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Wild Dogs and Decolonization: Ivan Sen's *Mystery Road* and Omar Musa's *Here Come the Dogs*

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Abstract

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Keywords

First Nations Australians, Omar Musa, Ivan Sen, *Here Come the Dogs*, *Mystery Road*, biosecurity, dingoes, pastoral, wild dogs

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank the organisers of the 2021 AASA conference for giving me the opportunity to present at the time of the conference an early draft of this paper.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to support and engage in animal advocacy and decolonisation work in teaching and studying Australian literature and film. The paper focuses on two dog populations in Australia and their representation in First Nations-Australian director Ivan Sen's film, *Mystery Road* (2013), and Malaysian-Australian author Omar Musa's novel, *Here Come the Dogs* (2014). The references to Australia's dingo and other wild dog populations in Sen's film obliquely and presciently relate to Australia's current biosecurity legislation inclusive of the current Commonwealth *Biosecurity Act 2015*, the efforts under the Act to exterminate wild dogs, and the contradictions between those efforts and efforts to preserve and promote biodiverse country. Sen's film implicitly questions Australia's biosecurity laws, and it does that by drawing attention to the critical intersections between the lack of commitment to supporting biodiversity in Australia and discriminatory post-colonialist attitudes toward First Nations Australians. In Musa's novel, a lone dog, Mercury Fire, stands for the hundreds of thousands of dogs who are exploited every year by Australia's lucrative greyhound racing industry. In the depiction of Mercury Fire's relationship with three troubled young men, Musa's novel represents the intersections between the speciesist barriers that greyhounds face in the industry of greyhound racing and the ethnic, class, and race barricades that many of Australia's human underdogs confront as they navigate and decolonise a colonised country.

Mystery Road: Biosecurity vs. Biodiversity

Australia's current *Biosecurity Act 2015*, administered by the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE), is discernibly at odds with other government departments' calls to slow the loss of and reclaim biodiversity. The Act manifestly backs pastoral interests that are more indifferent and hostile towards than supportive of calls to support biodiversity. A pertinent example of the conflict between Australians' biosecurity and biodiversity interests from the

perspective of defenders of wild dog populations includes language in the Act that explicitly identifies wild dogs as being a pest species and so a threat to biosecurity. The Act states that wild dogs are a particularly ‘significant pest’; ‘widespread in Queensland, the Northern Territory ... much of Western Australia and South Australia ... [and] parts of New South Wales and Victoria’; a major cause of environmental damage; a significant detriment to ‘the agricultural sector’; and a species that has ‘adverse social impacts’ (‘Wild Dogs Research’).

In contrast with the *Biosecurity Act 2015*, animal advocacy groups such as The Centre for Compassionate Conservation (based at the University of Technology Sydney) call on the government not to eradicate but rather to protect Australia’s wild dogs and slow the harassment and victimisation of them. This petitioning includes calls to defend the wild dogs who are classified as being dingoes.¹ These animals are apex predators, and the extermination of them has triggered cascade collapses – namely, massive failures of ecosystems that dingoes have supported and depended upon for several thousands of years (Burrell and Eldridge; Kilvert; Rose 64; 67-80). Dingo advocates also point out that efforts to eradicate wild dogs under Australia’s federal, state, and territorial biosecurity legislation have been, in any case, ‘largely unsuccessful’ and what threatens dingoes today more so than the legislation is dingoes’ contact with other wild dogs, meetings that are diluting the ‘Dingo gene pool’ (Burrell and Eldridge).²

As animal studies scholar Fiona Probyn-Rapsey sets forth in ‘Dingoes and Dog-Whistling: A Cultural Politics of Race and Species in Australia’ (published in *Animal Studies Journal* in 2015), distinctions between dingoes and other wild dogs, as well-intentioned as these typically are, can and do leak into and overlap with racist arguments about purity and hybridity as well as facilitating, in practice, the culling of countless wild dogs. Straddling a ‘biocultural frontier’ where ‘race ... and species intersect’, the distinctions hold that if the genetic makeup of a wild dog is less than arbitrary determinations of dingo pedigree status, then its life is worth less than that of a wild dog who can claim that status (Probyn-Rapsey 57). Such distinctions comprise what Probyn-Rapsey characterises as the ‘hybridity equals extinction’ argument (57). This argument, deployed by some scientists and conservation organisations, is intended to save

dingoes, yet instead licenses the eradication of dingoes, and it taps into and tacitly endorses a neighbouring and rhetorically derelict and racist argument: that First Nations Australians are in a process of genetic erasure through miscegenation.³

Ivan Sen's film *Mystery Road* resonates with Probyn-Rapsey's 'dingology' theorization of the ideological connections between hostile stances toward wild dogs considered other than dingoes and the racial purity argument that First Nations Australian people are a population in decline as a direct result of mixing with newer populations of Australian people (57). The first set of stances effectively endorses the killing of dogs on the grounds that they are not pure enough, and the second effectively states that First Nations people are becoming extinct because they are not pure. Sen's film refutes both sets of arguments; it celebrates the flourishing of people and animals whose ancestry predates 1788, regardless of the fact that these people are of mixed European-First Nations ancestry and these animals are hybrid dingo-wild dog canids.

Hardly a morally flawless being, Jay Swan in *Mystery Road* functions nonetheless as a quiet but powerful retort to Australia's 'dogger' traditions and the biosecurity legislation that endorses those traditions. He is potentially open to recognizing the right to life of all animals regardless of their origins or historic passage to Australia, and so unwilling to engage in the eradication of the kinds of human-animal bonds that Australia's biosecurity legislation underwrites.⁴ A prodigal son, Jay has returned to his Country in the remote pastoral region of what is now known as Winton, Queensland, on an assignment to investigate the death of a young First Nations woman, Julie Mason. Like many of the wild dogs who live on the town's post-colonial pastoral perimeters who are hybrid dingo-domestic dogs – descendants of Australia's oldest canids and younger canid populations – Swan is resented by some of the townspeople, both First Nations Australian and non-Indigenous townspeople. A 'copper', a symbol of racial oppression, the rookie detective has to earn the trust of the Indigenous townspeople who suspect him of deserting his own people and crossing lanes to Australian mainstream culture, with its attendant constructions of and beliefs about Australia. Swan also faces hostility from a mob of racist townspeople who run an illegal drug trade and sexually exploit First Nations women.

Through the figure of Swan and other characters, including canine figures, Sen's film taps into Australia's wild dog debates in the context of the 'hybridity-equals-extinction' argument that Probyn-Rapsey critically dissects, and a pastoralist argument, which is that dingoes and other wild dogs are inimical to Australia. As controversial as such an argument is, it represents and is supported by Australia's biosecurity laws. In addition, such biosecurity antagonism towards canines parallels arguments for culling other nonhuman animal populations in Australia inclusive of kangaroos (see David Brooks, this issue). *Mystery Road* subtly questions the scapegoating of dingoes, kangaroos, and other animals who are classified as being in excess of a conservation balance, either as native or feral. The questioning occurs directly in character speech but is also symbolized in the figure of the pro-wild-dog character of Jay Swan versus two manifestly repugnant anti-wild dog characters, a pastoralist whose property extends 'as far as you can see', and the pastoralist's son, a professional 'roo-shooter' who boasts that he can 'pull a [kangaroo] head off at a thousand yards'.⁵ The two men stand for aspects of colonialist and post-colonialist pastoral at the federal level as well as at state and territorial levels of government-sanctioned animal violence.⁶

While the plot of *Mystery Road* is likely fictional in its specifics, the setting is a naked allusion to the pastoralist town of Winton, in Channel country in central west Queensland. Winton depends on Australia's two main pastoral enterprises, the farming of sheep and cattle. The actual town is also a major trucking centre for transporting so-called livestock (mostly cattle and sheep). On Winton's perimeters there is a significant wild dog population (Eldridge and Burrell), and as in the film, antipathies toward wild dogs are run-of-the-mill sentiments among many pastoralists. Winton is also known as the site where Banjo Paterson composed 'Waltzing Matilda', and is part of an extensive bioregion that includes what is only just now being recognised as Australia's ancient 'Silk Road' (Willis). These two facts, the belated recognition of Indigenous cultural trade routes and the iconic nationalist myth-building, reflect the more than two hundred years' worth of denial of First Nations country and people and the celebration since 1788 of colonial and other settler people's traditions.

Mystery Road does not make simple and reductive equations between mainstream pastoral and anti-wild-dog sentiment; nonetheless, the film questions that pastoral perspective.

The film depicts it as a threat to biosecurity precisely because it is so hostile to biodiversity. Prior to 1788, the oldest Australian people engaged in extensive agriculture as well as aquaculture and those activities sustained biodiversity for tens of thousands of years. This argument, as it has been made most recently and powerfully, is represented by Bruce Pascoe in his study, *Dark Emu. Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* Australian pastoral, and ‘cattle farming’ in particular, is one of the main causes of the loss of biodiversity in Australia and one of the main reasons why Australia today leads the world in ‘habitat [and] vegetation clearance’ (Metherell), in extinction rates of nonhuman mammals (Rose 67), and in the lack of any commitment to slowing climate change, an effort in which Australia ranks worst out of fifty-seven countries (Martin).⁷ In Queensland and in much of eastern Australia, the deforestation that goes hand in hand with cattle farming compares with the far more publicised ‘infamous’ tree-felling in the Brazilian Amazon (Slezak). Australia, today, is a ‘global deforestation hotspot, the only one in the developed world’ (Slezak).

Here Come the Dogs: Greyhounds

In Omar Musa’s novel, *Here Come the Dogs*, a greyhound, Mercury Fire, is on his last legs. Gladys, his owner, will not run him again at the racetracks. ‘Blind in one eye with a kinked back leg’ and ‘smaller than the other dogs’, Mercury Fire has won race after race until now, when he comes in third at a race (Musa 13). An underdog of underdogs, an animal used up and spat out by the greyhound racing industry, Mercury Fire is bought from his owner, Gladys, on a whim by Solomon Amosa, a rapper and disaffected former basketball player who struggles to find his hybrid identity in a society that is indifferent or hostile to embracing hybridity. Not long after Solomon buys the dog, he gives Mercury Fire to his half-brother, Jimmy, a human being who has been discarded, as Mercury Fire is, by mainstream Australian society. The two animals, Jimmy and Mercury Fire, briefly bond before Mercury Fire dies. Jimmy finds the body of Mercury Fire ‘[a] final shape ... in front of him ... in the gutter’ as he is walking home late one evening:

[Jimmy] runs to it. He's crouched in the gutter at first, patting the fine fur. He traces his right hand over the hound's muscled legs, touches his paws, rubs his thumb on its nose – dry already. His hand rests on Mercy Fire's belly, which is still vaguely warm, though it could be the sweat from his palm. He shifts his weight and his knees crack like buckshot. He cradles Mercury Fire in his lap then holds him to his chest. The body is almost completely stiff. Lights come threading through the darkness. He's aware of car horns, and maybe even a person talking to him, but he doesn't reply. At a certain point, he lies next to the dog, still holding him. Eventually he stands and carries him to his house . . . He tries to feed him some water, but it dribbles onto the couch, a spreading stain. He sends signals with his brain, messages of love, but there is no reply now . . . He talks to him the whole night . . . Jimmy cries for a long time. (304-5)

Here Come the Dogs doesn't make clear how Mercury Fire died or what his previous life was as a racing dog before Gladys hawked him to Solomon. Readers know only that Mercury Fire spent most of his truncated life at the greyhound races, from the time when Gladys, herself a 'tough old bird from South London', found him in her back garden to the night of his untimely decease:

I looked underneath the old plum tree
and saw something against the fence.

I didn't want to touch it,
then it made a sound.

It looked like a bloody grey tennis ball.

Then I realised,
a tiny face was looking back at me.

. . .

It was a little puppy,
a bloody and broken little critter,
with fur the color of mercury.

I scooped it up and squinted at the sky again.

I saw an eagle with wings
maybe as long as a man's arms.

Could've been a wedgetail.

The little grey ball whimpered in me hands.

It looked as if its leg was broken
and it had one eye staring at me,
bright as a button.

The other had been scratched,
maybe even torn out, by the eagle.

...

I could hear the kids start their game again
On the other side of the fence.

I went inside and called a vet. (67-68)

The animal advocacy organization Animals Australia describes what typically happens to greyhounds in the industry of greyhound racing, during their racing days and after the industry no longer wants them.⁸ The industry breeds approximately 10,000 greyhound pups and kills thousands of others annually, as much as 17,000 in a year. 200 dogs sustain injuries each week in races and some dogs die from cardiac arrest. A common practice is to kill the dogs if their injuries are 'uneconomical' to treat. The industry kills approximately five dogs every week. Those who live spend most of their lives in 'tiny barren pens' and kennels. Another common practice is to underfeed the dogs so as 'to keep them at a lean racing weight'. The so-called natural lifespan of greyhounds is 12 to 14 years. The greyhounds in the industry of greyhound racing typically die much earlier. Many are killed by the time they are five or six years old or 'handed over' to a university veterinary facility. There, the dogs 'may be experimented on' or

'killed for use in teaching and training'. The industry regularly drugs dogs with anabolic steroids, cocaine, and caffeine. It also regularly uses other animals such as piglets, possums, and rabbits as prey to train the dogs.⁹

Today, there are only seven other countries that have a commercial greyhound racing industry. Australia stubbornly clings to its own. It is 'by far the biggest' in the world, and it fans a common argument that greyhound racing speaks for and celebrates a 'culture ... of male battlers in regional Australia hanging onto their dignity, whose main social interaction is a night at the doggies' (Sparrow); 'a mythical aspect of an ever-disappearing "old" Australian way of life' (Sparrow); and the making visible of Australia's working classes and 'egalitarian culture' (Georgakis).

The working classes who putatively identify with greyhound racing mainly refer to Australians of Anglo-Australian descent or Australians who nominally identify with Anglo-Australian culture and traditions. Musa's novel alludes to that identification early in the novel in a sentence uttered by Solomon Amosa, one of the three main human characters. Solomon is Samoan Australian; his best friend, Aleks, is Macedonian Australian; and Jimmy, Solomon's half-brother, as the narrative implies, is both Samoan and Indigenous Australian. 'What a crew', Solomon observes of himself, Aleks, and Jimmy, when they meet at the last greyhound race at which Mercury Fire is forced to perform, 'a Samoan, a Maco and my half-brother [Jimmy], a *something*... The only ethnics at the dog races' (Musa 8). These words highlight the association of greyhound racing with Australia's white Australian working classes even as they disrupt that identification, for as Ruth McHugh-Dillon argues in a review of *Here Come the Dogs*, Musa depicts 'not the white-bread Menzies suburbs that artists like Barry Humphries made visible', but rather suburbs like Musa's own home town of Queanbeyan, New South Wales, a suburb that Musa once referred to as a 'Struggle Town or the Soweto of Canberra' (qtd. in McHugh-Dillon). 'By introducing the trio in this way', explains another reviewer, Hamish Hamilton, 'Musa positions [Solomon's, Aleks', and Jimmy's] ethnicity as a predominant factor in their negotiations of identity'. At the same time, this 'emphasis on ethnicity allows for Musa to play with and expose the limitations and problems that an essentialist understanding of ethnicity has for contemporary

Australia' (Hamilton). Hamilton gives the example of the scene where Aleks goes to meet Solomon and finds him 'telling a story to two Tongan blokes', and Solomon muses, 'Aren't Samoans and Tongans supposed to hate each other?' (Musa 41-42).

The 'essentialist understanding of ethnicity' that Musa questions in the three main human protagonists in *Here Come the Dogs* shadows the essentialist demarcations that Australians make between humans and other animals. The given understanding and distinctions allow for some Australian humans to prosper at the expense of other Australian humans and at the expense of other Australian animals – including the greyhounds who are bred by the racing industry and many dogs who are bred as pets and who later are abandoned or who later abandon their pet status and take their chances in the bush. As Jeff Sparrow argues, if greyhound racing is 'the traditional grounds of blue-collar white men', then the industry uses those men in the same way that '[h]ip hop performers ... arise from the ghetto ... [and] record company executives live in penthouses... Culture-as-industry ... presents obvious problems for culture-as-class-expression' (Sparrow). 'Culture-as-industry' also brings into question the notion that culture is only human expression.

Australian pastoral is beloved and sentimentalised by many Australians. It is a multi-billion-dollar industry, strongly backed by biosecurity legislation, and indifferent, lackadaisical, or adverse towards calls to promote and protect biodiversity (Cox). Sen's *Mystery Road* subtly questions Australian pastoral and the laws that seem to immortalise it. The film does this by foregrounding what beleaguered classes of humans in Australia share with beleaguered classes of nonhuman animals, while rejecting the drumming up of speciesist and tribalist arguments about takeover and erasure. Supporters of the greyhound racing industry like to represent it as being the bastion of and outlet of expression for Australia's human blue-collar underdogs. Musa's *Here Come the Dogs* questions the industry's greyhound-racing-equals-working-class-suffrage rhetoric, and the novel also speaks to animal advocacy issues, if not as overtly as *Mystery Road* does, by representing what harassed humans and other kinds of harassed underdogs share.

The questioning of pastoral in Sen's film manifestly represents and identifies with projects of decolonization. These include foremost 'listening to the voices' of First Nations

Australians and other First Nations people, questioning ‘whose knowledge is privileged’, and reversing political ideologies in such ‘settler-colonial’ countries as Australia, where ‘colonisers remain’ and where ‘Indigenous people still don’t hold significant positions of power or self-determination’ (O’Dowd and Heckenberg). Decolonisation recognises the right of Indigenous people ‘to autonomy and self-government’, ‘freedom from forced removal of children’, ‘protection of archaeological and historical sites and repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains’, ‘the right [of First Nations people] to provide education in their own language’, the representation of ‘Indigenous cultural diversity’ by ‘state-owned media’, and the ‘legal recognition of traditional lands, territories and resources’ (O’Dowd and Heckenberg). Decolonisation includes, in addition, commitment to and support of Indigenous research (‘Listen Up’) and studying and learning about the creative work of First Nations artists (Winch). These artists include authors who are winners of or who were shortlisted or longlisted for Australia’s most distinguished literary award, the *Miles Franklin*: Alexis Wright, Kim Scott, Melissa Lucashenko, Tara June Winch, and Tony Birch; they also include Janine Leane, Larissa Behrendt, and Mary Graham. Similar to the films of Ivan Sen, the creative work of these authors tackles the problems of colonialism and post-colonialism that still beleaguer Australia today.

The questioning of the greyhound racing industry in Musa’s novel and the questioning of the dogger tradition in Sen’s film also represent and align with projects of decolonization, for these projects include understanding the ties between speciesism and racism and the role these prejudices play in colonial and post-colonial efforts of national mythmaking.¹⁰ These same projects of decolonisation bring to mind the work of First Nations writers more so than any other writers; and they evoke some words by Graham Harvey that Deborah Bird Rose cites in her study, *Wild Dog Dreaming*. In *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, Harvey, an English scholar of Indigenous religions and animist beliefs, writes, ‘the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human’ (xi; qtd. in Rose 18). First Nations-Australian director Ivan Sen and Malaysian-Australian author Omar Musa depict in their respective film and novel conditions and fates that many nonhuman animals in Australia share with human beings. Both film and novel support and contribute to the work of representational decolonization. This endeavour encompasses questioning speciesist barriers as well as racist barriers, and it foregrounds the ideological links between those two formidable handicaps.

Notes

¹ Roland Breckwoldt's 1988 study, *A Very Elegant Animal: The Dingo*, represents the many efforts to bring more attention to the plight of dingoes and to the role that dingoes play in contributing to and sustaining biodiversity. Other studies that represent the efforts to protect biodiversity and the questioning of laws that undermine it include Ruth Blair's 'Hugging the Shore: The Green Mountains of South-East Queensland' and Charles Massy's *The Call of the Reed Warbler*. Blair writes about those efforts in the context of nineteenth-century colonial-settler communities and Massy write about the current regenerative agriculture movement.

² For more on work in dingo genetics, see Dr. Kylie M. Cairns's website, <https://www.kyliecairns.com>.

³ The 'hybridity equals extinction' argument is deeply problematic on at least these two counts; it tacitly condones the extermination of wild dogs who are not determined to be pure dingoes and it feeds into the spurious racist argument that intermarriages between First Nations-Australians and European-Australians will lead to the extinction of First Nations-Australians (Probyn-Rapsey 57). Such rhetoric is hardly new. It traces back to the early twentieth century. A. O. Neville, appointed the Chief Protector of Aborigines Affairs in 1915, infamously invoked the hybridity equals extinction argument under a blatantly racist program of assimilation that included the forcible removal of First Nations children from their families and country. This policy and practice of removal, which persisted up through the last third of the twentieth century and is referred to under the term the Stolen Generation continues to be insufficiently addressed by the Australian government.

⁴ Doggers are people who legal or illegally shoot wild dogs or poison them with the chemical compound of sodium fluoroacetate, also known as '1080' (Rose 67). A common practice of doggers, who include pastoralists ('graziers') and other 'rural workers', is to hang the corpses of dingoes 'from gates, trees and signposts' or string the bodies of the dogs 'across fences' (66). Sen references this dogger tradition (a post-1788 Australian tradition) also in his film, *Goldstone* (2016), the sequel to *Mystery Road*.

⁵ A 'roo-shooter' is someone who legally or illegally kills kangaroos and other macropod animal species with a rifle or other firearm.

⁶ Many thanks to a reviewer of a draft of this submission for pointing out studies of human-animal relationships in First Nations contexts that discredit the many laws that undermine and negate those relationships. The studies include Rani Kerin's 'Dogging for a Living: Aborigines and "Undesirables" in South Australia' and Diana Young's 'Dingo Scalping and the Frontier Economy in the North-West of South Australia'.

⁷ See, also, studies by Gammage and Massy.

⁸ The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) released a damning report about the greyhound racing industry, 'Making a Killing', produced by *Four Corners* in 2015.

⁹ Between the 1920s and late 1930s, the industry exploited other animals as well. It trained capuchin monkeys to be jockeys to ride the dogs (Rolfe). See also Henderson, this issue.

¹⁰ For more on the work of decolonization as it includes interrogations of the critical links between speciesism (and anthropocentrism) and colonialism, see studies by Belcourt and Watson.

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