

theories and
methodologies

Postcolonial Critique in a Multispecies World

NEEL AHUJA

NEEL AHUJA is assistant professor of postcolonial studies in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. His new research project focuses on the concept of species in international law and international governance institutions. His current book manuscript, "Bioinsecurities: Embodiment, Disease Interventions, and the Cultural Politics of U.S. National Security," traces the transnational circulations of biomedical knowledges, technologies, and health identities in imperial public health projects of the United States since 1870.

HISTORIES OF RACE AND EMPIRE HAVE SHAPED THE FIELD IMAGINARY OF SPECIES STUDIES FROM ITS INCEPTION. POLITICALLY, THE field's animal-activist heritage models its critique on movements for racial justice. Historically, this move links to Enlightenment conceptions of animals that relied on the same objectifying methods used to represent slaves and the poor: sentimentality, representations of cruelty, humane manifestos. Epistemologically, the taxonomic tools that name the objects of analysis have been deployed to define non-Europeans as subspecies or independent species. Geographically, the field's intellectual production is centered in the United States, Australia, and Britain, tied to neocolonial institutions of animal advocacy, and slow in recognizing internal critiques of animal and ecological movements by activists of color.

Yet there is an emerging transnational turn in species critique. Recent scholarship at the intersection of postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, and species studies acknowledges links between species, race, and transnational power structures that underlie the production of culture. Some of the best of these works focus on the influence of sea otter habitats on Russian-Alutiiq intermarriage in the North Pacific, the centrality of cattle to Anglo-indigenous relations in colonial North America, the effects of state animal culling on the cultural memory of South African apartheid, the tourist "adoption" of Malaysian orangutans, the connection of zoo animals to post-independence Indian nationalism, the adaptation of bird and plant camouflage techniques by colonial militaries, and the global spread of bioprospecting.¹

Contemporary postcolonial criticism is being transformed by various projects that broaden its geographic, historical, and methodological scope.² Toward this end, species studies offers new tools for rethinking transnational circuits of power and identity. By tracing the circulation of nonhuman species as both figures and materialized bodies within the circuits of imperial biopower, species critique helps scholars reevaluate "minority" discourses and enrich histories

of imperial encounters. Outlining two concepts—the animal mask and ecologies of representation—I offer examples of postcolonial cultural criticism that demonstrate the centrality of multispecies social formations to modern coloniality and subaltern agencies. At the same time, the methods I outline seek to broaden the scope of species studies by (1) disentangling discourses of race and species, in opposition to the capitalist colonial logics that historically conflated them, (2) taking minority discourse as a site of species theorizing, thus decentering the privileged geographic sites of analysis, and (3) articulating examples of multispecies relations that shape cultures of imperialism.

Animalizations: Conflating Race and Species

Race and species—concepts that precede modern scientific thought—were historically united in “nature” through a modern epistemology that understood bodies in terms of resemblances in their deep organic structures. This is the basis of what I call *speciated reason*, the taxonomic paradigm that based its categorization of bodies on functionalist descriptions of organs and systems. Emerging with an animal-centered evolutionary biology, this episteme was consolidated from 1800 to 1930. Although speciated reason challenged absolute divisions between species, it also naturalized biological difference, legitimizing the definition of racial groups as subspecies (a definition that justified colonization and extermination) and reinforcing heterosexual reproduction as the privileged site of species definition for multicellular organisms.³

A common response to the racial legacies of speciated reason is to describe non-European worldviews that unveil the episteme as provincial.⁴ This strategy is important for highlighting the contingency of speciated reason, although it may occasion an essentialist trap of situating the others of Europe outside modernity. To explain speciated reason’s influence beyond the borders of Europe, critics

of racial and colonial power have taken up another strategy, critiquing *animalization*, the organized subjection of racialized groups through animal figures. Animalization involves contextual comparisons between animals (as laborers, food, “pests,” or “wildlife”) and the bodies or behaviors of racialized subjects (Ritvo 121–27; Pratt 208–13). W. E. B. DuBois denounces post-Reconstruction industrial schools that failed to treat African Americans as “more than meat” (94), leaving them in a “tertium quid” between human beings and cattle (89). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o recounts that punishment in British schools for speaking Gikuyu included wearing a sign declaring, “I AM A DONKEY” (“Language” 437). Frantz Fanon describes the rejection of animalization as a basis of national consciousness among colonized peoples (who ironically declare their humanity with a “roar”):

When the colonist speaks of the colonized he uses zoological terms. . . . This explosive population growth, those hysterical masses, those blank faces, those shapeless, obese bodies, this headless, tailless cohort, these children who seem not to belong to anyone, this indolence sprawling under the sun, this vegetating existence, all is part of the colonial vocabulary. . . . The colonized know all that and roar with laughter every time they hear themselves called an animal by the other. For they know that they are not animals. And at the very moment when they discover their humanity, they begin to sharpen their weapons to secure its victory. (7–8)

Feminist theory has analyzed the animalization of women’s bodies since the 1970s, and black feminist theorists argued more specifically that the objectification and hypersexualization of black women’s bodies were central to the maintenance of larger racial formations (hooks 62).

Unfortunately extending the conflation of race and species, “animal studies” often assimilates racial discourse into species

discourse, flattening out historical contexts that determine the differential use of animal (and other) figures in the processes of racialization. Even some of the field's more nuanced accounts of racialization assimilate race critique into species critique, taking animalization as the generic basis of racism. Cary Wolfe's often insightful study *Animal Rites* contends that an anthropocentric "species discourse" underlies "racism's conditions of possibility" (167). Wolfe dismisses Homi Bhabha and Toni Morrison for failing to address animals, rejecting their failed "postmodern pluralism" and lack of interest in "justice" for the animal (7–9). Such arguments risk perversely suggesting that because race and postcolonial critics possess special insight into the violence of humanism, they have a unique responsibility to speak for animals.⁵ Wolfe resists simplistic comparisons of racial and species violence that continue to abound in "animal studies" and mainstream animal activism;⁶ still, animalization theorists like Fanon open more direct avenues for a cultural critique that holds race and species as intersecting yet discrete aspects of identity.

Dark Skin, Animal Masks: Animality and Minority Discourse

Fanon's account of the response to animalization—that the colonized dismiss it with a "roar of laughter"—recognizes the contradictions of anticolonial subjectivity when colonial discourse assumes the untamable animality of the colonized. In our supposedly postracial moment, an ironic stance provisionally embracing animality is actually a common strategy for disentangling race and species in this context. I call this strategy, which appropriates the rhetoric of animalization to reveal its ongoing racial, neocolonial, or ecological legacies, the *animal mask*. By ironically appropriating an animal guise, the performer unveils a historical logic of animalization inherent in processes of racial subjection. The perfor-

mance of the animal mask does not necessarily entail identification with nonhuman species, but it always points to the historical conjunctions of social difference and species discourse. It may also, on occasion, envision alternative multispecies relationships.

The animal mask is common among hip-hop artists responding to legacies of animalization. For example, in Da Lench Mob's music video *Guerillas in tha Mist*, the militarization of Los Angeles is transposed onto a fictive occupied Africa, with references to *Tarzan*, *King Kong*, *National Geographic*, and the primatologist Dian Fossey. Released after the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings, the video depicts the musicians defending African indigenes against a white colonial operation. Moving between the jungle, the city, and a military camp, it repeatedly shows blurry surveillance images of the rappers' bodies taking the shapes of gorillas and ghosts. As this visual display unveils the animalization and annihilation of black male bodies under the postindustrial militarization of urban space,⁷ audio samples from conservation documentaries describe gorillas as "the pride of Africa." Despite some stereotyped images of women and indigenous Africans, the video speaks to multiple historical moments of animalization that underpin colonial fantasies of the African jungle and the institutionalized racism experienced by African American youth.⁸

The animal mask may also occasion transspecies identification. Helena María Viramontes's novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* takes its title from a reference to uses of dogs in the Spanish conquest of Mexico (León-Portillo 41). Viramontes, however, reverses the idea that dogs are an invasive, colonizing species used in campaigns of terror and conquest. Acknowledging many forms of transspecies intimacy and friction in 1960s Los Angeles, as well as the historical layers of Spanish and United States colonization through which Chicano/a identities and social spaces are formed, Viramontes figures dogs

and human beings as targets of a governmental agency called the Quarantine Authority. This scenario alludes to a panic over rabies in the city in 1955 (Kevane 25) and the origins of the Border Patrol as a migrant worker quarantine (Stern 57–81). Under border biopolitics, dogs become symbols of racial dehumanization and victims in their own right.

Written in a different context, the Bengali author Mahasweta Devi's story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" addresses similar connections between the "endangerment" of species and of social groups by mapping ecosystems, extinct animals, and indigenous peoples in relation to neoliberal agriculture in India. The story presents the mystery of a pterodactyl that flies above a famine-stricken village ravaged by green-revolution pesticides. Devi uses the figure of the extinct animal—worshipped by local villagers who are situated in a particularly Indian communal discourse of blackness—to critique the postindependence devastation of India's multispecies landscapes. When the journalist Puran sees that a disenchanting urban society and a multispecies rural society "belong to two worlds and there is no communication point," he acknowledges both the animalization of indigenous communities and disrespect of the multispecies ecologies necessary to human survival (195). Devi argues for respect across species, languages, religions, and classes, rejecting romantic views of peasant ecologies as well as humanist visions of progress.

Toward Multispecies Ecologies of Representation

Devi's ethic of respect requires what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "translating" diverse "lifeworlds." Chakrabarty argues that historical prose translates systems of thought in which "humans are not the only meaningful agents" into its own secular system (72). Nonrealist literature is more apt at representing nonhuman actors (86). Yet when literary critics re-

duce nonhuman characters to symbols, they may foreclose transspecies relations underlying representation. Ngũgĩ, for one, sees magic realism's popularity as rooted in subaltern oral traditions whose conceptions of time, space, and species differed from those of modern secular representation ("Writing").

Johann Gottfried Herder once wrote, "[A]lready as an animal, the human being has language" (65); his insight pointed to how animal vocalizations, dances, scents, colorations, tracks, and built structures operate as signs. Interdisciplinary scholarship in the field of biosemiotics suggests that human cultural production is an outgrowth of larger semiotic systems that precede the human. Discussing human-canine relations in Upper Amazonia, Eduardo Kohn sees human sign systems as a subset of larger, multispecies semiotic practices. Kohn points to extralinguistic semiotic categories: "icons" represent likenesses (a lizard's skin coloration), "indices" are influenced by the objects they represent (a monkey's alarm call), and embodied adaptations represent the body in relation to the environment (a paramecium's swim-ready cilia). Thus, life itself "is a sign process" (5–6). Anna Tsing calls these extrahuman semiotic processes "gaps" of "unreadability" in humanist disciplinary gazes. Proposing that scholars "take the landscape as an object of analysis," Tsing rejects distinctions between the material and the semiotic in the lived "configuration of humans and nonhumans across a terrain" (172–73).

Following Tsing, I argue that cultural studies can trace the localization and contestation of imperial power by undertaking *ecologies of representation*. Ecologies of representation trace the ways in which the historically situated zones of contact between peoples and nonhuman species create the conditions of possibility for semiotic activities in defined fields of social power. I offer an example—concerning imported research monkeys in Puerto Rico—that outlines how multispecies landscapes interact with military,

scientific, and economic institutions of imperial biopolitics.⁹ In the interwar period, United States health-security policy encouraged the importation of animals for antibiotic and vaccine production. In 1938, when impending war and British colonial animal-welfare policy threatened the primate trade, Columbia University's School of Tropical Medicine imported 408 rhesus macaques to a breeding colony on Cayo Santiago, an islet southeast of mainland Puerto Rico. Harvested throughout northern India (where, coincidentally, Mahasweta Devi worked as a monkey trapper), the monkeys encountered a radically different ecosystem in the Caribbean.

Cayo Santiago had been artificially landscaped for the animals so that it resembled a colonial ideal of the tropical island. Images of Cayo Santiago in *Life* and the *Illustrated London News* emphasized sandy beaches and wind-blown palms. The newly built landscape constituted a transspecies representational strategy by suggesting particular boundaries, exchange propositions, and social organizations to monkeys understood to be intentional beings. Presuming that tropical plants would nourish the monkeys and that the sea would enclose them, the caretakers were surprised when the monkeys destroyed the imported vegetation and, in small numbers, swam to the Puerto Rican main. Tearing down the imperialist fantasy of tropical nature, the animals forced scientists to establish feeding stations. This provisioning of the monkeys had material and semiotic effects, training them to see built platforms and humans beings as part of social life.

These representational activities interrupted a potent imperial discourse on the primate. As Donna Haraway argues, primate colonies advertised a "simian orientalism" in which a civilizing mission was carried out on nonhuman bodies (10–13, 19–25). This emerged within a broader set of scientific and popular discourses invested in comparative psychology (which compared child, criminal,

ape, and "primitive" psyches), the myth of the "missing link," and scientific expeditions for "undiscovered" animals and tribes. An emergent rhetoric of animal rearing adjudged all primates as sharing a racialized transspecies semiotic space. An article in *Life* on the opening of Cayo Santiago bluntly attributed rhesus behavior to indigenous psychology and failures of transspecies discipline: "Because he is considered sacred in India, the rhesus is domineering, undisciplined and bad tempered" ("First"). The focus on taming animality is evident in the dystopian visions of science in a variety of popular expedition films of the 1930s and 1940s, including *Island of Lost Souls* (1932, an adaptation of H. G. Wells's *Dr. Moreau*), *King Kong* (1933), the *Tarzan* films (1932–48), Universal's *Ape Woman* trilogy (1943–45), and the serial *Queen of the Jungle* (1935).

As the idea of civilization encompassed a savage heart of darkness, primates came to stand in for a "primitive consciousness" underlying social relations. This is evident in Hansel Mieth's popular 1939 *Life* magazine portrait *The Misogynist*, featuring a swimming Cayo Santiago rhesus staring, with heavily furrowed brow, at the viewer. The editors' caption explains that the distressed monkey retreated to the water to escape "the chatter of innumerable female monkeys." Eschewing this sexism, Mieth's discussion of the image proclaims the monkey's wartime alienation (Flamiano 26). However, if we are to take seriously nonhuman performance and representation, we must acknowledge the monkey's own gaze. Mieth's presence would have disturbed the colony's delicate transspecies accommodations, whereby human beings keep distant from monkeys and avoid direct eye contact or visual prosthetics. That the use of a camera might provoke the rhesus to angrily stare down the photographer should remind us that visual culture is also a multispecies domain. Figuring the animal as viewer instead of viewed, as responsive swimmer instead of stranded island dweller, we can

begin to trace how monkeys rewrite agricultural and cultural landscapes in Puerto Rico.

In the 1960s, the National Institutes of Health established spinoff primate colonies in southwestern Puerto Rico, from which monkeys escaped. By the late 1980s, hundreds of monkeys encroached on farmlands of the Lajas Valley. To deter the monkeys, farmers transformed export-oriented fruit crops into less lucrative hay farms. In addition to re-writing the landscape, the monkeys' presence also transformed representations of human-nonhuman encounters. The legend of the *chupacabra*, a blood-sucking alien later reported throughout the Americas, emerged in Puerto Rico at the moment that monkey sightings became commonplace. As an alien monkey-vampire targeting rural communities, the *chupacabra* highlights fears of United States-sponsored medical experimentation and sterilization, the decline of agriculture affecting the southwestern economy, and popular unrest regarding United States military radar projects—all layers of biomedical, military, and industrial imperialism in Puerto Rico.¹⁰

Despite monkeys' conflicts with human beings in the southwest, in southeastern Puerto Rico research monkeys could be a source of nationalist pride and could generate tourist revenue for boat operators. In a 1989 narrative, Jaime Benítez, a former chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico, points to such contradictions as he describes being watched by monkeys on his colony visit. Evoking racial stereotypes of Puerto Rican overpopulation, as well as the island's contradictory "free associated" commonwealth status, he depicts himself "in jail while [the monkeys] were free," "exceeding" the "population disposition" of Puerto Rico (19). Benítez deploys the animal mask, figuring himself as lab animal and monkeys as overseers and connecting Cayo Santiago to broader histories of scientific racism that aided industrialization and reinforced imperial eugenics.

By unwinding the tangled webs of monkeys, human beings, and scientific institutions

in visual culture, spatial organization, and popular legends, we can recognize monkeys as companion travelers under imperial biopower. Listening for such nonhuman presences is limited by the violence of enclosure, mass culls of farmed animals, deforestation, and monoculture—all of which have reached unprecedented scales globally. Yet power is never totalizing. In his analysis of the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén's *El Gran Zoo*, Antonio Benítez-Rojo argues that "the mechanism of power, the zoo, or, let's say, the military academy, is a failure," given an "impossible desire to keep on knowing and transforming the captive" (136). Power in a multispecies world is redirected on scales and in spaces that often elude perception. The evidence is not always archived on paper or silicon; it is more often written in the dirt, where our shit combines with bacteria, weeds, and worms to make the soil out of which empires and their discontents grow.

NOTES

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1. Miller; Anderson; Jacobs; Parreñas; Sastry; "Petting Oronooko" in Aravamudan (29–70); "Meat: A Short Cultural History of Animal Welfare at the Fin-de-Siècle" in Gandhi (67–114); Taussig; and Shiva.

2. Recent critiques of postcolonial studies are described in the volume edited by Ania Loomba et al. and are best exemplified by Walter Dignolo and others in Latin American studies. When I invoke "postcolonial" analysis, I refer to the various scholarly projects analyzing the power relations and cultural forms forged by histories of contact between peoples, colonization, racialization, and (trans)nationalism in historically situated global systems.

3. See Foucault 264–71 and Rose 41–45. On race, see Silva 110–11.

4. Léopold Senghor describes essential differences between European and African conceptions of life (30–34). On views of animals in Japan, see Pflugfelder and Walker. On views of animals in Upper Amazonia, see Kohn.

5. Michael Lundblad argues that Wolfe's model, by neglecting to situate animal protection within a history of imperialism, may also legitimize neocolonial conservation policies like those proposed by Goodin, Pateman, and Pateman (1129; 835–36).

6. Steven Best claims that “species apartheid is an even more oppressive system” than South African racial apartheid. See also Walker; Spiegel.

7. Robin Kelley documents Los Angeles police militarization (131); on the uses of animality in the “necropolitics” of postmodern policing, see Mbembe.

8. Hip-hop's animal mask takes a variety of forms. Paul Gilroy sees Snoop Dogg's animalized embrace of sexuality as “a political and . . . moral gesture” toward an alternative vision of black community (201–05).

9. My full analysis appears in Ahuja (ch. 3). On the monkeys of southwest Puerto Rico, see Gonzáles-Martínez. See also key works on Cayo Santiago by Haraway (84–111) and Rawlins and Kessler.

10. On race, population, and science in United States-occupied Puerto Rico, see Briggs.

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