extinct species—these constitute the historical record. As a result of historians’ prominence in identifying the emergence of the Anthropocene, the parameters and scale of history as a discipline are more uncertain than ever. Humans are both more and less important in an Anthropocene history. As a species we are rendered world-makers and world-destroyers,<sup>13</sup> however as nations, cultures and individuals, we can recede from view.<sup>14</sup> Nonhuman animals are

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<sup>12</sup> P. David Polly et al., “History Matters: Ecometrics and Integrative Climate Change Biology,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 278, no. 1709 (2011): 1131–40; Robert Davis, “Inventing the Present: Historical Roots of the Anthropocene,” *Earth Sciences History* 30, no. 1 (December 1, 2011): 63–84; Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, “The Industrial Revolution in the Anthropocene,” *The Journal of Modern History* 84, no. 3 (September 2012): 679–96; Alison Bashford, “The Anthropocene Is Modern History: Reflections on Climate and Australian Deep Time,” *Australian Historical Studies* 44, no. 3 (2013): 341–49.

<sup>13</sup> Gisli Palsson et al., “Reconceptualizing the ‘Anthropos’ in the Anthropocene: Integrating the Social Sciences and Humanities in Global Environmental Change Research,” *Environmental Science & Policy*, Special Issue: Responding to the Challenges of our Unstable Earth (RESCUE), 28 (April 2013): 3–13; Gerda Roelvink, “Rethinking Species-Being in the Anthropocene,” *Rethinking Marxism* 25, no. 1 (2013): 52–69.

<sup>14</sup> For attempts to remake and resituate subjectivities and geographic frameworks within the Anthropocene, see: J.K. Gibson-Graham, “A Feminist Project of Belonging for the Anthropocene,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 18, no. 1 (2011): 1–21; Tom Cohen, “Polemos: ‘I Am at War with Myself’ or, Deconstruction™ in the Anthropocene?,” *Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (December 1, 2012): 239–57; Jamie Lorimer, “Multinatural Geographies for the Anthropocene,” *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 5 (2012): 593–612; Gene Ammarell, “Whither Southeast Asia in the Anthropocene?,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 04 (2014): 1005–7.

occasionally actors in these sweeping narratives, but more often they are merely archival evidence of the advent and ascendance of the Anthropocene.<sup>15</sup> It is towards resisting these totalizing, reductive histories while still arguing for meaningful environmental action, that animal history might recommit its radical praxis.<sup>16</sup>

### **Radical History and Biology**

I think that recommitting animal history to its radicalism in this new context necessitates a move away from the politics of negation. Its limitations are apparent in historian and postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty's utilization of negation to expose the difficulties that the Anthropocene poses for the humanities. In his "Four Theses" on Climate History he points out that at the very the point in history that humans have become an epochal force as a species, the species itself faces the possibility of its own extinction. In this context, the problem Chakrabarty poses is that of the emergence of subjectivity at the level of species. In the current crisis the human subject at the level of species is being materially constituted and made politically necessary through anthropogenic climate change. At the same time, this subject is so diffuse and intangible that it is impossible to realize and unimaginable to inhabit. He terms this dilemma "negative universal history". It is a dialectic that does not produce

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<sup>15</sup> Sam White, "Animals, Climate Change, and History," *Environmental History* 19, no. 2 (2014): 319–28.

<sup>16</sup> For a thoughtful consideration of how the language of the Anthropocene can be used to disempower local communities, see: Nayanika Mathur, "'It's a Conspiracy Theory and Climate Change': Of Beastly Encounters and Cervine Disappearances in Himalayan India," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 1 (2015): 87–111.

a viable subject.<sup>17</sup> His essay also resituates other emancipatory forms of politics in history writing in relation to our ecological emergency. Chakrabarty's negative dialectic leaves the struggles for liberation from the differentiations, inequalities and hierarchies within human societies subordinate to the imperative of the survival of the species. Animals are neither companions nor kin in this existential struggle. It is hard to find the praxis in this pessimism.<sup>18</sup>

The challenge that Chakrabarty foregrounds, of finding a viable subject for history in the Anthropocene, has been thoughtfully worked through by Julia Adeney Thomas as a problem of the tensions between history and biology as academic pursuits. In her article bringing the two together, she shows how scales of biological research operate on a range hard to reconcile with most forms of history writing, varying from the planetary to the cellular. Depending on the scale of the study, the human is conceptualized by biologists in profoundly different ways; from Anthropocene species-level actor, to porous loci for microbial multitudes. For Thomas, this problem of competing and incommensurate biological scales sets in relief the work that can be done by historians, which is to address problems of value. By encouraging an explicit assessment of what is valuable, Thomas is asking historians to consider which entities within the dazzling spectrum of biological life might be meaningfully incorporated in their narratives.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Baucom, "History 4°: Postcolonial Method and Anthropocene Time," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (2014): 123–42.

<sup>19</sup> Julia Adeney Thomas, "History and Biology in the Anthropocene: Problems of Scale, Problems of Value," *The American Historical Review* 119, no. 5 (2014): 1587–1607.

Through her discussion of scale and value, Thomas's provocative essay forces us to confront how engaging seriously with biology as a historian unsettles the working premises of the discipline. What constitutes an event in a geo-physical sense? How can historians narrate the past while accounting for the temporalities of molecular processes? Who are historical actors when a single large, multicellular organism is understood to be a permeable body inhabited by a panoply of bacterial lifeforms? Through Thomas, Chakrabarty's grappling with human subjectivity in the age of the Anthropocene is revealed as just one profound challenge among many, many more. In another sense, Thomas's essay suggests that Fudge's early textual deconstruction of the human now has its materialist parallel in the form of biological deconstructivism. In both, the human was a fiction made by other forms of life, but in the latter animals too are dissolved into messy, metabolic matter. Here, the politics of negation have surely reached the limit of their radical potential.

However, the novelty of the problems that Thomas raises can be overstated. Reframing Thomas's problems of biological scales and value as akin to the commonplace challenges of scope and narrative in historical research, and the problem begins to look like a rather familiar one to historians. At their heart, these are the problems of defining and selecting appropriate subjects with which to populate our histories. Research at the intersection of the humanities and the biological sciences can help in this process. As well as negating our understandings of historical subjects, engaging with biology can enable us to reconstitute them. Philosopher Samantha Frost's recent reconceptualization of humans as "biocultural creatures" is helpful in this regard. Her work entailed a close, detailed engagement with biology to develop a new theory of the human building on—as opposed to refuting—posthumanist negations. Refusing a fixed distinction between biology and culture, Frost argues that the two



inform and shape one another. At the same time, she avoids both biological determinism and cultural constructionism by highlighting the ways that cultural practices have biological effects and biological factors shape cultural practices.

Organisms are thus never outside of culture or biology, in Frost's conception. But neither are they determined by the interplay of culture and biology. They respond to their "biocultural habitats" and change; they materialize, to use her terms. Like Thomas, Frost pays close attention to the porous, unstable and composite biology of humans, but in her assessment the problem of scale is not indeterminate. The organism remains one meaningful frame of analysis; it retains a phenomenal and ontological "itness". She describes the bodies of organisms as "energy under constraints", focusing on how they live out their lifetimes constantly re-composing until they pass out of existence and decompose. As such, bodies are conceived of as inseparable from their environments, but this does not mean that they are reducible to their environments. The porous membranes of an organism's cells respond to their habitat, managing the constant traffic between body and environment. Over time, how the organism's prior generations responded to their habitats places a limit on how the organism can respond, while enabling these cellular activities to continue. By acknowledging these bodily temporalities as existing in what she calls "non-contemporaneity" with their environments, she is able to account for bodies as entities shaped and responding to biocultural habitats. Her conceptualization provides a foundation for keeping some historical narratives at the scale of individual creatures' bodies.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Frost's theoretical work offers a materialist foundation to move beyond the politics of negation by returning humans and animals to our narratives as biocultural creatures. This is a move that radical historians of are familiar with. It is akin to the move that Gayatri Spivak identified when she interrogated the failings of the early essays of the Subaltern Studies collective. As she concluded, this "double move" of *both* deconstructing received historical texts *and* reconstructing subaltern subjectivities was the animating dynamic of the collective, even while she did not believe that the tension between the two could be resolved.<sup>21</sup> This reoccurring strategy has perhaps been most eloquently addressed by the historian of sexuality Jeffery Weeks, writing in context of the uncertainties of the AIDS pandemic and the multiple political crises of the late 1980s. Meditating on the political limitations of social constructionist approaches to sexual identities, even while he drew inspiration from them, Weeks argued that these identifications were "historically contingent but politically essential". He described them as "necessary fictions".<sup>22</sup>

Aligning Frost's theory of the human with this radical historiographic manoeuvre, we might view animals, including humans, as being "necessary fictions" too. By exploring the porosity and multiplicity of bodies as biological entities, Frost provides a justification for conceiving of animals as responsive bodies with subjective experiences and historical effects. In other words, while being an unavoidably incomplete picture, animals are nevertheless biologically plausible fictions for historians—snapshots of an organism that is changing as it moves through time. I admit, Frost's work pushes humanities scholars towards engaging with a range of biological

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<sup>21</sup> Spivak, "Subaltern Studies"; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"; Schwarz, "Subaltern Histories."

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, "Invented Moralities," *History Workshop*, no. 32 (1991): 151–66.

entities that constitute bodies and foregrounds the permeability of bodies as matter in flux. Nevertheless, that myriad biological processes converge to produce responsive animal bodies in particular temporalities and at certain scales provides us with some heuristic thresholds for selectively narrowing the field of our studies to the bodies of large multicellular organisms—not at the permanent exclusion of other scales, but in order to address particular historical questions. When read with Spivak and Weeks, the necessity of these fictions can be treated by radical historians as a political question. If our focus is informed by an imperative to centre marginalized figures in our histories, even while we remained attuned to the historically contingent construction of those very same figures, who do we include? To borrow an apt phrase from Anna Tsing, Frost and Weeks point animal historians towards practicing the “arts of inclusion”; the careful politics of expanding the cast of characters we include in our historical narratives.<sup>23</sup>

We might even turn our focus on animals on its head. Frost’s work, when mobilized in aid of a radical animal history, allows us to recognize that habitats are immanent, imbricated, and implicated in the ongoing reproduction of organisms through time. In other words, the value of including animals as historical subjects in our narratives is that they act as synecdoche for entire, complex biocultural systems. An elephant is valuable as an animal and, as such, valuable as an intrinsic part of the world that they were made through and that they contribute to remaking. This is not a politics of negation, far from it. It is a recognition of the futures made possible by the survival of species.

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<sup>23</sup> Anna Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion, or How to Love a Mushroom,” *Manoa* 22, no. 2 (2010): 191–203.

## Against Capitalism and Colonialism

So far I have made the case for the value of keeping animals as historical actors in our narratives as a radical response to the imperative to constitute meaningful subjects in times of ecological crisis. But value is a slippery notion, one which can itself be historicized. How we might value animals in our histories and how animals were valued in the past are not likely to be coincident with one another. Animals were valued in early- and pre-modern eras, as well as in decolonial indigenous ontologies, in ways irreducible to the critical frameworks of posthumanist scholars and contemporary biologists.<sup>24</sup> It is also unlikely that these valuations will be aligned to dominant value-systems in the present. In other words, making a claim about the value of understanding the importance of animals as biocultural creatures with rich subjective worlds is not only making a positive case, it is arguing *against* competing modes of valuation. Helpful in thinking this through is David Graeber's anthropology of value.

Graeber makes a distinction between "values", meaning the subjective worth, utility and significance attributed to things and practices within particular social arrangements and imaginaries, and "value", the monetary, exchange value of goods or services in the form of a commodity under capitalism.<sup>25</sup> He does not draw this distinction to suggest a clear separation between them. Values inform value, but the latter, being a more monolithic category with the power of capital behind it, has a

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<sup>24</sup> Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006); Juanita Sundberg, "Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies," *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (2014): 33–47; Zoe Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment and Epistemology*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 241–54.

<sup>25</sup> Graeber, "It Is Value That Brings Universes into Being."

tendency towards hollowing-out and devouring the former. These insights echo the critiques of social scientists questioning the undifferentiated human figure held responsible for our ecological crisis, arguing instead that capital is the generative force that has ushered in a new epoch; that of the Capitalocene.<sup>26</sup> Key exponent of this position, Jason Moore, shares with new materialist animal historians an understanding of planetary life as constituting a web of interdependency. In the Capitalocene, Moore argues, this web of life is “cheapened”. This cheapening, he explains, is at once monetary, in that it entails reducing the costs to capitalists, and ethico-political, in that it engenders a degrading of social worth.<sup>27</sup> Set against this analysis and the political import of the case animal historians often make for valuing animals as complex historical actors in their own right emerges in relief. It is a claim that implicitly runs against a reduction of animal life into exchange value. As such, animal history’s radicalism might be bolstered through a stronger alignment with the history of capitalism.<sup>28</sup>

The history of capitalism is a field that has had a considerable resurgence in recent years, although predominantly in north American history. It is an approach that

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<sup>26</sup> Bruno Latour et al., “Anthropologists Are Talking – About Capitalism, Ecology, and Apocalypse,” *Ethnos* 83, no. 3 (May 27, 2018): 587–606.

<sup>27</sup> Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 594–630; Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene Part II: Accumulation by Appropriation and the Centrality of Unpaid Work/Energy,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, no. 2 (February 23, 2018): 237–79.

<sup>28</sup> Shukin, *Animal Capital*; Barua, “Lively Commodities and Encounter Value”; Maan Barua, “Nonhuman Labour, Encounter Value, Spectacular Accumulation: The Geographies of a Lively Commodity,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42, no. 2 (2017): 274–88.

brings together various fields, such as labour history, business history, and the history of consumption, into a single frame and names capitalism itself as a subject to be studied. As such, it is a syncretic field ridden with imprecision but one that has nevertheless facilitated a flourishing of specific studies within sub-fields.<sup>29</sup> Its principle development within historiography on the United States, branching out into commodity specific global studies, is undergoing an expansion into Asian history—although at the time of writing this remains very much nascent.<sup>30</sup> The global framing of some histories of capitalism share a similar scalar ambition to studies of the emergence of the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene. These are big histories, often with sweeping timeframes. Animal historians have intervened at this level, as Sam White’s global study of pigs does through deploying an evolutionary approach,<sup>31</sup> but this grand geographic and temporal scope undercuts the value most animal histories place on finding space in their work for animals’ wilful actions and subjective experiences. What might be more useful in the history of capitalism for animal historians is the de-familiarization of capitalism itself. Rather than taken as a given backdrop for animal history, animal history might be part of excavating the making, spread, tensions and

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<sup>29</sup> Beckert et al., “Interchange.”

<sup>30</sup> Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Penguin Random House USA, 2015); Andrew B. Liu, “Incense and Industry: Labour and Capital in the Tea Districts of Huizhou, China,” *Past & Present* 230, no. 1 (2016): 161–95; Liu, “Production, Circulation, and Accumulation”; Debjani Bhattacharyya, “Provincializing the History of Speculation from Colonial South Asia,” *History Compass* 17, no. 1 (2019); Tagliacozzo, “Capitalism’s Missing Link.”

<sup>31</sup> White, “From Globalized Pig Breeds to Capitalist Pigs.”

maintenance of capitalism in the past.<sup>32</sup> The radicalism of animal history can be found in its utility in resisting and denaturalizing the reduction of sentient creatures to commodities.

As Nicola Shukin has shown, animals rendered into commodities and valorised as capital can present in our sources as naturally occurring entities. This givenness of animals masks the material and ideological work entailed in this capitalist rendering.<sup>33</sup> There are histories here to be reconstructed. Her use of the verb “render” to describe the process through which animals become capital is resonant with Frost’s insistence on thinking of the “culture” in her neologism “bioculture” as a verb—to culture rather than *a* culture.<sup>34</sup> In both conceptions, animals are in a constant process of iterated becoming. They are continually being reproduced. The difference between their conceptions lies in the forces that they identify as moulding this reproduction. As we have seen, for Frost these forces were the biocultural habitats within which organisms were emergent. For Shukin, the forces were more specifically the biopolitical logics of settler-colonial capital accumulation in Canada. While Frost’s concept of the biocultural is capacious enough to incorporate capitalism as a force, I find it helpful to keep the two analytically discreet so as to be able to isolate the transformative effects of capitalism. Doing so enables us to build on Graeber and Moore to conceptualize the commoditization of animals as the exploitation of biocultural habitats. Framed this way,

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<sup>32</sup> This has been done in animal histories of meat production, see: Joshua Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 1–17.

<sup>33</sup> Shukin, *Animal Capital*.

<sup>34</sup> Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, 4.

the intersection of animal history and the history of capitalism is a space to excavate the simultaneous cultivation and exploitation of biocultural creatures.

But the “values” side of Graeber’s heuristic division between values and value also needs attending to. To reiterate, this is the subjective worth, utility and significance attributed to animals within historically contingent social arrangements and imaginaries. In the context of British colonialism these too were at odds with how a radical animal history values animals in the past. Central to this divergence is the place of animals in colonial racism. There can be few studies at the intersection of animal and imperial history that do not touch on how nonhuman creatures were implicated in the construction of racist hierarchies, if indeed there are any at all. In the thirty-three years between Harriet Ritvo’s *Animal Estate*, and Antionette Burton and Renisa Marwani’s collection of essays, *Animalia*, the importance of animals to the racist thinking behind, and practice of, modern imperialism continues to be excavated by historians.<sup>35</sup> However, the radical historian needs to go further than critiquing the role of the animal in constructing racial categories. As important as this deconstructionist analysis remains, as a methodological tool at the disposal of the animal historian it is both insufficient and, if deployed in isolation, counterproductive.

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has persuasively argued with reference to antiblackness, that simply critiquing the exclusionary animalization of black people reinscribes a universalizing conception of liberal humanism. The critique in effect holds liberal humanism up against its own standards. In Jackson’s assessment, this has led posthumanists to “misdiagnose the problem of Western globalizing humanism” by

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<sup>35</sup> Ritvo, *Animal Estate*; Antoinette Burton and Renisa Marwani, eds., *Animalia: An Anti-Colonial Bestiary for Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).



narrowing it to a problem of rectifying unjust divisions. This comes at the expense of engaging with the multiple modes of violence that sustain it through ongoing colonialism. In contrast, her work shows that neither blackness nor animality were ever fixed in themselves or in their relation to one another. Jackson instead emphasizes their material and ideological plasticity. She counters this lurking universalism in posthumanist scholarship through the texts of black writers who were not seeking to expunge the animal to assert their humanity, but to fundamentally transform conceptions of the human in their entirety.<sup>36</sup>

In animal histories of colonial Asia, the lop-sidedness of the research agenda resonates with Jackson's critique. In contrast to the ubiquity of studies that deconstruct imperial discourses, the conceptions and practices of colonized populations have mostly been overlooked.<sup>37</sup> But animals and notions of animality were not only deployed to bolster imperial hierarchies, they were the very terrain for contestations. As such, postcolonial critique in animal history cannot stop with imperial texts. As postcolonial historians of South Asia have long argued, colonial rule did not simply operate as a restrictive force on the colonized population it restructured the parameters for subjectivization; it shaped identities and cultures.<sup>38</sup> As a result, analysis needs to be

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<sup>36</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> For some exceptions to this, see: Mishra, "Cattle, Dearth, and the Colonial State"; Kumar, "Satyagraha and the Place of the Animal"; Powell, "People in Peril, Environments at Risk"; Adcock, "Preserving and Improving the Breeds"; Roy, "White Ants, Empire, and Entomo-Politics in South Asia."

<sup>38</sup> For some influential, if perhaps overstated, examples of this argument, see: Scott, "Colonial Governmentality"; Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*; for a more nuanced analysis focussed on Myanmar itself, see: Turner, *Saving Buddhism*.

carried through to vernacular nationalist discourses and practices. In other words, the radical animal historian must do more than negate the animalization of imperial racial differentiations. They must excavate the novel, syncretic modes of being with and understanding animals that emerged through colonial modernity. Through this, animal historians can denaturalize the worlds that colonialism made.<sup>39</sup>

The politics of negation are necessary but insufficient for animal history to remain radical. The explosion of histories engaging with the ecological crisis have led to a thoroughgoing critique of the human as *the* subject of history. As a result, the radicalism of posthumanist deconstructions of anthropocentric assumptions no longer has the force it once had. Worse still, as Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd and Zakiyyah Jackson have both argued, academic posthumanism has all too easily been co-opted into colonial logics.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the animal itself has been reduced to either data in the history of the Anthropocene or reframed as a porous, unstable, assemblage in histories informed by the biological sciences. In these new circumstances, as well as negating humanism through a focus on the nonhuman, animal historians have an imperative to find subjects and actors who can be “necessary fictions” for radical politics. The animal remains important in this, but not as a destabilizing spectre haunting humanistic assumptions. The animal can be a radical subject through our recognition that it represents more than just the organism itself. The animal is a synecdoche for the environments that they emerge from and are reproduced within. To include animals in our histories is to value the ecologies that make possible their continued existence in the world. But lest this claim become an empty gesture towards

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<sup>39</sup> Roy, “Nonhuman Empires.”

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, “Animal”; Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene.”

a liberal, inclusive environmental politics, it is a radical position that needs to be attenuated by a critique of the commoditization of life and marginalization of human populations.

### **Interspecies Vulnerabilities in Myanmar**

These are not idle or idealist concerns. Two examples from contemporary Myanmar show the stakes involved in these radical histories for the present: the precarious fate of the country's working elephants; and the recent campaigns against the Muslim owners of slaughterhouses. Although not the inevitable result of colonial-era practices and ideas, the histories traced through this book are readily apparent in both cases. As I have shown, it was during the colonial period, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century, that elephants came to be commoditized and the population of wild elephants fell below the numbers of working elephants. This great mobilization of elephant power in the colony was impressed into the timber industry and it was reliant upon the labour of Burmese *oozies*. During this same period, the expansion of the rice frontier in the delta resulted in the peasantry's growing use of cattle. Plough oxen in particular became vital co-workers, whose rising monetary value combined with their bodily vulnerabilities to add to cultivators' economic precarity. In this fraught political ecology, Indian cattle and cattle-herders were framed by the colonial state and some anticolonial nationalists as a threat. During the interwar years, Indian butchers were othered in anticolonial nationalist discourses and cattle-herders became targets for xenophobic popular violence. These differing interspecies histories, that entangled subaltern colonized peoples with particular animals, speak directly to Myanmar's present.

Most working elephants in Myanmar have been state property ever since the timber industry was nationalized after independence. By 2016 this amounted to roughly three-thousand individuals directly employed by the Myanmar Timber Enterprise, a government-owned outfit. When smaller private owners are added to the picture, the total number of working elephants in the country comes to an estimated figure of five-and-a-half-thousand, a number higher than the extant wild population.<sup>41</sup> These elephants mostly worked in logging. However, in response to high rates of deforestation in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, when Myanmar was losing an estimated 1.7% of its forest cover annually from 2005 to 2015, logging was stopped in the Bago Yoma forests in 2016.<sup>42</sup> Even before these restrictions were imposed on logging, the sustainability of this captive population was insecure. Faster reproductive aging among working elephants and high rates of calf mortality have meant that it has not been possible to replace workers through reproduction from within the captive

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<sup>41</sup> Zar Zar Win Thein and Zhou Jianhua, “Development of Elephant Conservation Based Tourism after Implementation of Logging Ban Policy in Myanmar,” *International Journal of Sciences* 7, no. 05 (2018): 87–96; Khyne U. Mar, “Box B2: Human–Elephant Interactions in Semi-Captive Asian Elephants of Myanmar,” in *Zoo Animal Learning and Training* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2020), 187–90.

<sup>42</sup> Gabrielle Kissinger, “Background Report for Identifying the Drivers of Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Myanmar” (UN-REDD Programme, February 8, 2017).

herds,<sup>43</sup> resulting in ongoing capture from shrinking wild populations.<sup>44</sup> Now, with elephants and their *oozies* surplus to requirements, their future is unclear.

No longer contributing to timber extraction, several hundred of the Myanmar Timber Enterprise's elephants have been rapidly redeployed as entertainers. The state attempted to transform their elephant camps into ecotourist destinations. The drivers for this were numerous. Aside from the continuing costs of their upkeep and the salaries of their *oozies*, these schemes potentially offer some protection from poaching.<sup>45</sup> They also reduce incidences of human-elephant conflict caused by the release of elephants back into the forests. And they addressed the metabolism of male working elephants, who without the physical exertion of the labour regime have reportedly gained weight and become less docile as a result of having heightened libidos.<sup>46</sup> This pivot to conservation based tourism as the economic foundation for keeping the captive populations of elephants going in the country is fragile, at best. It was a shift dependent upon a wider political landscape of relative stability and openness that the Covid-19 pandemic (still far from abating as I write) and a new military coup (unfolding as I write) have undermined. The tensions of elephants' commodity status are at the heart

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<sup>43</sup> Mumby et al., "Elephants Born in the High Stress Season Have Faster Reproductive Ageing"; Jennie A. H. Crawley et al., "Taming Age Mortality in Semi-Captive Asian Elephants," *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 1889 (2020): 1–8.

<sup>44</sup> Capture itself likely impacts upon reproduction, see: Mirkka Lahdenperä et al., "Capture from the Wild Has Long-Term Costs on Reproductive Success in Asian Elephants," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 286, no. 1912 (2019): 20191584.

<sup>45</sup> Although, the emerging evidence does not support this: Christie Sampson et al., "New elephant crisis in Asia—Early warning signs from Myanmar", *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 3 (2018): e0194113.

<sup>46</sup> Thein and Jianhua, "Development of Elephant Conservation Based Tourism."

of this vulnerability. No longer valuable for their labour power, their costs have to be recovered through mobilizing their spectacular, encounter value; they have to be made visible, lively representatives of their endangered species for the consumption of ecotourists.<sup>47</sup> But this shift is not easily realized—the labour requirements and political economy of timber extraction and ecotourism are not commensurate.

But valuing the elephants as organisms first produces alternatives. Writing on Thailand's captive elephant population in 2020, the conservation behaviourist Liv Baker and anthropologist Rebecca Winkler have advocated for a rewilding of captive elephants. For them the captive population opens the possibility of new modes of conservation. From this basis, elephants might be supported in forming new social bonds, navigating new terrains, and integrating back into the wild populations. Crucially, they emphasize the importance of Karen mahouts (*oozies* in Burmese) playing critical roles in effecting these transitions.<sup>48</sup> Commentating on their proposals, another anthropologist, Nicolas Lainé, notes that the role they grant to mahouts resides within an ethnocentric idiom of “well-being”, arguing that grounding the conceptions of the project within Karen vernaculars and cosmologies instead may prove essential to its success.<sup>49</sup> In another set of commentaries, Phyllis Lee, a behavioural ecologist, and Keith Lindsay, a conservation biologist, both of whom have extensive experience in elephant conservation, warn of near intractable limits to such a project. They point to both the limited forest for rewilded elephants to return to and the need for significant

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<sup>47</sup> Barua, “Lively Commodities and Encounter Value”; Barua, “Nonhuman Labour, Encounter Value, Spectacular Accumulation.”

<sup>48</sup> Liv Baker and Rebecca Winkler, “Asian Elephant Rescue, Rehabilitation and Rewilding,” *Animal Sentience* 5, no. 28 (2020): 1–20.

<sup>49</sup> Nicolas Lainé, “Anthropology and Conservation,” *Animal Sentience* 5, no. 28 (2020): 1–3.

changes in the legislative landscape to provide the necessary protections and support for the elephants and the mahouts.<sup>50</sup> In my reading, the critiques of Lainé, Lee and Lindsay only underscore the understated radicalism of the project Baker and Winkler envision.

Valuing the elephant as an organism cascades into a series of necessary further recognitions of valuable actors. Most prominently among these are *oozies*. Recent research on Myanmar's working elephant populations has shown the centrality of *oozies* as caregivers. Their labour is key to the creatures' health.<sup>51</sup> Lainé's critique pushes this acknowledgement towards becoming a decolonizing act that provincializes European knowledge. These vernacular understandings also become vital in mediating wider communities, particularly in managing human-elephant conflict. This has two sides to it, communities of elephants and communities of humans. The elephants require managing as psychologically complex social creatures with particular ecological needs, rather than as mechanistic-instinctual beings that require governing through the infliction of pain and instilling fear.<sup>52</sup> On the other side, Burmese peasant communities' concerns over elephants are also highly contingent on cultivation habits and related seasonal vulnerabilities, but are fundamentally informed by the perceived threats posed

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<sup>50</sup> Phyllis Lee and W. Keith Lindsay, "A 'Halfway House' for Improving Captive Welfare," *Animal Sentience* 5, no. 28 (2020): 1–4.

<sup>51</sup> Mumby, "Mahout Perspectives on Asian Elephants and Their Living Conditions."

<sup>52</sup> Hannah S. Mumby and Joshua M. Plotnik, "Taking the Elephants' Perspective: Remembering Elephant Behavior, Cognition and Ecology in Human-Elephant Conflict Mitigation," *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 6 (2018).

by elephants to their modes of subsistence.<sup>53</sup> Rather than pitting these needs against one another, elephant rewilding might be conceived as necessitating poverty alleviation, pointing to the governmental changes that Lee and Lindsay note as lacking. In other words, the project of rewilding working elephants can be read as a radical political platform for wider social justice. And elephants and humans would not be the only beneficiaries of this egalitarian ecological demand. Elephants are eco-system engineers spreading seeds and producing environments for smaller organisms to thrive. In Myanmar, this includes species of frogs. The forest paths that elephants forge in their migrations provide protected environments for frogs' eggs to spawn, mature and hatch away from predators.<sup>54</sup> More widely, the rewilding of megafauna contributes to mitigating the effects of anthropogenic climate change.<sup>55</sup> These are the biocultural futures that de-commoditizing elephants can foster.

The problems of xenophobic violence directed towards Muslim-owned slaughterhouses in Myanmar is of a different order. These are interspecies associations deployed to marginalize a minority population rather than foster an egalitarian political platform. Concerns about cow slaughter were a common trope among the everyday expressions of Islamophobic hate that circulated in Myanmar more openly in the 2010s. This followed the expansion of the public sphere in the country following the military junta's (temporary, it seems) handover of power to civilian authorities through

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<sup>53</sup> Christie Sampson et al., "Perception of Human–Elephant Conflict and Conservation Attitudes of Affected Communities in Myanmar.," *Tropical Conservation Science* 12 (2019): 1–17.

<sup>54</sup> Steven G. Platt et al., "Water-Filled Asian Elephant Tracks Serve as Breeding Sites for Anurans in Myanmar," *Mammalia* 83, no. 3 (2019): 287–89.

<sup>55</sup> Joris P.G.M. Cromsigt, "Trophic rewilding as a climate change mitigation strategy?" *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 373, no. 1761 (2018): 20170440.



democratic processes under a new constitution that reserved considerable authority to the military. This new space was attended by a marked rise in populist xenophobia against Muslims in the country, attendant with a particular disdain for those ascribed with “Indian” physical characteristics—most markedly, this was hate that was directed towards Rohingya peoples.

The local ethnographic work of Matt Schissler, Matthew Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi collecting Buddhist Burmese people’s fears of Muslims during this time noted the frequency of references to cow butchery. The focus on slaughter not only distinguished Buddhist practice from Islam, even for beef-eating Buddhists, it also fostered an understanding of Muslims as having an innate capacity for violence.<sup>56</sup> The ultra-nationalist Buddhist monk, U Wirathu, propagated this belief in his monk-led beef-eating prohibition campaign—itsself part of a wider attempt at politicizing everyday acts through a racially and religiously exclusive Burmese nationalism. This rhetoric coincided with his far-right MaBaTha movement (the popular acronym for the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) orchestrating an effective boycott of Muslim-owned slaughterhouses by purchasing slaughterhouse licences in bulk, a campaign enabled by the government who sold them to MaBaTha applicants at discounted rates to deprive longstanding Muslim businesses of their income.<sup>57</sup> As Elliot Prasse-Freeman has noted, this toxic politicization of the prosaic contributed to the

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<sup>56</sup> Matt Schissler, Matthew J. Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Reconciling Contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim Violence, Narrative Making and Memory in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 381.

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin Schonthal and Matthew J. Walton, “The (New) Buddhist Nationalisms? Symmetries and Specificities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 17, no. 1 (2016): 89.

climate of hostility that enabled the sustained violence levelled against Rohingya peoples that reached a grim peak in 2017.<sup>58</sup>

The contrast between elephants, whose lives might provide a platform for wider ecological and social justice, and cows, whose deaths are mobilized to marginalize Muslim populations, is stark. Valuing animals in and of themselves cannot alone provide a coherent framework for navigating these problems. A more precise radical position needs to be articulated. I hope my animal history of colonial Myanmar provides a genealogy for such a radical critique. Through empire animals were routinely reduced to their commodity status and they were deployed in the service of exclusionary politics. These are histories of the present.<sup>59</sup> But by excavating these historical processes for what they were—contingent, incomplete, and contested—the past can become a position through which alternative futures can be imagined.

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<sup>58</sup> Elliott Prasse-Freeman, “The Rohingya Crisis,” *Anthropology Today* 33, no. 6 (2017): 1–2.

<sup>59</sup> For a neat summary of both “history of the present” and “genealogies” in Foucault’s work as modes of “re-valuing the value of contemporary phenomena”, see: David Garland, “What Is a ‘History of the Present’? On Foucault’s Genealogies and Their Critical Preconditions,” *Punishment & Society* 16, no. 4 (2014): 365–84.