

Series: 'Why Animal Studies?' with Jonathan L. Clark

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Welcome to our series, 'Why Animal Studies?' The aim of the series is to have scholars across the ideological spectrum (i.e., human-animal studies, critical animal studies, anthrozoology) reflect on why they locate their scholarship in the field. We will be featuring pieces from PhD students, established and early career scholars as well as established scholars from other areas who are increasingly interested, and working, in the field. If you would like to contribute to the series please email [**nik.taylor@flinders.edu.au**](mailto:nik.taylor@flinders.edu.au)

In this thought-provoking piece Jonathan asks us to consider the choices we make about the kinds of animals we study and cautions that anthropocentric motivations might lead us to focus on some while excluding others.

From Jonathan – Which Animals Do We Study?

When you say you do “Animal Studies,” which animals do you have in mind? If a recent study by zoologist Daniel Lunney is any indication, “mammal” is what most of us mean by “animal.”^[1] In July 2013, Lunney attended the Australian Animal Studies Group’s fifth biennial conference. As he read through the program, Lunney was struck by the lack of biodiversity in the abstracts. Most of the animals who had caught the assembled scholars’ attention were fellow mammals, the animals most like us. Lunney couldn’t help but wonder why a group that claims to study animals focuses on such a small slice of the animal kingdom.

In light of our apparent mammal-centrism, perhaps it’s time to rename our field. “Mammal Studies” has a nice ring to it, though “Vertebrate Studies”

may be more accurate. Or, to underscore the residual anthropocentrism at work, we could go with the unwieldy but perhaps even more accurate title, “Those Animals Who Are Most Like Who I Take Myself To Be Studies.” I welcome further suggestions.

Particularly in its “critical” formulation, Animal Studies is supposed to be about challenging anthropocentrism. But what if, in doing so, we’re unwittingly placing mammals, vertebrates, or some other preferred taxon at the center of the moral universe? Might we be challenging one moral hierarchy only to install another in its place?

If you’re like me, you study animals not only because you find them interesting but also because you think they’re worthy of moral consideration. Indeed, for me ethics and scholarship go hand-in-hand; I see scholarly attention as a form of moral consideration. In light of this, it matters which animals I study. (It also matters that I study *animals*, as opposed to, say, plants, microbes, ecosystems, or rocks, but I’ll leave that issue for another day.) My choices are moral, not just analytical. I’m not merely choosing a topic; I’m also implicitly asserting that the animals I study are worthy of careful, thoughtful attention.

So what about the animals we don’t study? What are we saying about them? Of course, we can’t study everything. Given our limited time and energy, we have to make choices, and just because you haven’t studied earthworms or aphids doesn’t mean you think they’re unworthy of moral consideration. Only the most uncharitable critic would suggest that. Yet it’s still worth reflecting on your choices. Why have you studied the particular animals you have? Why haven’t you studied other animals? Have you been dividing the animal kingdom into those who are worthy of your attention and those who (or that) aren’t? If so, which criterion or criteria have you been using to make the cut?

At its best, our scholarship moves animals out of people's ethical blindspot and into their line of vision. But we scholars have our blindspots, too. We focus on some animals but not others. Or we forget that animals are not the only organisms who are worth thinking about. And we forget that living things, in whatever form, may not be the only things that are worthy of moral consideration.

So what should we do about this? In an essay titled "Thinking About Earthworms," David Quammen advocated a kind of "stubborn mental contrariety," exemplified, he argued, by Charles Darwin's research on these segmented soil dwellers.^[2] Quammen also offered advice for honing this indispensable skill. "Just take a day or an hour each month to think carefully about something that nobody else deems worthy of contemplation," he advised. "Pick a subject so perversely obscure that it can't help but have neglected significance."

Perhaps a desire for political relevance has led our field to focus on the kinds of animals that have captured the attention of animal advocates. Of course, there's nothing wrong with weighing in on the issues of the day, and I'm not suggesting that we abandon this kind of work. But I am advocating another, complementary way of doing Animal Studies. In addition to focusing on animals who have already achieved some degree of ethical standing, and about whom large numbers of people are already thinking, we should also focus on what Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren have called the "unloved others," the animals our culture tells us to ignore.^[3] We should try to make these animals matter, both to ourselves and to our readers.

So how will you know when you've achieved a suitable degree of contrariety? Over the years, I've come up with a pretty good test. If your colleagues give you a puzzled look when you tell them what you plan to study, you're probably on the right track. And if you start to feel a slight tinge of

embarrassment when thinking about your proposed topic, and you begin wondering whether you'll be taken seriously as a scholar if you continue to take this topic seriously, then you've probably found something worth studying. Unfortunately, there's just no way around it: you have to be willing to be a nonconformist in order to challenge the social norms that tell us who matters and who does not.

Jonathan L. Clark is Associate Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Department of Anthropology & Sociology at Ursinus College, in Collegeville, Pennsylvania. He also serves as a review editor for Society & Animals. Jonathan's research is situated at the intersection of two interdisciplinary fields: Animal Studies and the Environmental Humanities. His most recent article, "Uncharismatic Invasives," was published in the journal Environmental Humanities. Follow him @jonlclark or email him at jclark@ursinus.edu.

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