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## Introduction: Critical Animal Studies Perspectives on Covid-19

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### Abstract

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# Introduction:

## Critical Animal Studies Perspectives on Covid-19

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**Chloë Taylor, Kelly Struthers Montford and Eva Kasprzycka**

From its genesis to its impacts, animal advocates and critical animal studies scholars have observed that the COVID-19 pandemic, and other zoonotic disease epidemics and pandemics that have preceded it, highlight the devastating repercussions of human exploitation of other animals, and the interlocking of human and animal oppressions. This special topics issue of *Animal Studies Journal* collects critical animal studies scholarship and creative work that explores these connections.

Animals have been everywhere in the Covid-19 pandemic, for those who were paying attention. Early in the pandemic we heard much about bats, pangolins, live animal markets and human encroachment on wild animal habitats as the causes of zoonoses such as and including Covid-19. To a lesser extent, we heard critiques of the often Sinophobic focus on wild animal markets, as a racist and xenophobic diversion from the fact that Western industrial animal agriculture is not only equally cruel to animals but has also been and will continue to be a source of zoonotic disease transmission. Early in the pandemic, we also witnessed wild animals who were eager to take up more space, returning to beaches and urban areas that had been suddenly evacuated by humans. The fact that, in ‘normal’ times, humans take up far *too* much space was apparent.

Throughout the pandemic, we heard of record numbers of companion animals – mostly dogs and cats, but also other animals, such as backyard hens – being adopted by humans lonely or with time on their hands as they sheltered in place, or concerned about their protein supply. We heard much about the psychological benefits of having pets when struggling with conditions

of loneliness, depression, and anxiety that the pandemic induced in many. To a lesser extent, we heard of these same animals being abandoned when lockdowns were lifted.

Although these animals were rarely mentioned in the news, in the rush to find vaccines for Covid-19, many of us were aware of the animals who were being sacrificed in animal study trials for some, but not all, of these antidotes. Those of us at universities who cared to know were also aware that in the first waves of lockdown and campus closures, millions of lab animals, particularly mice, were killed when the studies for which they were unwilling subjects were suspended; due to their lives being devalued and deemed fungible, not enough people were allowed on campus to keep these animals alive. More rarely, we heard of researchers who brought lab animals into their homes, and wild-caught animals such as fish who would otherwise have been destined to laboratory experimentation who were released back into the wild as shelter-in-place orders went into effect.

Throughout the pandemic, we also heard much about dead animals and the sites where they are killed, as panicked consumers hoarded meat, meat-packing was declared an essential service, slaughterhouses became hotbeds of virus transmission where the lives of the most marginalized and exploited workers were deemed dispensable, and some employees of abattoirs called for meat boycotts. Although the unusual amount of media attention to the deplorable conditions in these sites of interlocking human and animal oppression was welcomed by animal as well as labour advocates, many were also disappointed that this critical scrutiny of slaughterhouses remained almost entirely anthropocentric.

As this overview indicates, just as there was a minority of humans who benefited from the pandemic, while the majority of humans whose lives were already marked by oppression and precarity were more likely to be worse off and to die from the pandemic, so it was for other species of animals. While companion animals whose humans spent more time at home with them during lockdown, the companion animals adopted from shelters who were not abandoned afterwards, and the wild animals who briefly enjoyed more space or who were re-released into the wild rather than subjected to laboratory experiments, may be said to have benefited from

Covid-19, many more more-than-human animals were adversely affected by the pandemic. These include the animals who were sacrificed in animal study trials for vaccines, and the millions of fur and agriculturally farmed animals who, already destined for premature deaths, were killed sooner and in even more merciless manners than they would have been otherwise.

The first three pieces in this issue are literary in style or subject matter or both. The issue opens with a powerful and poignant poem by Dana Medoro, ‘A Covid Calendar, in Twelve Animals’. As Medoro notes in the poem, the word calendar ‘derives from *calare*, meaning to announce solemnly, to call out, as the Roman priests did when they shouted out the appearance of the moon each month. Or from *calendarium*, referring to Roman account books and the monthly settling of debts’. With entries for each month in the year 2020, Medoro not only provides an evocative snapshot of pandemic experiences and events, but also calls out the interlocking systems of oppression driving the pandemic, and the political debts of that pandemic year.

Medoro’s poem is followed by Tessa Laird’s essay, ‘Zoognosis: When Animal Knowledges Go Viral’. Reflecting on the near homonyms of *nosis* (disease) and *gnosis* (knowledge), Laird ingeniously explores the idea that zoonosis may not only be understood as the transmission of diseases from other-than-human animals to humans, but also as the transmission of knowledges between them and us. Drawing on a range of Amerindian cosmologies, critical theory, and animal studies scholarship, this idea is pursued by Laird through a reading of Laura Jean McKay’s prescient 2020 novel, *The Animals in That Country*, which tells the story of a zoonotic pandemic that enabled infected humans to understand the languages of other animals.

Next is the hauntingly powerful meditation by Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond, ‘Akbar, My Heart: Care-Giving for a Dog During Covid-19’. In this personal essay, Isfahani-Hammond deftly interweaves stories of assisting a beloved canine companion in his last days with insights into the racial violence of the pandemic and the carceral state, the powerful uprising of anti-racist resistance of the Black Lives Matter protests, and the raging of wildfires in California that

were simultaneously occurring around her. Drawing on critical race theory, critical animal studies scholarship, Brazilian literature and Sufi poetry, Isfahani-Hammond astutely explores the honorable death of and personal grief for a single canine in the midst of so much devastation.

Like Isfahani-Hammond's essay, the next three articles each address racism in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic as it interlocks with speciesism. The first two of these, Darren Chang and Lauren Corman's 'Multispecies Disposability: Taxonomies of Power in a Global Pandemic', and Angela Lee's 'Greedy Bat Eaters versus Cruel Pig Killers: The Lose-Lose Battle of Divisive Discourse', offer critical analyses of the anti-Asian discourses that have circulated during the pandemic, and which have been propounded by vegan, animal and environmental activists in particular. For their part, Chang and Corman take up political theorist Claire Jean Kim's influential theoretical framework of 'taxonomies of power' to argue that these Sinophobic attacks around issues such as wet markets buttress the longstanding animalization of East Asian people, and thereby reinforce the inter-imbricated oppressions of speciesism and racism. Critically analyzing a number of ways in which both racialized human and more-than-human animal lives have been deemed disposable in the course of the pandemic, Chang and Corman compellingly argue for what Kim has described as an 'ethics of mutual avowal'.

In her article, Angela Lee takes up the example of Canadian singer and vegan activist Bryan Adams' public tirade against 'bat eaters' as a 'prism' through which to understand anti-Asian racism within animal advocacy movements and in the broader society. Lee's wide-ranging article provides an overview of animal activism and the food movement with an emphasis on the intersecting of animal, racial, and xenophobic oppressions, and also furnishes cultural context for often misunderstood traditions such as the role of wet markets in Chinese society. Arguing that it is impossible to take a universalist perspective, or to focus on animals while bracketing culture and race, Lee insists that we must instead acknowledge the connections between religion, race, culture, and food, and consider what we may learn from other cultures. Drawing on Iris Marion Young's 'social connection model' of justice, Lee urges animal advocates to stop isolating perpetrators and to instead recognize responsibility for structural injustices such as animal oppression as shared.

Co-editor Kelly Struthers Montford and her co-author Tessa Wotherspoon's contribution to the issue, 'The Contagion of Slow Violence: The Slaughterhouse and Covid-19', examines the slaughterhouse as an institution of state-organized racial violence. In the context of the Americas, they show that race and animality are inseparable and the violence meted out against those who are racialized and animalized is often not thought of as violence and racism at all. The authors contend that zoonotic disease, slaughterhouse labour, and the current pandemic are consistent with *slow* forms of harm: insidious, normalized, unconstrained by borders, and without end. As Struthers Montford and Wotherspoon demonstrate, the spread of COVID-19 through the slaughterhouse and into surrounding vulnerable communities thus represents an acceleration of the state's racist death drive, which law and institutions organize and support – this time through the designation of slaughterhouses as an essential service.

Catherine Oliver's 'Returning to "The Good Life"? Chickens and Chicken-Keeping during Covid-19 in Britain' considers the increase in animals in domestic spaces during the pandemic. Although a surge in companion animal adoptions has been a large component of this growth, Oliver focuses on another pandemic-related phenomenon: the rapid expansion in backyard hen-keeping, particularly in Britain, where many of these hens are rehomed ex-commercial chickens. Drawing on ethnographic research, Oliver explores why humans are choosing to enter these multispecies living arrangements, and how these arrangements are experienced by chickens themselves. Although the living conditions of rehomed hens are an improvement on the conditions they experienced on commercial farms, Oliver ultimately argues that the birds continue to be expected to labour for humans, and normative human-chicken power relations have been uninterrupted by the rise in backyard hen-keeping. Finally, Oliver moves to consider a second space of multispecies intimacy from which she argues that backyard hen-keeping is inseparable: the slaughterhouse, particularly during Covid-19.

The final two pieces in the themed part of this special issue critically consider the frequently heard goal of 'returning to life as normal', and provide reflections on what we learned from the pandemic at this point mid-way through 2021. Paula Arcari's 'The Covid Pandemic, "Pivotal" Moments, and Persistent Anthropocentrism: Interrogating the

(II)legitimacy of Critical Animal Perspectives’ begins with the observation that the Covid-19 pandemic might have been – and in its early stages many animal and environmental advocates were hopeful that it would be – a ‘pivotal’ moment in which the untenability of current human-animal and human-nature relations would be faced and radical changes, including to our economic systems, would finally be made. As is clear in June of 2021, however, the pandemic has not in fact served as the significant catalyst for change that many had hoped, and Arcari’s article is a thoughtful consideration of the responsibility that the animal advocacy movement bears in this failure. Although the pandemic has not in fact served as a ‘pivotal’ moment for society at large, Arcari contends that it might still serve productively as a ‘wake-up call’ for animal advocates who must change their discourses to gain legitimacy if their message is to be heard.

The last themed piece in the issue is a roundtable dialogue between Dinesh Wadiwel, Kendra Coulter, and Charlotte Blattner – three animal studies scholars with a common interest in labour studies. The dialogue, ‘Covid and Capital’, was mediated by co-editor Eva Kasprzycka and hovers above a number of issues caused or amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic to fuse together major concerns regarding structures that produce forms of life invalidation. In non-anthropocentric examinations of racial capitalism, authors break down the many stages of food production to scrutinize sites of interconnection between human and nonhuman oppression. In discussing lab-grown meat, Just Interspecies Transition, Universal Basic Income, Marxist analyses of animal agriculture, and the schism between reform and abolition, this dialogue maps the necessary restructuring of economic policy, subsidies, investments and enterprises that would secure viably sustainable – and just – futures of food production. While their perspectives differ, the three authors discuss their interpretations of neoliberal tactics that cement nonhuman animals as absent referents that haunt global conversations on the origination and management of zoonoses. That is not to say this piece exists only alongside the discouraging; hopeful visions of societies that leftist animal advocates want to create are etched into the horizon – societies ‘devoted to the flourishing of humans and animals, and not merely the flourishing of humans at the expense of animal lives’.