

Animal Subalterns

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This article examines the conceptual and political implications of the term “animal” by linking animality to subalternity. Engaging the work of theorists Dinesh Wadiwel, Syl Ko, Donna Haraway, and Gayatri Spivak, it argues that both nonhuman animals and some human populations occupy the status of social animals—figures stripped of political existence and rendered intrinsically dominable. The article explores the potential and pitfalls of applying Subaltern Studies—particularly its second wave—to nonhuman animals, and ultimately advances “subaltern” as a trans-species designation within established social justice paradigms. This proposal challenges posthuman entanglement theories for downplaying systemic domination and urges a return to frameworks of power, hierarchy, and resistance—situating the struggle for animal liberation as one inseparable from broader anti-oppression politics.

Keywords:

Subaltern; Animals; Gramsci; Haraway; Violence; Entanglement

We are imposing a complete siege on Gaza. There will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel, everything will be closed. We are fighting against human animals, and we are acting accordingly.

—Yoav Gallant, October 9, 2023

INTRODUCTION

“Raise your hand if you’re an animal”—I prompt my students and their hands go right up. The truth is so obvious that even some roll their eyes. Yet if this were true, if we are all so obviously animals, then how do we explain the evil within Yoav Gallant’s description of Palestinians as “human animals”? (Al Jazeera, 2023). What does the former Israeli Defense Minister mean when he asserts that Israel’s genocidal deprivation of basic goods to Palestinians is “acting accordingly” toward these “human animals”? If we are all animals—precisely human animals—why and how is it so evil to be regarded and treated as one? I follow the first prompt with a second. This time I ask the students if they want to be treated like animals, like the animals they confess themselves to be. Time stretches and the room tightens. No one raises a hand. I’ve turned “animal” into a homograph—same spelling, different meanings. The students are unbothered by admitting animality in a biological sense: bodies that need food, water, warmth, protection; organisms born into the world, living for a time, sometimes reproducing, always dying. This is the animal they accept themselves to be, the biological one. The other

animal, the social one, the animal dominated in and by the human world, is the one they are far less willing to embody.

The life science conception of animality is not our concern. We can agree that *homo sapiens* are biological animals. This is an irrelevant conclusion. By contrast, the social conception of animality could not be more relevant to themes of domination and subalternity. Maneesha Deckha (2010) refers to “subhuman” as a “violence-producing category” (p. 30). Syl Ko (Ko & Ko, 2017) adds that the same description suits “animal” (p. 46). Ko directs us to the least irrelevant conclusion with their elegant “decolonial” statement: “Some humans are animals” (p. 115). In the sense that matters, only some humans are animals, only some humans are treated like animals, and being treated like an animal is definitely not a good thing.

In this paper, I proceed from the two statements by Deckha and Ko to advance the intrinsic subalternity of any social “animal,” whether biologically human (some) or nonhuman (all). I suggest abandoning the *political* animalization of animals, paralleling critiques of the animalization of humans, and thus caution against contemporary pro-animal or ecological calls to “rewild” ourselves or reclaim our “animality.”¹ The turn to “reanimalize” ourselves minimizes the fact that some among “us” have never been—and can never be—“wild,” “beast,” or “animal.” I also resist, like Eva Haifa Giraud (2019), pivots to posthuman entanglement theories of human animal/nonhuman relationalities, whose “flat ontologies” present entities as engaged in forms of sophis-

ticated interplay with minimal emphasis on hierarchy and antagonism (Wadiwel, 2023, Chapter 2). In my view, these approaches reinscribe an anthropo-exceptionalism that subjects nonhuman animals to vocabularies and political frameworks conspicuously dissimilar from those applied to traditional human-human power relations. “Animal issues” thereby remain fringe, complex, and apolitical topics until or unless they pose significant consequences for humans. To avoid the pitfalls of the human-animal binary and of entanglement lenses, I elevate and insist upon a “traditional” trans-species vernacular of nonflat power relations, such as master–slave, colonizer–colonized, oppressor–oppressed (Mignolo, 2005), or as I engage in particular: dominant–subaltern. To be transparent, this is not an essay on rights or even ethics, but rather a categorical intervention with unresolved implications for those involved in practical ethical and political projects.

Before beginning, it would be negligent not to mention that while *some* humans are animals, *no* animals are humans. Technically speaking, “animal liberation” is actually a logical impossibility, a contradiction in terms. The animal cannot be free(d) and remain an animal, just as the prisoner cannot be freed and simultaneously remain a prisoner—in theory at least, since “you ain’t gotta be locked up to be in prison” (Dead Prez, 2000). “Wild,” “free,” and even “freed” animals remain unliberated because they are always dominable, or in Jeff McMahan’s terms, “fully violable” (2002, p. 265; cf. Srinivasan 2022, p. 361–362). Only the inviolable human is conceptually free. Without eliding critical differences between human and animal captivities, I borrow Hortense Spillers’s (2009) description of a captivity immune to “movement”:

Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated”, and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, *remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement*, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (p. 447, cited in Wilderson, 2003, p. 237)

“The ruling episteme” governing the animal is likewise “grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity

and mutilation,” and domination more broadly conceived. The animal must be “‘murdered’ over and over again,” even if sometimes only in the imagination. Returning to Gallant, Robyn Maynard (2023) counters: “There are no ‘human animals.’” In this context—as Ko’s decolonial intervention applies elsewhere—Maynard is correct, technically, and Gallant is wrong. A “human animal” is an oxymoron because one cannot simultaneously be both human and animal. Yet Gallant denies the “humanity” of Palestinians altogether. In the eyes of the Israeli state, Palestinians are human-like animals, *not* animal-like humans (“human” is the adjective in the phrase). Social humanity does not include Palestinians. Again, the “animal” homograph confuses.

I. ANIMAL SUBALTERNIS

In *The War Against Animals*, Dinesh Wadiwel (2015) confides that he is not the first to assert that humans have waged a literal war against animals. If we adopt Wadiwel’s definition of war—following Carl Von Clausewitz—as “a phenomenon of mass or corporate organised violence that aims at total domination” (p. 16), human relations with animals stand as an example of war par excellence. Of course, this conclusion is predicated on a sincere acknowledgement of animals as *true victims* of domination, whose liberation is the remedy to the organized violence that pursues their subjugation and annihilation. This acknowledgement—a precondition of the conclusion—is a formidable hurdle for many humans, including those on the political Left, who, as Donaldson and Kymlicka (2013) note, “do not believe that these injustices [against animals] are of any real significance” (p. 126; cf. Sanbonmatsu, 2011, p. 13). Rejecting the assumption of the insignificance of these injustices, it is through the lens of domination that I suggest a trans-species redefining of “subaltern” to include animal oppression and liberation.

I add a confession similar to Wadiwel’s: I am not the first to assert animal subalternity. Over a decade ago, in *Reading the Animal in the Literature of the British Raj*, Shefali Rajamannar (2012) wrote that “the animal is the ultimate subaltern” (p. 7). Yamini Narayanan (2017) later described a “subaltern animism” as “the formulation of new multispecies-inclusive geographies or planning theories that recognise the agency and personhood of non-humans, as well as the ways in which they claim and occupy space” (p. 488). In *Subaltern Studies 2.0: Being Against the Anthropocene*, Milinda Banerjee and Jelle J.P. Wouters (2022) advocated for “placing subaltern communities, human and other-than-human, at the center of all policy

changes to regulate capital and pierce the veil of sovereign immunity claimed by states” (p. 120). Most recently, in *Indifference: On the Praxis of Interspecies Being*, Naisargi Dave (2023) reflected on “Animals and Other Subalterns,” specifically in the context of resistance (Chapter 4). Before returning to this relatively recent and underappreciated intervention advancing animal subalternity—especially to the work of Banerjee and Wouters—I suggest that the biological animal also warrants inclusion into the earlier Subaltern Studies 1.0 project. In short, I ask: Why has subalternity—from its coinage to the present—generally been restricted to the human? How is subalternity, in any of its formulations, not explicitly and unanimously a trans-species category?²

Subaltern Studies 1.0

Around the turn of the eighteenth century, “subaltern” was a general term for inferior military ranks and peasants. In the following centuries, historians would write histories *about* subalterns. The term “subaltern” was later used by Antonio Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks* (written between 1929 and 1935 and first translated into English in 1966), which “began to weave ideas about subaltern identity into theories of class struggle” (Ludden, 2001, p. 5). Marcus Green (2011) rejects the prevailing “censorship thesis” that maintains that Gramsci chose the ambiguous term “subaltern” to avoid prison censorship when referring to the working class and peasant class. Green underscores that Gramsci used “subaltern” both simultaneously with, and distinctly from, “proletariat” throughout the *Notebooks*. Hence, “subaltern” is neither a codeword nor a synonym for class subordination: “Gramsci never reduces subordination to a single relation, but rather conceives subalternity as an intersectionality of the variations of race, class, gender, culture, religion, nationalism, and colonialism functioning within an ensemble of socio-political and economic relations” (p. 400).

Largely owing to the work of Raymond Williams, Gramsci’s ideas became well known to Subaltern Studies historians. Most scholars within the collective accepted the “subaltern” censorship thesis, which meant that for this emergent field, “subaltern” functioned “*de novo*” (Ludden, 2001, p. 16) as a sociological category extending beyond the single relation of class to enfold other human hierarchies, in particular caste-based discrimination. Led by Ranajit Guha, the Subaltern Studies group emerged in the early 1980s with Indian and English historians interested in writing histories of South Asia “from below.”³ Guha (1982a) wrote:

For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people (p. 4).

Oxford University Press in Delhi began to publish *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* in 1982. By 2001, eleven *Subaltern Studies* volumes had appeared. Notably, while the field focused on subaltern histories, prior to 1985 there was no unanimous or even clear definition of “subalternity” (Ludden, 2001, p. 17). In *Subaltern Studies IV*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (1985) defined the term as “the composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of domination and hierarchy” (p. 376, cited in Ludden, 2001, 18). In the years that followed, “subalternity” evolved transnationally with the idea increasingly applied to diverse populations and cultures oppressed under colonialism.

Exclusion and Inclusion

As for the term “subaltern,” in the preface to *Subaltern Studies I*, Guha (1982b) offered a preliminary definition:

The word ‘subaltern’ in the title stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, ‘of inferior rank’. It will be used as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, gender and office or in any other way. (p. vii)

In “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” featured in the same volume, Guha (1982a) continued:

The terms “people” and “subaltern classes” have been used as synonymous throughout this note. The social groups and elements in this category represent *the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite*. (p. 8)

Two years later, in *Subaltern Studies III*, in response to criticisms regarding the simplistic binary of elite–subaltern as well as the incorporation of the concept—the Gramscian notion of the subaltern—into South Asian historiography, Sumit Sarkar (1984) offered a clar-

ification. He noted that “[s]ubaltern” is no more free of ambiguities and problems than its rough equivalents (for example ‘popular,’ ‘mass,’ ‘lower-class’); it does have the advantage however of emphasizing the fundamental relationships of power, of domination and subordination” (p. 273). The value of the term, Sarkar asserts, lies in its capacity to foreground fundamental power relations: domination and subordination. Ironically, although Subaltern Studies is thought to have redefined “subaltern,” this “advantage” was already embedded in Gramsci’s own conception—at least according to Green—which presented domination and subordination as irreducible to any single axis, including class.

In *Subaltern Studies IV*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985) discussed the tricky question of a “subaltern consciousness” (which does not deny heterogeneity of subaltern consciousnesses), that may be roughly described as an “emergent collective consciousness” among the non-elite (p. 343). Years later, in an interview with Leon de Kock, Spivak provided a more nuanced perspective on subaltern subordination given the critical blowback to her seminal 1988 article “Can the Subaltern speak?”. Spivak (1992) clarified that while “the oppressed” is often used as a synonym for “subaltern,” the former term does not accurately capture the sense of voicelessness that Spivak associates with subaltern identity: “Now, who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern.” Spivak continues: “When you say cannot speak, it means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern’s sphere” (p. 45–46). Spivak’s understanding connects with Arundhati Roy’s (2004) oft-repeated pronouncement that “[t]here’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

Linking Spivak’s exegetical nuance to the idea of animal subalterns, the presence of “voicelessness” has been and remains common to animal advocacy rhetoric. Disability and animal liberation scholar Sunaura Taylor suggests that the widespread attribution of voicelessness to animals from *within* advocacy circles most likely derives from a poem composed by Ella Wheeler Wilcox in 1910 (Taylor, 2002, p. 61; original in Wilcox, 1910). “The Voice of the Voiceless” begins: “I am the Voice of the Voiceless, Through me deaf and dumb shall speak,” and continues, “And I am my brother’s keeper, And I shall fight their fight, And I speak the word for beast and bird, Till the world shall set things right.” Wilcox’s prose is well intentioned, yet Taylor problematizes

“voicelessness” from both anti-speciesist and anti-ableist perspectives. Building on Jason Hribal’s *Fear of an Animal Planet* with additional examples, Taylor underscores the rather obvious, but nevertheless overlooked, facticity of animals’ expressions of defiance: “We deliberately have to choose not to hear when the lobster bangs on the walls from inside a pot of boiling water or when the hen who is past her egg-laying prime struggles against the human hands that enclose her neck” (Taylor, 2002, p. 83; cf. Dave, 2019; Hribal, 2011; Meijer, 2019; Wallace, 2024; Wadiwel, 2023, Chapter 6; Animal⊗Resistance, n.d.).

Critics, especially Eva Meijer (2019), rightly warn against the danger of attributing voicelessness to animals, as it can further ingrain the human exceptionalist myth of animals’ nonsubjectivity. Nonhuman voices are rarely recognized, inside or outside political theory, as real voices at all, which is a remarkable nonrecognition, especially among those who study subalternity and labor. As Taylor and Wadwel emphasize, *subaltern human* labor in “food animal” industries primarily involves managing and suppressing *subaltern animals’* “voices” of resistance. Technologies such as herding, confining, isolating, binding, prodding, debeaking, docking, dehorning, and medicating function as instruments of domination, designed to break animals’ noncompliance and render them controllable. Nonetheless, the utterances and movements of animals typically register apolitically as mere grunts, snorts, and yelps. Their expressions fail to signify the presence of a subaltern subject—or *any* subject—to human interpreters, including those on the Left. Given this widespread “preferable unhearing,” animal advocates argue not only for the recognition of animals as legal and political subjects (Francione, 2008), but also, and much more fundamentally, as mere subjects based on everyday observation and common sense.

Spivak is surely cognizant of the various ways that oppressed humans (and presumably animals) actualize their displeasure and resistance to oppression, and in this manner carry some form of voice. In the same interview, Spivak remarks that “[t]he third thing, which is the worst, that is, you don’t give the subaltern voice. You work for the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity” (1992, p. 46). Spivak’s comments may seem perplexing at first, or even contradictory, on the topic of the voice of the subaltern. On the one hand, the subaltern cannot speak, but on the other hand, you don’t give the subaltern a voice. Yet Spivak is specifically concerned with the fact that “the possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern’s sphere.”

The subaltern subject—insofar as the subaltern subject is recognized at all by the elite—may exist as a “person,” but not one whose voice must be taken seriously, or whose voice commands serious listening, or whose voiced needs and wishes command any type of response. One works for the subaltern by making the latter’s voice legible and legitimate, rather than replacing it. I suggest that the ubiquitous epistemic violence (Wadiwel, 2015, pp. 29–36) exercised against animals, a violence that erases not only their voices but their very existence as dominated subjects, positions animals at the absolute nadir of subalternity. In this context, there is no possibility of “response,” in a Spivakian sense, for allegedly there is no voice or meaningful utterance to which to reply.

The distinctively abject (and object) position of animals impels Rajamannar to posit the animal as the ultimate subaltern. Ko describes this dire predicament: “If human is the definition of value itself, then, following the golden rule of the human-animal opposition, the animal is the definitive representation of the absence of value itself” (Ko & Ko, 2017, p. 111). I have no wish to debate ultimate subalternity and nor does Rajamannar’s contention need to be interpreted as a claim about the unsurpassable extent to which animals, qualitatively and quantitatively, are oppressed. Nor must her claim be read as a conjecture about the first or *ur*-subaltern. Rather, the “ultimate” label suggests that the emergence and stability of the “free” ontological category “human” depends upon the “unfree” ontological category “animal.” Accordingly, as noted earlier, discourses concerning—and issuing from—human subalterns routinely involve references to their dehumanization, subhumanization, and animalization by dominant classes. The political utility of reinforcing animal valuelessness at one end of the human-animal binary has arguably been essential to subaltern human resistance. Yet, both theoretically and politically, this move has proven—and continues to be—disastrous for animal subalterns.

Subaltern Studies 2.0

Several years ago, when I started thinking and writing about animal subalterns, I was informed of the then-forthcoming publication of *Subaltern Studies 2.0: Being against the Capitalocene* (Banerjee & Wouters, 2022). Opening the text, I was relieved by its direct and unabashed engagement with nonhuman lives and lifeworlds: “Where Subaltern Studies 1.0 focused on human communities, we must recognize the interdependence between human and nonhuman that has always character-

ized noncapitalist life worlds: think through multibeing communities” (p. 5). The text includes an even grittier description of the bio-necro-capitalist transformation of bodies into machines: “The accumulation of power and property alike requires that beings be treated not as beings but as living corpses: vocal and nonvocal instruments to be subjected, used, consumed” (p. 8). The text labels animals as the first colonial subjects: “If we define colonialism as a form of systematic exploitation that invades and subordinates another political system and legitimates this conquest through ideology, then the first colonialism that human beings perpetrated was undoubtedly over the animal world” (p. 98). The authors continue: “[W]e can better interpret colonialism as involving multispecies imperialism” (p. 101) and thus “[w]e advocate for placing subaltern communities, human and other-than-human, at the center of all policy changes to regulate capital and pierce the veil of sovereign immunity claimed by states” (p. 120). I was pleasantly surprised: finally, a Subaltern Studies text proposing an animal-inclusive conception of subalternity, one that properly recognizes individuality and sovereignty as a trans-species phenomenon. Yet reading this volume, which admittedly is more poetry and polemic than sustained argument, I noticed how animals were repeatedly discussed alongside all manifestations of “nature.” For example: “The study of ‘animal culture’ is a flourishing field today, as are ever-growing paradigms like ‘animal personhood,’ ‘plant kinship,’ ‘multispecies becoming,’ ‘earth Animism,’ and ‘ecologies of relations’” (p. 93). As a result, “[s]ociety must now be amended in service of a demos that surpasses the human, where nonhuman beings are ancient and indigenous citizens. Comrade metapersons must help us drown the sad freedom of possessive man” (p. 112). Metapersons? I am torn. While the authors elevate the “multispecies demos” project of Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2013)—one that centers on nonhuman animal species and not all nonhuman species—their language betrays an embrace of entanglement theories of “nature” recently critiqued by Giraud and Wadiwel (also see Steiner, 2013; Weisberg, 2014). The danger here involves obscuring the structural antagonism inherent to human-animal relations and opting for a much wider and nebulous “nature”-centered theory. This latter approach conjures “the vegetal turn,” a relatively recent scientific and academic pivot that investigates the “increasingly sophisticated, inter- and trans-disciplinary, inter- and trans-cultural explorations of the manifold systems and networks of communication, intelligence, technical-operational capa-

bilities, and relations articulated by and via plants” (Di Paola, 2024).⁴ While I have no fundamental disagreement with this area of inquiry and resultant ethical debate (Kallhoff, Di Paola, & Schörghöfer, 2018). I wonder if we have ever grappled satisfactorily with the animal turn. Has there ever really been one?

II. RELATEDNESS AND ENTANGLEMENT

Radhika Govindarajan’s work on human-animal relations in the Himalayas and Muhammed Kavesh’s account of animal “keepers” in Pakistan foreground the inescapable “relatedness” and “entanglement” of multi-species interactivity. The popularization of theories of relatedness and entanglement owes largely to the work of Donna Haraway (2003; 2008; 2016). Giraud (2019) summarizes this entire body of work as one that “has emphasized the ways that human existence has always been knotted together with the lives of other entities” (p. 42). Ethically speaking, Haraway adds: “It is a question of cosmopolitics, of learning to be ‘polite’ in responsible relation to always asymmetrical living and dying, and nurturing and killing” (2014, p. 42).⁵ The situation is extraordinarily messy, both in theory and in practice. Corresponding with Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi in the context of lethal experiments on laboratory animals, Haraway replies: “I refuse the choice of ‘inviolable animal rights’ versus ‘human good is more important.’ Both of those proceed as if calculation solved the dilemma, and all I or we have to do is choose” (2014, p. 87). Haraway warns against oversimplifying thorny ethical issues by means of “calculation” and simply “choosing” the more attractive moral sum. I, too, acknowledge this complexity and do not argue for a totalizing normative framework, whether it favors utilitarianism, inviolable rights, or an ethics of care. In step with Haraway, I even admit the possibility that some instrumental relationships between humans and animals (and perhaps even between humans and other humans) are in fact permissible. Yet at the moment I am interested in, sensitive to, and troubled by how the language, theory, and politics of “politeness”—and even more significantly, “violence”—are differentially applied to human and animal actors and victims.

On Violence

I share Wadiwel’s curiosity regarding how “the actual word ‘violence’ barely seems to figure in Haraway’s text” (2015, p. 215). The powers to define and apply—or withhold—violence-coded words such as “cruel,” “unnecessary,” and “excessive” typically lie in the hands

of the oppressor, in this case humans who regard animals as being intrinsically dominable. Hence the problem, and its potential remedy, starts from how animals are *antagonistically* viewed and categorized. Thus, it is critical to “unpack epistemic violence, particularly that violence which is rendered as ‘not violence’ through a pervasive system of truth” (p. 215). One example of a “pervasive system of truth” is a perspective not entirely insensitive to the welfare of animals, but nevertheless obstructive to any stable definition of violence. From this viewpoint, the power to concede or deny “violence” is restricted to those very humans most implicated in, and often benefiting from, the human-animal entanglement. Kavesh’s account of animal keepers in Pakistan is representative:

As a work of multi-species anthropology, the book focuses on the entanglement of the human and animal lifeworlds in rural Pakistan and argues that to explore such entanglement, we must pay attention to how human and animal lives unfold through a complex relationship of care and violence. Pigeon flyers, cockfighters, or dogfighters care for their animals by decorating their bodies and providing them protection and a good diet, and yet, since they engage them in competitive activities that may result in exhaustion, injury, or death, this appears as violence to urban animal rights activists. (2020, 7–8)

Kavesh criticizes the reflex labeling of pigeon flying, cockfighting, and dogfighting in Pakistan as acts of “violence,” pointing instead to the ornamentation, nourishment, and overall care these animals receive from their handlers. Yet the existence of “violence” cannot simply be negated by the presence of such provisions—especially when these offerings often serve to enhance the animals’ performance as flyers or fighters. Much more compellingly, Kavesh’s perspective emphasizes the culturally specific, affective dimensions of these practices, highlighting notions of *shauq* (delight, joy) and *izzat* (honor) (2020, p. 1–11), much like Govindarajan’s evocation of *mamta* (maternal love) in her own work. These affective elements escape commonplace moral philosophical reductive reasoning and thus complicate standard conceptions of violence and subsequent calls for intervention or “justice.” Accordingly, what may be perceived as violence by those outside of these human-animal relations may *actually* constitute complex entanglements resistant to universal moral

principles, since such principles fail to satisfactorily integrate various historical, cultural, and emotional factors.

This conception is clearly not entirely false, but as Claire Jean Kim (2015) remarks: “That they [insiders] have access to different kinds of knowledge than outsiders seems plausible . . . But this knowledge, like all knowledge, is partial and contingent . . . Insiders bring something to the table with regard to ethical evaluation, then, but so, too, do outsiders” (p.195). Additionally, insider and outside group views are neither uniform or consistent in their allegiance to supposedly “natural” (read: authoritative) insider views. As John Walzer (1987) notes in his Tanner Lectures on social criticism, “standards of virtuous character, worthy performance, just social arrangements” are “social artifacts” subject to interpretation both inside and outside of the group within which they persist. These standards are interpreted in *both* “apologetic and critical ways” by insiders themselves. Thus, if apologetic interpretations are instinctually (and problematically) considered to be the “natural” ones, then insider critics resemble critical outsiders who only happen to be from the insider group (p. 48). In short, any appeal to a surface insider–outsider dynamic misses the perspectival diversity always present within both groups and, more importantly, frays as the emphasis shifts to an analysis of who has *power* within a group, over whom it is wielded, and who maintains the authority to describe and moralize about it.

In response to Kavesh, I first note how referring to pigeon flying, cockfighting, and dogfighting (and animal sacrifice) as “violence” is not the rhetorical monopoly of urbanites, animal rights activists, or urban animal activists. Second, and more significantly, it is unsettling to advance that violence is no longer violence (or domination) once we concede histories of entanglement, the co-presence of feelings of delight, honor, love, or care, and the “cultural importance” of various animal-manipulating enterprises (Kavesh, 2020, p. 114). As Wadiwel warns: “Epistemic violence allows us to name these relations, almost without a moment of self reflection, under the guise of ‘friendship’” (2023, p. 220).⁶ The implication is not only that the presence of friendship, love, and care in human-animals relations somehow neutralizes the co-presence of violence in those relations, but that the humans perpetuating those relations somehow earn the authority to dictate what is and what is not “friendship” between humans and animals, and hence also what is and what is not “violence.” Kim takes Wadiwel’s insistence on “self reflection,” and reflection more generally, very seriously. Kim tackles the class and

racial complexities involved in the infamous Michael Vick dogfighting case—including defenses of dogfighting that appeal to care and love—yet neither elides nor downplays the unmistakable violence embedded in this dynamic, no matter the relevance of various situational complexities (2017, Chapter 8).

Haraway does not present the same argument as Kavesh, instead confessing that harm, and perhaps even violence, unavoidably permeate human-animal relations. Haraway perceives the facticity of harm as a phenomenon woven into the histories and futures of human-animal entanglements. Haraway also asserts that animals do not necessarily lose agency when forced into exploitative relations with humans. With respect to animals subjected to laboratory experimentation, and with some characteristic “elaborate wordplay” (Nocella II et al., 2014, p. xxiv). Haraway states: “People and animals in labs are both subjects and objects to each other in ongoing intra-action.” They then ask: “What happens if the *working animals are significant others* with whom we are in consequential relationship in an irreducible world of embodied and lived partial differences, rather than the Other across the gulf from the One?” (2008, pp. 71–72).

My concern, to again quote Wadiwel (here in reference to Haraway), is the “shy[ing] away from naming a systematic form of domination that characterises our relations with animals” (2015, p. 219). Kavesh apparently not only contests the accusation of a “systemic form of domination,” but even the mere presence of violence in human-animal relations that intentionally subject animals to clear harms and the possibility of a brutal death. Haraway is more hesitant to concede the charge of domination than that of violence, and Govindrajan likewise does not deny the violence of animal sacrifice and embedded in other harmful human-animal relations. However, Govindrajan does pause before framing these relations as indicative of a structural domination, of an institutionalized conflict waged by humans “at war” with animals. Speaking generally, Govindrajan concludes in the context of animal sacrifice: “This was the violence at the heart of relatedness, the expected outcome of a difficult yet inevitable entangling of lives and fates.” (2018, p. 176). Yet are these entanglements truly “inevitable,” or rather the “expected outcome” of directed and dominating power?

The Question of Intervention

Fortunately for animals, several scholars have drawn attention to how entanglement framings foreclose the possibility of critique and intervention, particularly

since appeals to entangled worlds tend to deny more conventional counterclaims about power and violence (Arcari, Probyn-Rapsey, & Singer, 2021; Hollin et al., 2017; Weisberg, 2009). Giraud warns of the limits of relationality, emphasizing its inadequacy in addressing opposition and asymmetry between parties in what are far from inevitable entanglements:

The problem is that relational approaches do not just make intervention difficult but actively problematize conventional modes of ethics and politics because relationality—as a conceptual commitment—is, in part, constituted by a resistance to ethico-politics that is perceived to lack this complexity. The paradox of relationality, in other words, is that it struggles to accommodate things that are resistant to being in relation, including forms of politics that actively oppose particular relations. (2019, p. 7)

In addition, while not rejecting the plausibility of entanglement as a descriptive or even prescriptive lens, Paula Arcari et al. ask:

- (1) how do types of entanglement vary across species and between individuals within species?
- (2) to whose benefit, primarily, is the entanglement?
- (3) is there an option for another species to end or refuse the entanglement?
- and (4) who is being excluded from a particular conception of entanglement? (2021, p. 16)⁷

The third question—regarding the possibility for animals (or humans) to stop, refuse, or renegotiate their relations with humans—resonates with Giraud’s concern for “forms of politics that actively oppose particular relations.” These forms of politics must include the situation of “outright compulsion” that so often structures human-animal relationships, nowhere more starkly than in “food animal” industries, where refusal is impossible and entanglement is constantly enforced.

I read the fourth question, “Who is being excluded from a particular conception of entanglement?” as the converse of my own question about animals’ exclusion from mainstream conceptions of “subaltern,” or even “oppressed.” If relations between communities and the individuals within those communities are the products of complex historical entanglements irreducible to normative ethical principles, then what justifies excluding humans from this notion of entangled relationality, including when the relations are antagonistic and lethal? It is both curious and disconcerting that conceptions of

entanglement are employed to describe human-animal (and also human-nonhuman nonanimal) relations but are either modified or omitted in discussions of human-human relations. I wonder if those who are sympathetic to entanglement would accept presentations of human enslavement, labor exploitation, physical and sexual abuse, and various others forms of interpersonal human violence as mere “intra-action,” with the oppressed humans being, viewed in Haraway’s terms, “*significant others* with whom we are in consequential relationship in an irreducible world of embodied and lived partial differences.” Haraway is correct that oppressed animals and humans do not lose all agency as a consequence of their domination—they remain “actors” despite their circumstances. However, even as actors they can still be unjustly harmed and denied the ability to “end or refuse the entanglement,” no matter how defiantly they struggle. Outsider intervention may therefore become necessary, yet this intervention is precisely what is discouraged based on its purported insensitivity to complexities, both ontological and local.

If those who elevate the idea of entanglement harbor resistance to conventional ethico-politics, then why do they not express a similar hesitancy in the context of human-human conflicts and corresponding remedial intercessions? Caste-based human discrimination and violence would not be tolerated, let alone exonerated, on the basis of its being viewed as a product of complexity, relatedness, and entanglement. Are Hindutva vigilantes and their Muslim, Christian, and Dalit victims enmeshed in a politically illegible ecology that ought to be left alone owing to its relational complexity? Or should we, following Wadiwel, insist that these are not mere “contact zones” where “agents interact and co-shape each other,” but also “conflict zones” defined by structural antagonism and ever-present violence? (2018, p. 540). Do such conflict zones not require action from inside, and perhaps also from outside, the relations?

In a later publication by Govindrajana (2018), an interlocutor named Mohini *chachi* laments some of the painful and regrettable contradictions present in human-bovine “contact zones”:

What a thing God has made, this love. After a lifetime of doing work for animals [*jaamvaron ka kaam*] you come to feel such *moh-maya* [love⁸] for them that you can’t sleep at night thinking of them trembling in the cold. But in the end, we sell or let them loose after they stop giving milk. . . . This greed for milk is a terrible thing. I don’t know if God will for-

give us for thieving milk from their calves. . . .
Maybe that's why we call it *moh-maya*. (p. 213)

Even in the midst of deep interspecies intimacy and caregiving, Mohini *chachi* admits her “undeniable ‘complicity’ in the violent extraction of animal labor” (p. 196). The ethical tension surrounding this extraction is not merely imposed from the outside but emerges as a concern for those most closely entwined—both physically and emotionally—with their laboring animals. Mohini *chachi* loves her animals but also remains unsettled by her personal role in the structural antagonism at the heart of both labor and substance extraction.

Traditional ethics and entanglement theory jointly operate in two contradictory ways, both discriminating against animals and in favor of humans. On the one hand, animals are denied subaltern status owing to an entrenched human-animal binarism joined with both philosophical and political anxieties about the consequences for human liberation struggles. On the other hand, violent relationality, as in the case of caste-based violence, is framed as an urgent ethical issue demanding intervention—one that cannot be vindicated by an appeal to “intra-action”—only when humans are the victims of the entanglement. Animals are excluded from the conventional ethico-politics of justice on the basis of not being human, and humans are excluded from the nonconventional ethico-politics of entanglement on the basis of not being animals. The human-animal binary remains intact. A lingering concern with *Subaltern Studies 2.0* is not its enfolding of animals into the domain of subalternity, but rather how subalternity loses its power when the inclusion of animals immediately summons entanglement thinking or the immediate inclusion of all “nature,” as if we can only have the former with the latter.

III. CRITIQUE 2.0

Subaltern Studies 2.0 has drawn numerous critiques, many of which lie outside the scope of this discussion. However, one review speaks directly to the sensitivities surrounding any claim for animal subalternity. In “A Failed Manifesto,” Richard Pithouse, like me, begins with the figure of the “human animal” in Palestine. Citing Gallant’s phrase and invoking Fanon, Pithouse emphasizes how the central ideological weapon of colonialism is the dehumanization/animalization of the colonized population. In response, anti-colonial ideology and discourse has historically advanced a “defiant affirmation of a universal humanism” as a counterforce. Accordingly, Pithouse maintains:

A manifesto that announces an end to the separation between the animal and the human must address the long and ongoing history of the ways colonized and other oppressed people have been animalized, excluded in full or in part from the count of the human. It must also address the fact that oppressed people have built and sustained movements in the face of murderous repression in the name of the human. (Bajaj et al., 2023, n.p.)

I agree that any argument for animal liberation must address past and present ideologies and practices of animalization between human groups. As emphasized throughout this essay, “the animal” and “the human” are little, if anything, but terms of domination and oppression, and it is impossible to summon one without the other. This is exactly why Pithouse glosses “animalization” with being “excluded in full or in part from the count of the human.” I also affirm the importance of recognizing why liberation movements have historically rallied around the category of the “human.” “Human” is not only a category of relative safety and superiority, but it is also an assault category, first deployed by dominant groups. It is *only* in response to animalization that liberation-seeking subaltern humans *defensively* reclaim the term. Oppressed humans insist on their humanity only when they have been animalized; to fault the oppressed for counter-firing the weapon of “the human” is misguided.⁹ Nevertheless, Ko warns against endlessly reinforcing anti-animal logics and reproducing a zero-sum game. For this reason, they “advise against the strategy of ‘humanizing’ groups of color, or gaining protections for vulnerable groups on the basis of *their humanity*” (2017, p. 47). Looking forward, we may ask ourselves: Is it possible to build and sustain liberation movements in the name of the subaltern, rather than in the name of the human?

Pithouse’s critique lacks any direct repudiation of humanism. A thoroughgoing critique of humanism—along the lines of Ko—not only undermines anthropocentric speciesism (Horta & Albersmeier, 2020) but also rejects the humanization of humans *and* the animalization of animals. One vital expression of the rejection of humanism is the embrace of a trans-species subalternity, and such an embrace must be genuine and unreserved. Hence, I am suspicious that Pithouse’s call for “great care” in possibly relinquishing humanism functions as a subtle mechanism for subordinating subaltern animal-centric issues to subaltern human-centric ones.¹⁰ I draw here on John Rawls’s (1971) notion of lexical priority,

“an order which requires us to satisfy the first principle in the ordering before we can move on to the second, the second before we consider the third, and so on. A principle does not come into play until those previous to it are either fully met or do not apply” (p. 42–43). An anthropocentric lexical priority would maintain that any and all humans’ interests (or most human interests, in a modified account) outweigh any and all animals’ interests, no matter the number of individual humans or animals involved, the nature of the interests, and the nature of the harms threatened. In essence, human needs and wants must be “cared for” before we consider any of the needs and wants of nonhumans. This framework is not only philosophically weak but also immediately discriminatory in practice, thereby meriting both our suspicion and critique. That being said, I struggle to take any definitive stance (nor is it my place, perhaps), since the *conceptual* abandonment of humanism surely does not mean an abandonment of the *material* care for actual humans, and perhaps cannot even demand the total abandonment of the *strategic* political vocabulary of “the human” by the oppressed. For now, I leave this issue unresolved and resurrect my previous qualification that this essay is a categorical intervention with unresolved implications for those involved in ethical and political projects.

IV. CLOSING

In *To Be Cared For*, Nathaniel Roberts (2016) describes social life in the near-exclusively Dalit slums of Chennai. Roberts describes how the prevalent understanding of humanity is rooted in the notion of care:

To be human was to be vulnerable and susceptible to harm. It was also to care instinctively about those who were in need, whoever they might be, and to feel called upon to care for them. And finally, to be human was to be oneself worthy of being cared for by others. (p. 78)¹¹

Relating care to invisibility—here resonating with Roy’s “unhearing”—Roberts adds:

What I gloss with the English word care corresponded to no single word in slum dwellers’ lexicon. It summarizes a constellation of inter-related words and concepts. One such word was *par*, which literally means “seeing” or “looking at,” but which also means “attending to” someone out of concern, acknowledging

that person’s presence, treating him or her as consequential. (p. 78)

Slum dwellers say of the elite: “They don’t *see* us.” I wonder if they would say: “They don’t *hear* us.” I wonder if they would say that they are politically voiceless.

I have argued for including animals in the category of the subaltern from within extant theories of human-human relations. I pointed to the definitional and material domination of animals and their near-complete lack of political voice. Recent contributions to Subaltern Studies lend support to this inclusion, but more significantly, the foundational concerns of the Subaltern Studies project itself justify a retroactive expansion of its framework to enfold animals. More broadly, my work calls for the disavowal of “the human” as a normative axis of political value. This call arises from the term’s pervasive, exclusionary anthropocentrism, the obscuration of its own racialized history, and, perhaps most impactfully, its role in naturalizing structural hierarchies under the guise of biology or ontology. I have not made an argument for how exactly humans should reimagine and restructure their relations with animals once they are admitted as subaltern populations. While I challenge how some contemporary relational theories situate animals differently than humans with no convincing justification, I have made no argument against the veracity of these theories overall. My claim is singular but critical: subalternity as a trans-species category. The acceptance of this claim does not simply permit the inclusion of animals into subaltern justice discourse—it requires it.

NOTES

¹ Krthika Srinivasan’s (2022) much more palatable “re-animalization” includes the task to “develop grammars to denounce and combat the material processes associated with ‘dehumanisation’ without resorting to negative references to ‘being animal or animalised’, i.e. without being zoöpolitically exceptionalist” (p. 364).

² The acknowledgement of animals as part of the “working class” (subaltern or not) under capitalism has often gone unrecognized. A foundational argument of Wadivel’s *Animals and Capital* (2023, p. 14) is the trifold status of animals (particularly “food animals”) as commodities, raw materials, and labor. Even outside the frameworks of war and subalternity, anticapitalistic liberation efforts concerned with labor cannot simply ignore—without integrating an untenable speciesism—nonhuman worker exploitation.

³ For an explicit intervention in “writing the history of animals from below,” see Hribal (2007, pp 101–112).

⁴ While “the vegetal turn” has been operative in the sciences for decades, one wonders when it gained traction in the humanities, especially outside of philosophy. I wonder if anthropologist Anna Tsing’s text *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015) was the tipping point?

⁵ Govindrajan (2018) states similarly: “A reparative love, I propose, refuses purity and coherence, and instead works through complicity and ambiguity. It demands ongoing embodied labor that is relational, ‘response-able,’ and aspires to transformation even as it remains mired in violence” (p. 215).

⁶ Wadiwel (2023) does not deny that “friendship” may very well exist, but that “[t]he war against animals does, however, frame the terms for this friendship, and forces us to place our relations with non human companions in question” (p. 220).

⁷ Question 3 begs the question of whether or not “laborer” is the proper descriptor for “food animals.” If animals have no option to initiate, dictate, or end the entanglement, is “slave” not a more appropriate name? Wadiwel (2023) states: “Animals are not free of the means of production – the means to realise the value of their labour – since food animals are the means of production. Nor is there an in-principle freedom to sell one’s own labour, since animals do not own their labour to sell. Compulsion cloaked under the guise of freedom (as implied by the human labour contract under capitalism) is replaced by outright compulsion” (p. 76). Later in the text Wadiwel distinguishes slavery (exclusively racial slavery) and animal labor, but ultimately, I find the argument for withholding the term “slavery” from animal labor unconvincing (p. 92–98).

⁸ According to Govindrajan (2018), *moh-maya* is “literally, the illusion of love” (p. 213).

⁹ “Beef festivals” are an example of the complexity of this issue (Natrajan, 2018).

¹⁰ “If one wishes to make an argument for abandoning humanism and breaking down the separation between the animal and human, it needs to be done with an awareness of all this, and with great care” (Bajaj et al., 2023, emphasis added).

¹¹ Notice how Spivak’s sensitivity and this notion of care converge in de la Bellacasa’s (2011) description of care: “[C]are connotes attention and worry for those who can be harmed by an assemblage but whose voices are less valued, as are their concerns and need for care” (p. 92).

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