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Abstract

In September 2015, I gave a talk at Siteworks, an arts festival that takes place at Bundanon (see Bundanon Trust <https://bundanon.com.au/>) on the South Coast of New South Wales about two hours south of Sydney, Australia. The theme for the festival was "The Feral Amongst Us." In my talk, I started off by asking the audience about their relationships with companion animals; the response indicated that most had companion animals in their lives and cared about the quality of their relationships with animals. Asking an audience about their own relationships with animals is a common and useful strategy in Animal Studies talks (especially those for a general public) because it can help resituate (rehome?) the abstract "animal" into more relatable terms. It also makes the effects of categorical thinking palpable: relatability wears thin and often falls apart across categorical divisions and between them, such as those animals named "feral." The text of my talk follows from this first engagement with the audience about their own companions and then describes five propositions on ferals.

Keywords

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Five Propositions on Ferals

Fiona Probyn-Rapsey

In September 2015, I gave a talk at Siteworks, an arts festival that takes place at Bundanon (see Bundanon Trust <https://bundanon.com.au/>) on the South Coast of New South Wales about two hours south of Sydney, Australia. The theme for the festival was “The Feral Amongst Us.” In my talk, I started off by asking the audience about their relationships with companion animals; the response indicated that most had companion animals in their lives and cared about the quality of their relationships with animals. Asking an audience about their own relationships with animals is a common and useful strategy in Animal Studies talks (especially those for a general public) because it can help resituate (re-home?) the abstract “animal” into more relatable terms. It also makes the effects of categorical thinking palpable: relatability wears thin and often falls apart across categorical divisions and between them, such as those animals named “feral.” The text of my talk follows from this first engagement with the audience about their own companions and then describes five propositions on ferals.

Animal Studies scholars tend to argue that the relationships that we form with our “pets” are a foundation for positive relationships and attitudes towards animals in general. Those who form attachments with pets and appreciate their pets as individuals with personalities (and all that that implies) are also more likely to feel uncomfortable with the thought of animal cruelty. That is why you’ll often see animal advocacy groups refer to pets as a benchmark for better relations with animals. The comparison with pets is supposed to elevate and enhance our moral perception of the cruelty around us. And yet there is a persistent and profound disconnect between how much we respect and value the animals that are our companions and those that are treated as mere animal machines, kept in appalling conditions, often in factory farms for the purpose of making cheap meat. This disconnect between how we love our pets and how we mistreat animals in agriculture (who are just as likely to be persons like our pets) is puzzling and yet it is partly explained by the powerful role that categories play in how we relate to animals. Categorized as a “pet,” an animal has legal protection against cruelty. Classified as “livestock,” an animal is subject to the cruelties that comes with being seen as edible. Classified as “feral,” an animal is subject to even greater cruelties associated with being exterminable. This brings me to my first proposition regarding feral animals, which is that: **Australian feral animals live and die between categories (neither wild, pet, nor livestock), in an ethical vacuum bordered by extraordinary violence AND a romance of the escapee.** Feral animals no longer fit into any of the usual categories of wild, pet, or livestock; they have exceeded the usual categories and so they exist in a sort of ethical vacuum, which licenses extraordinary violence against them. They have exceeded and escaped from the domesticated sphere of humans. They have gone from best friend to traitor, enemy, meeting the full brunt of a human sense of rejection. Feral pigs, donkeys, horses, rabbits, camels have also gone beyond the category of livestock, defying human control and use. All ferals show resilience, intelligence, self-organization, and a capacity to evade human captivity—all of the things that contradict a



belief that livestock exist only to serve us, obey us. Going feral, they remind us that animals are neither machines, nor docile objects, but thinking, escaping, beings, and as such they help us to define the injustice of farming a little better. Perhaps this is why they are so hated; they are an uncomfortable reminder that animals are not “happy meat.”

This brings me to my second proposition on ferals: **The word feral means “killable” and “ungrievable.”** Once the dog is outside of the category of pet, or the pig or donkey is outside of the category of livestock, they have lost their place, their purpose, their allegiance to human society and slip into a category of the killable, into ethical nothingness. The violence that is unleashed on feral animals is extraordinary; it is well beyond the ordinary institutionalised violence that we unleash on animals, particularly the 100 million sheep and cattle that currently reside in Australia. Feral violence—and I say “feral violence” rather than violence against ferals to indicate that the violence is itself beyond the “usual” categories of industrialized violence against animals—involves poisons such as 1080, most commonly used for wild dogs, feral pigs, foxes, but also cats and rabbits (as in Queensland, Australia) and possums in New Zealand. Secondary poisoning effects pet dogs, cattle, sheep, wallabies, deer, and any of the animals that may feed on their dead bodies. Death takes hours; animals suffer grotesque, cruel deaths. 1080 is banned in some countries and highly restricted in others. In Australia and New Zealand, it is sometimes dropped on wide areas of land by plane or helicopter, with predictable hellish results. Clive Marks, previously head of the Victorian Government’s Vertebrate Pest Research Department, has described pest control in Australia as “caught in an innovation death spiral, largely because the suffering of pest animals has not been valued or considered a sufficient priority to warrant appropriate investment in better approaches” (Marks 2014). According to Marks, animal welfare and conservation biology are locked in conflict over this issue. Animal welfare concerns simply vanish when the word “feral” appears. Standards could not be any lower (Marks 2014; see also Marks 2013).

This brings me to my third proposition, which is that **ferals do not recognize themselves by that name.** Jacques Derrida argues in a now-famous essay called “The Animal That Therefore I Am, More to Follow” (2002) that the word “animal” is an example of a human war waged against other species. This war takes two forms—mass extinctions on the one hand and mass overproduction of industrialized livestock animals on the other. He suggests that the word “animal” predicts this calamity because the word does two things. Firstly, it collapses all their differences into one mass; everyone from the oyster to the elephant is imprisoned by this word “animal,” diminishing everyone’s complexity and difference into a catch all, “everything” term (see Derrida 2002, 392). The word “animal” also allows humans to imagine themselves above, beyond, separate, superior, with all that this implies morally and ethically. The word “animal” makes it possible to say that someone is “*only* an animal,” with all that that implies morally and ethically (see also Kim 2015). If we add the word “feral” to the word “animal,” then it’s as if we have added a “no-one,” a “nothing,” to an “everything”; together, the two words manage to double the insult, double the animals’ vulnerability, double the violence.

And yet, just as animals do not recognize themselves by the name “animal” (it is “our” name for them after all), ferals also do not recognize their status as “nothings.” They do not think of themselves as killable or as ungrievable. We can see this because they are out there busily surviving, conducting complex social lives, weaving in and out of human habitation, interacting with other species, changing themselves and others. In the case of dingoes, for instance, now thought by some to be a domesticated dog that went feral some 4,000 years ago, their involvement with feral dogs continues, in a way that frustrates conservationists and dingo



advocates, who want pure specimens, who want to see dingoes choose only other dingoes to mate with, and not Labradors or cattle dogs. The queer mixing of dingo with dog leads conservation biologists to suggest that dingoes are going extinct through impure breeding. But this idea is false. Take the idea of purity out of the picture and they are not going extinct, they are making do. But in the name of purity, in the name of the “pure” dingo, “wild” dogs or feral dogs are being shot, baited, and eradicated in unacceptably cruel ways. The dingo does not see herself as a killable, nor her own pups as living embodiments of her species extinction (see Probyn-Rapsey 2015). We should, I think, be wary of the tendency to see animals only as examples of a whole species—this makes them interchangeable and it also makes them vulnerable to pronouncements on purity. Conservation biologists see a whole species, a category; a dingo sees an opportunity, a mate, a litter, a social life, a persistence.

This leads me to my fourth proposition, which is that **the “feral” should remind us that the language of species is entangled with the language of race.** The categories into which animals are made to fit are *both* cultural and scientific. When the “father of taxonomy,” Carl Linnaeus, separated and sorted the natural world into kingdoms and species, he also included humans divided by race. In the first edition of *Systema Naturae*, we find “white Europeans,” “red Americans,” “brown Asians,” and “black Africans,” and in the tenth edition he was ascribing racial temperaments to these groups, with white Europeans displaying the most favoured characteristics. The point here is that species and race—and gender for that matter—are related taxonomies (see Kim 2015); they share the good and bad effects of taxonomic logic. All categories produce ferals, persons who do not fit in to an imagined norm, who are in between, mixed. We have ferals because we have a stubborn insistence on categorical thinking. The language of species purity and a fear of mixing, of invasion, of menace and genetic swamping, is mobilized regularly and repeatedly in conservation biology surrounding dingoes. But the rhetoric sticks to bodies, all bodies; it keeps the language of eugenics in circulation, ready to re-attach itself again to human bodies (see Probyn-Rapsey 2015). It is not acceptable to speak of purity in terms of human populations—we know the history of that thinking—so we should know what happens when we speak about animals in those terms too.

This brings me to my final proposition, which is that **ferals are a big distraction from the violence of animal agriculture.** Feral animals are violently eradicated in the name of two dominant principles. The first is that we kill them in the name of protecting biodiversity (this is the “cats are eating our natives!” sort of argument), and secondly, we kill them in the name of the “sustainability” of animal agriculture. Sustainability is often used in a very vague way in animal agriculture because animal agriculture and sustainability are actually incompatible. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report on the environmental impact of the livestock sector indicates that, globally, livestock contributes to 18% of global warming, a larger contribution than the whole transportation sector (FAO 2006). Animal agriculture represents the largest of all anthropogenic land uses and is a key player in increasing water use, water depletion, and water pollution.

The livestock industry in Australia is vast and politically active. Animal agriculture, specifically beef cattle and sheep farming, accounts for 52% of Australia’s land mass (Meat and Livestock Australia 2014). We currently have around 29 million cattle and 75 million sheep; that’s 100 million hard-hoofed, belching, farting ruminants walking over 52% of the deforested land mass of Australia. Compare this impact to the number of feral animals and they become a miniscule part of the problem of water use, water pollution, air pollution, land degradation, biodiversity, and habitat losses. So, when thousands of feral camels are culled by shotgun in the



name of climate-change action in order to reduce methane emissions (see Ritvo 2012, 411), while at the same time cattle and sheep are forced to produce more and more offspring, surely we have to say that something is drastically out of balance here. Sure, feral camels affect waterways, polluting them with waste, eating native flora, and they also contribute to climate change through their methane and waste, but feral camels are vastly outnumbered by sheep and cattle. Killing feral animals in the name of sustainability has all the appearance of doing something about climate change, but in reality it leaves the main issue of animal agriculture untouched. Ferals are a good distraction; they raise hackles. They transgress our fences, our ways of thinking, and the violence which we unleash upon them is spectacular and unhinged from usual ethical constraints. Feral animals rarely have advocates, certainly not lobbyists in parliaments; they are easy to demonise and in killing them we can claim to be addressing habitat loss, biodiversity loss, and sustainability, while at the same time breeding more and more cattle and sheep. Ferals should not made responsible for this; we should.

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FIONA PROBYN-RAPSEY is based at the University of Wollongong and Fiona's research connects feminist critical race studies and animal studies (also known as human-animal studies), examining where, when and how gender, race and species intersect. Her first book *Made to Matter: White Fathers, Stolen Generations* (2013), examines how the white fathers of Indigenous children (many now part of the Stolen Generations) reacted to and were positioned by Australian assimilation policies. This book highlights a research interest in the reproductive and biopolitical nature of settler colonial societies, a common thread that extends into more recent research in animal studies, including 2 co-edited books, *Animal Death* (2013) and also *Animals in the Anthropocene: Critical Perspectives on Non-human futures* (2015). From 2011-2015, Fiona was convenor (and founder) of HARN: Human Animal Research Network, at the University of Sydney. Fiona is currently working on an anthology of essays with Professor Lori Gruen (Wesleyan University) called *Animaladies*, as well as monograph on the cultural politics of eradication. Fiona is also Series Editor (with Melissa Boyde) of the Animal Publics book series through Sydney University Press, http://sydney.edu.au/sup/about/animal_publics.html