

Introduction

Jay Johnston and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey

Animal death is a complex, uncomfortable, depressing, motivating and sensitive topic. For those scholars participating in human–animal studies, it is – accompanied by the concept of ‘life’ – the ground upon which their studies commence, whether those studies are historical, archaeological, social, philosophical or cultural. It is a tough subject to face, but, as we hope this volume demonstrates, one at the heart of human–animal relations and auman–animal studies scholarship.

The sheer scale of animal death is mind-boggling. The statistics are easily accessible and the rhetoric all too familiar: ‘Animals become extinct. They are also killed, gassed, electrocuted, exterminated, hunted, butchered, vivisected, shot, trapped, snared, run over, lethally injected, culled, sacrificed, slaughtered, executed, euthanized, destroyed, put down, put to sleep, and even, perhaps, murdered’ (Animal Studies Group 2006, 3). It is not that we do not know what is going on (the information is available if we care to look), but that many do not ‘care to know’ in the sense that Stanley Cohen uses that phrase. For Cohen, caring to know is knowledge plus acknowledgment of the moral and ethical consequences of that knowledge (2001). While killing animals is a ‘defining aspect of human behavior’ (Animal Studies Group 2006, 8), understanding the *ways* in which animal deaths are faced up to, ob-

J Johnston & F Probyn-Rapsey (2013). Introduction. In J Johnston & F Probyn-Rapsey (Eds). *Animal death*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.

scured, minimised, and rendered morally distant by cultural design (by which we mean ideas, arguments, representations and beliefs) is vital to bringing about change. This volume examines the cultural contexts in which animal death becomes the background noise of everyday life: routinised, normalised, mechanised and sped up. It also offers different strategies for intervention that highlight the need to sit with, contemplate and act with the discomfort brought on by confronting animal death. And so the volume considers not only the cultivation of indifference¹ and silence by various cultural mechanisms, but also responses that are possible and necessary, responses to the call of those who are, as Deborah Bird Rose describes, in the 'deathzone: the place where the living and the dying encounter each other in the presence of that which cannot be averted'. In this sense, this volume contributes to the scholarship on the subject by bringing the modes of recognition, acknowledgment (as well as forms of disavowal) to the foreground.

This volume emerges out of a symposium held at the University of Sydney on 12–13 June 2012 by Human Animal Research Network (HARN). The symposium brought together cross-disciplinary voices on animal death. These papers variously explored how animal and human death diverge and also connect in profound ways. The selection of papers reflects a genuine commitment by the editors to the transdisciplinary nature of human–animal studies, while also acknowledging that differences in discipline methodology and conceptual foundation always remain in the dynamics of such dialogue. This volume aims to open up discussion with scholarship that is challenging, insightful and diverse.

Deborah Bird Rose's chapter, 'In the shadow of all this death', contemplates questions of response-ability towards the dead and dying in a time of mass extinctions. Her elaboration of the 'deathzone', as a space of encounter between species, and a place where ideally none should be abandoned, underscores the necessity of confronting death as an ethical and political problem for individuals and species. She points out that a 'multispecies shadow' hangs over us all, connecting our lives and

1 'Cultivation of indifference' is a phrase used by Fiona Probyn-Rapsey in *Made to matter* (Sydney University Press 2013) to highlight the point that indifference does not arise simply through neglect or ignorance but is actively cultivated through various cultural mechanisms.

deaths not only to past and future generations of our own species, but also every other species too. Her chapter illustrates models for hope in what she calls ‘crazy love’, a form of radical multispecies relationality seen in passionate responses to the call of those imperilled. In the work of Levinas, Seamus Heaney, the story of the Moon and the Dingo from the Ngarinman people of the Northern Territory, Australia, and in the ‘crazy love’ expressed by Louise and Rick in their attention to a grieving Albatross pair, Rose finds examples of remarkable multispecies entanglement in the deathzone, where none is ‘abandoned’ to die alone. Such fidelity to the dead and to the imperilled marks a space of hope where our relationality, our being-with-others, does not leave us paralysed and alone, ‘behind the corpse house, longing for those “we” have killed, and unable to save those “we” are now killing’, but gives us resources with which to respond.

The question of whose deaths we mourn and how we pay our respects to the animal dead correlates with human–animal intimacy and proximity. As Hilda Kean observes in her chapter on pet cemeteries in London, Paris and New York, the memorialisation of beloved ‘pets’ by tombstone, plaque and monument are signs of a broader pattern of attachment between human and animal in life and also, by implication, in some kind of afterlife. But Kean also observes that these public commemorations of the animal dead go beyond the individual relationships formed between specific animals and humans. They also include public monuments erected to commemorate animals in war, memorial walls (such as that for the dogs in Glebe, Sydney), or monuments and plaques celebrating the bravery of particular animals. Kean discusses the commemoration of Sirius, a rescue dog who died in the aftermath of the World Trade Center bombing in 2001, as one example where the human–animal divide is challenged by such commemorative practices. What we can mourn and grieve for is indicative of what is possible between the species in life.

The issue of which animals we choose to mourn and those whose deaths are ignored or devalued is played out in Tarsh Bates and Megan Schlipalius’ chapter. It records the artist’s and curator’s reactions to relationships with non-human organisms during an artistic installation. Responsibility towards maintaining life, confrontation with death and the aesthetics of engagement between human and organism (insects, fungi, plants and yeasts) in a gallery environment is evocatively re-

corded. The installation, dependent on the life and deaths of so many others, becomes an ethical conundrum. Bates and Schlipalius provide the reader (as they did the exhibition viewers) with an opportunity to sit with these dilemmas.

The staging of such dilemmas is the remit of Peta Tait's chapter 'Confronting corpses and theatre animals'. Here the vocabulary of the contemporary visual exhibition is counterpointed with the pseudo-presence of dead animals in selected theatre productions. The dead here are at turns entertainment, prop, education, spectacle: their presence bounded by diverse frames. Tait draws our attention to the way in which such framing speaks to the dead animal and confines the way an audience responds and proposes increased awareness of the sensory body's reactions.

Chloë Taylor's chapter highlights the ways in which animals that are not companions – such as the hunted or those who die on our roads, or are killed by other animals – are relegated to a very different ethical space. Taylor discusses a number of case studies that demonstrate a cultural habit of equating 'respect for the dead' with eating the corpse, not wanting to 'waste' the animal dead. She points out that while human death 'should entail notions of dignity, rituals of mourning, and abiding by the wishes of the deceased', respect for the animal dead can, for some, mean 'instrumentalising their corpses as much as we can'. This word 'respect' is subject to very different interpretations depending on the species one is, and the proximity of human and animal relationships involved.

The issue of proximity and the ability to mourn individual animal lives also informs George Ioannides' chapter and his analysis of Stan Brakhage's silent short film *Sirius remembered* (1959). Brakhage's film documents the decomposition of his dead dog, Sirius, over several seasons. Ioannides argues that this film attends to the material, embodied and affective life of Sirius and offers a ritual of mourning for a beloved subject. Ioannides departs from John Berger and Akira Lippit's diagnosis of the visual/cinematic animal as intrinsically linked to their disappearance in the world: 'where cinema, even more consummately than linguistic metaphor, "mourns" vanishing animal life, preserving or encrypting animality in an affective and transference structure of communication'. But a film like *Sirius remembered*, Ioannides argues, complicates and supplements this spectral de-animation of animal life,

because Brakhage's film moves animal life and death back towards materiality and affect, where the animal's life and death insists on its difference to the cinema's appropriation of animality as an ideal image of modernity's loss.

Melissa Boyde's chapter considers animal death in two novels and their film adaptations – *Wake in fright* (Kenneth Cook 1961/Kotcheff 1971) and *Red Dog* (De Bernières 2001/Stenders 2011). This chapter interrogates how cultural texts that use animal deaths as poetic devices can *simultaneously* marginalise and yet also make central the death of animals. Boyde points out that animal deaths in these texts function as a comment on human life, human feeling and companionship, while the animals whose bodies inhabit the textual space function as backdrop, their stories constituting a 'presumptive knowledge' that leaves the animals silent. Animal deaths in these films are routinised with little interrogation of human complicity in the poisonings and shootings that imperil animals from start to end. Highlighting the textual strategies of the *roman à clef*, with its generic potential to both conceal and reveal cultural secrets, Boyde turns her attention to how these texts minimise and obscure the lives and deaths of animals by 'bring[ing] to the surface animal matters embedded in these texts: deviation and disappearance, shame and shamelessness, and vested and invested interests'.

Jill Bough engages with the particularly Australian cultural myth of Simpson and his donkey to expose the gulf between the celebrated animal and its treatment in everyday society: a shameful gulf. While exploring the rich tradition of symbolism associated with the donkey, Bough articulates the tension between symbolic reverence and physical neglect.

Similarly, Annie Potts and Philip Armstrong deftly weave together the symbolic and the real life – real death – of chickens in 'Picturing cruelty: chicken advocacy and visual culture'. 'Picturing' here is the key: this chapter excavates the visual literacy of advocacy projects unpacking the cultural complexity and socio-political 'afterlife' of images.

Turning from what the symbolic and everyday treatment of animals can reveal about culture, a time, a place, Agata Mrva-Montoya looks to the material remains of horse sacrifice to propose a re-reading of cultural change in Cyprus. In this chapter the material evidence of animal death is employed to construct an alternate cultural history. Intersecting with current debates in archaeology and history, Mrva-Montoya

interprets the material culture of animal death to temper histories built upon predominantly textual foundation.

Disparity in the rendering and reading of different textual formations underpins Carol Freeman's investigation of Julia Leigh's *The hunter* as novel (1999) and as film (Nettheim 2011). In a careful exegesis she mines the film's images for slippage in attitude towards the animal. Changes in emphasis and orientation are read against audience expectation and broader socio-cultural opinion. Animal-human relations, extinction and responsibility jostle one another in the packaging and repackaging of this thylacine tale.

The reluctance to discuss animal death, even though its place is undeniably central to our relationship to animals, marks institutions, theories and practices that produce the idea of 'surplus animals'; factory farms, the pet industry and zoos. All of these institutions grapple with animal death and all involve animal science practitioners. Anne Fawcett's chapter highlights the moral stresses faced by veterinary surgeons who, on a daily basis, are faced with the task of euthanising animals. Euthanasia is supposed to describe an assisted death in the context of poor quality of life and prevention of suffering. But, as Fawcett points out, the term is also misused to describe the deaths of animals who are deemed 'surplus', and who can no longer be looked after by their owners. Fawcett argues that such slippery (mis)use of this term has become normalised in veterinary practice and that it poses significant risks for animals facing death, and also for the vets and pet owners who allow it.

Matthew Chrulew's chapter highlights the place of death in the zoo. He points out that while zoos are reluctant to discuss death, it is intrinsic to their function as 'archetypally life-fostering' institutions. Chrulew discusses the zoo's relationship to death, not as something that can be hidden successfully (though the public hears very little of zoo deaths), but as an 'immediate product of scientifico-medical intervention, where one group survives (or indeed lives well) at the expense of another'. Chrulew uses the example provided by Heini Hediger, a mid-century zoo director, whose interest in managing death at the zoo marks a significant shift in the understanding of the role of zoos, and death within them. Chrulew argues that Hediger's 'analysis of "death due to behaviour" opened up captive and other animals' lives to a new domain of knowledge, power and biopolitical intervention'. Chrulew finds in Hediger an exemplary biopolitician whose work is best understood

within the context of a shift from sovereignty to biopower, as elaborated by Michel Foucault.

Fiona Probyn-Rapsey's chapter 'Nothing to see, something to see: white animals and exceptional life/death' also attends to a biopolitical intervention into animal life in the form of standardisation, in particular the ways that an animal's appearance, specifically colour, affects its treatment in human hands. Struck by the standardisation of white broiler chickens, her chapter engages with the question of how their whiteness contributes to the de-individuation of animal life in intensive factory farming. Contrasting this with the fascination for albino animals, the essay examines the variability in how the white animal is marked for death in some contexts and exceptional life in others such as zoos, which foster rare and exceptional albino animals for purposes of trade and spectacle. Her chapter analyses how white animals 'are marked by the (non)colour of whiteness, caught not just *within* but *as* the space between death and life: whiteness as vulnerable hypervisibility and as exceptional life; to be made *more of* in order to be continually unmade'.

The 'state of death-in-life', found in the complexities of anti-vivisectionist thought in the Victorian and Edwardian periods is the focus of Greg Murrie's chapter. Not only articulating the often paradoxical positions taken by individuals and organisations to the issue, Murrie demonstrates the way in which such debates led to an expansion of perceived animal-human difference.

Drawing boundaries of difference between species and the (irr)rationales employed, forms the ground layer upon which Rick De Vos builds his analysis of the relationship between huskies and hunters in Greenland. Richly detailed fieldwork is recounted which presents both the dogs' contradictory socio-cultural positioning and De Vos' own embodied response to this predicament and its specific environmental context. As an 'arctic other', Greenland's status as a frontier place – part wild and part 'civilised' – is mirrored in De Vos' reading of the husky-hunter interaction: a relation that covets dependence and dissolution simultaneously.

Drawing together an unlikely coupling of contemporary spiritual subculture (Otherkin) and poststructuralist theory, Jay Johnston questions the usefulness of distinguishing between 'animal' and 'human' for individuals who understand themselves as simultaneously both. This

Animal death

chapters explores how, by claiming the animal as an aspect of their lived subjectivity, Therians (animal–human Otherkin) enact the simultaneous death of the animal and the human, while paradoxically reinforcing a generic and romanticised concept of the animal. The ethics involved are both promising and troubling.

In summary, the essays in this collection problematise animal death. Collectively they demonstrate that whether that death is an ‘anonymous’ fly or a beloved pet, whether it is deemed symbolic or real, or a conflux of the two, animal death is never simple. An increasingly mechanical and routinised event for so many nonhuman creatures, animal death is a departure point for a broader consideration of our lives with, and as, other animals.

Works cited

- Animal Studies Group (Ed.) (2006). *Killing animals*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Cohen S (2001). *States of denial: knowing about atrocities and suffering*. Cambridge: Polity Press.