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Man, Animal, Other: The intersections of Racism, Speciesism and Problematic Recognition within Indigenous Australia

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Abstract: This paper explores the parallels between racism and speciesism, to argue that the colonial ‘othering’ and subjugation of Indigenous Australians reflects the domestication of farmed animals.

Keywords: Aboriginal history; animal rights; racism; speciesism

*“This story’s right, this story’s true
I would not tell lies to you
Like the promises they did not keep
And how they fenced us in like sheep
Said to us, ‘come, take our hand’
Set us up on mission land
Taught us to read, to write and pray
Then they took the children away
The children away
Snatched from their mother’s breast
Said, ‘this is for the best’
Took them away”
(Roach 1990)*

Played alongside archival footage of Indigenous Australians of the Stolen Generations, it is these devastating lyrics of Archie Roach’s ‘Took The Children Away’ that introduce *Bringing Them Home*, a 1997 documentary by the Australian Human Rights Commission about the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (1995 – 1997). The song, which found mainstream success upon its release in 1990, can also be credited for raising public awareness of the devastating social impacts that Indigenous Australians of the Stolen Generations endured as a result of past government policies. An aspect of the song that both public and scholarly discourse has failed to appreciate, however, is the parallels it draws between the colonial suffering of Indigenous Australians and domesticated animals. This pattern of animal-human metaphor is richly represented within Indigenous art and scholarly works, though academia remains silent in observation.



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This essay will demonstrate that the colonial othering and subjugation of Indigenous Australians reflects the domestication of farmed animals. Drawing on primary evidence from Indigenous Australians (in the form of memoir, autobiography, interview, poetry, and song), as well as academic literature from the fields of animal rights and indigenous studies, this essay will explore the parallels of racism and speciesism. Ultimately, a cross-species understanding of colonial suffering will be reached, and the implications of this deliberated in relation to the problematic recognition of both indigenous rights and animal rights.

Animal analogies in the Indigenous experience

In her 2014 autobiography, Wiradjuri woman Christine Green (2014, pp. 12-18) recounts her childhood as a State Ward as part of the Stolen Generations, describing how she was shipped between foster homes “like cattle, branded and transported. . . given no explanation or asked how we felt”, and “physically, mentally and emotionally abused”, enduring “starvation, deprivation and isolation . . . like a pair of animals”. Analogies like these are not uncommon within the personal accounts of Indigenous people of this era. In her exploration of Indigenous memory of the Stolen Generations, Attwood (2001, p. 186) quotes Tucker recalling that she “often wondered how many other [Aboriginal] children were taken like that, just like animals”. Tellingly, this pattern of animal analogy is passed through the generations. In 1988, when the Australian Bicentennial Authority produced a memento coin for all school students to commemorate the Bicentennial year, brothers Kali and Malu Belleair (13 and 15 at the time), stood up to an assembly of 800 predominantly white students at Sydney’s Vaucluse High School to reject their medals, saying “we cannot accept a medal that celebrates what has happened to our families . . . they were tortured, massacred and herded like animals onto reserves” (Hewett 1988).

Crucial to understand here is the recurrent theme of ownership - an experience Indigenous Australians felt they shared with domestic animals. This is poignantly displayed in the introduction to the 1993 memoir of Baakkanji elder, Evelyn Crawford. In *Over My Tracks*, Evelyn Crawford recounts her search for proof of her birth. Returning to Rossmore, the station just outside of Burke on which she was born, Crawford (1993, p. ix-xi) recalls finding a small book in the room that had been the station office:

“And written on one page it had:

Born, to station, calves - 9
lambs - 28
foals - 2

Born, to Hannah Black and Jack Mallyer, one girl baby.

We was on the station ledger, like we was their stock!

My date of birth was registered there, and not any place else, ‘cos I was a station kid. Back in those days Aboriginal babies didn’t have to be registered. We weren’t citizens so we was nobody.”

The implication is clear: not only did white Australia feel entitled to claim ownership of Indigenous

Australians as if they were animals, Indigenous Australians felt they *were* animals. The Certificate of Exemption is a primary example of this ownership. A document of the government's assimilation policy commonly held by Indigenous Australians from the 1940s onward, a Certificate of Exemption gave its recipient citizenship rights they did not otherwise possess, such as the right to vote, attend school, enter hotels, and be exempted from the restrictions of state protection laws. Milton (2014) describes the certificates as a "licence to live in a white man's world", as, of course, the basic rights the certificates afforded were already enjoyed by all non-indigenous Australians, making the certificate a racist profiling tool. This was oppression Indigenous Australians evidently felt deeply, as they nicknamed the certificates "dog tags". Similarly, Green (2014, p. 7) recalls how at age six she was given a number and "called by that number" until the age of eighteen. Reminiscent of the numbering and branding of farmed animals, this ultimate form of objectification represents the state's "ownership" of its wards, and mirrors the ownership which domesticated animals are born into.

Returning to Archie Roach's 'Took The Children Away', the parallels between the experiences of animals and the Indigenous Australians of the Stolen Generations is striking. While the sheep analogy is clear, it is not as crucial as the line "snatched from their mother's breast" (Roach 1990). Farmed cows are generally taken away from their mothers between three and 24 hours after birth so that the milk of the lactating cows can be taken to enter the food market, leaving the calves to be raised on artificial formula, separated from family, to either be killed for veal (males) or reared to become a dairy cow (females) (University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna 2015). Despite the fact calves are snatched from their mothers' udders to be farmed and objectified for profit, while Indigenous Australians were snatched from their mothers' breasts under state "welfare" policies, the theme of paternalism and ownership in these actions are clear. Crushingly, the social outcomes in each situation bear similarity. In *Bringing Them Home*, Sir Ronald Wilson recalls an interview with an Indigenous woman of the Stolen Generations: "I'm a rotten mother", she said, "I cannot cuddle my children. And that's because I was never cuddled. I never knew what it was to be cuddled" (Australian Human Rights Commission 2014, 2:08). In their study of motherless calves, the University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna (2015) found that "contact to mothers and to other cows, makes animals more sociable and socially competent as adults".

The legal status of domestic animals and Indigenous Australians

Curiously, there are even parallels between the legal standing of Indigenous Australians and domesticated animals. Animal welfare is not specifically addressed in the Australian constitution, and has long been the responsibility of the states and territories (Sutton 2014). This lack of recognition of overarching animal rights law has meant that the "standard regulatory approach is marked by an underlying irrationality in the insistence on treating farmed and companion animals differently, even though both categories comprise sentient creatures capable of feeling pain" (White 2007, p. 348).

Similarly, laws pertaining to Indigenous Australians vary by state, and despite reform after the 1967 census, Indigenous Australians are only mentioned in the constitution to state their allowance to be counted in the census, and to state that the Commonwealth government can make laws for them (Korf 2017, para. 2). Pre-1967, though they had the right to vote, Indigenous Australians were not

counted in the census, and the government was prohibited from specifically making laws from them, which “fed into the misunderstanding that Aboriginal people were classified as fauna until the '67 referendum” (Sutton 2014). This myth was so pervasive that in 2007 New South Wales’ first Aboriginal minister Linda Burney told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “It still staggers me that for the first ten years of my life, I existed under the Flora and Fauna Act of NSW” (Pearlman & Gibson 2007). Indeed, the legal standing of Indigenous Australians at this time was so socially contentious that in 1965, prominent Aboriginal rights activist Faith Bandler lamented, “People in Australia have to register their dogs and cattle, but we don't know how many Aborigines there are,” (Korf 2017, para. 37).

A shared Otherness

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Enlightenment and the application of Western science was heralded as a triumph in knowledge. In particular, the “‘discovery’, naming and categorisation of plants and animals hitherto unknown in Europe, contributed crucially to the construction of European discourses of superior civilisation” (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p. 166). “Otherness” was thereon defined as “lack” of European qualities and “reinforced and reshaped by the long development of European contact with indigenous and native peoples” (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p. 161), such as Indigenous Australians whose cultures were considered “exotic and/or primitive” (MacNaughton & Davis 2001, p. 86). In her poem ‘Naming the Animals’, Native American Linda Hogan reflects on this colonial categorisation:

*“as if they had not been there
before his words, had not
had other tongues and powers
or sung themselves into life
before him . . .*

*His children would call us pigs.
I am a pig,
the child of pigs,
wild in this land“*

(Quoted in Payne & Newman 2017).

Important to note here is the ambiguity about whether or not the subject of the poem is an animal, or a human relating to the lives of the animals around them as they endure colonialist “othering” together. While “the ‘othering’ of a culture and its complicity in racism and colonialism is now widely acknowledged” (MacNaughton & Davis 2001, p. 86), the related colonial “othering” of animals is not. However, as Borkfelt (2011, p. 137) argues, “non-human animals are arguably placed in a constant, almost irredeemable state of alterity” (Borkfelt 2011, p. 137). The link between native peoples and animals is also represented through the stereotyping of postcolonial societies who continually place first peoples “in the role of the primitive” by virtue of “their connection to the places” and “animals of those places” (Borkfelt 2011, p. 146).

The culpability of intersectionality and recognition

Intersectionality as defined by Bredström is a theoretical lens through which to view social phenomena “in which systems of oppression are seen as mutually constructing one another” (Phoenix & Pattynama 2006, p. 190). In other words, all oppression is linked. Animal rights theory extends this definition of oppression to animals based on their sentience and ability to feel pain. As philanthropist Phillip Wollen famously stated: “when we suffer, we suffer as equals, and in their capacity to suffer, a dog is a pig, is a bear, is a boy” (Kindness Trust 2012, 1:24). Intersectionality, then, recognises that like racism or sexism, speciesism is institutionalised, and that animals, like women or people of colour, are “similarly positioned” in a colonial, patriarchal world “as objects rather than subjects” (Adams 2015).

Essential to note is that the comparing of Indigenous Australians (and their suffering) to animals is hugely taboo due to a lack of animal-inclusive intersectionality. Firstly, this is due to inherent speciesism within society. Speciesism is the ideology “that puts human interests above some or all nonhuman animals or the assigning of a hierarchy to animals in relation to their value” (Animal Rights Advocates Inc. 2017, para. 1). It is clear then that in a speciesist society, the comparison of humans with animals is seen as demoralising and insulting. An infamous example of this comes from 2013, when a 13-year-old Collingwood Magpies fan made headlines for calling Sydney Swans forward Adam Goodes an ape. “It's not the first time on a footy field that I've been referred to as a 'monkey' or an 'ape', it was shattering,” said Goodes of the incident (Crawford, A. 2013). Clearly, this example demonstrates not only speciesism, but racism, and this is no coincidence.

The links between speciesism and racism are undeniable: both are socially-constructed systems of hierarchy and institutionalised oppression that disadvantage and harm sentient beings. Speciesist ideology underpins much of human society's interaction with animals, primarily the moral justifying of farming and eating animals. Similarly, racism underpins the justification of creating “protectionist policies” for Indigenous Australians, or using race as a form of insult. In the case of Adam Goodes, the socially-constructed meaning of the “ape” is a double insult. Not only does it attempt to lower Goodes' worth by comparing him to an animal, its depth of offense lies in the linguistic history of “ape” or “monkey” being used as a racial slur.

Just as comparing Indigenous Australians to animals is taboo, so is the recognition and furthering of animal rights and indigenous rights. Arguably, this is because any advancement in these rights (e.g. constitutional change) mandates the admission of past wrongdoings as well as change to deep-rooted societal norms. The contentiousness of this is deepened further when one considers the parallels of human and animal suffering. Though several indigenous activists have argued that “Indigeneity and Veganism intersect on spiritual, moral and practical levels” (Robinson 2010), and have heralded the rise of “indigenous veganism” as a “subversive tactic against colonialism” (Wonders 2017, para. 2), they are the minority. Recognising animal or indigenous rights, let alone the parallels between animal suffering and indigenous suffering, for the majority of society, is far too contentious as it commands culpability, self-condemnation and deep change. However, it is important to note that, “history does not exist without an observer” and that “historical accounts are constructed by people” (Land 1994, p. 7). That is, the history of construction is always subject to the changing perspectives of the dominant discourse, or a “supportive environment” that “demands that their ‘truths’ be uttered” (Attwood 2001, pp. 196-197).

The future

Through critically analysing relevant literature from the fields of animal rights and Indigenous Studies, this essay has confirmed the link between the colonial othering and subjugation of Indigenous Australians and the domestication of farmed animals. Focusing on the personal accounts of Indigenous Australians taking the forms of memoir, autobiography, interviews, poetry and song, this essay has revealed the parallels that exist between racism and speciesism. Through working in the radical, contentious space between the fields of animal rights and indigenous rights, this essay has established some uncomfortable, antagonistic parallels which are perhaps most problematic in the continued striving for recognition of both indigenous rights and animal rights. In exploring the connection between furthering animal and indigenous rights and the then-implicit necessity of admitting cross-species wrongdoing, this essay serves as a preliminary starting point for the embracement of cross-species study within the wider social studies paradigm. With the emergence and increasing prominence of animal rights activism in mainstream society, it is not unlikely that future academia will be characterised by the convergence of animal rights and indigenous rights into a more holistic form of intersectionality.

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