

Introduction to Special Issue Ethics in Multispecies Research: Reflections From the Field

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Abstract

This essay introduces the special issue on Ethics in Multispecies Research in terms of process and content. Emerging from a crescendo of conversations about the regulatory-ethical lacuna between research with human participants and non-invasive research on or with other-than-human animals, contributors were asked to discuss how they have navigated this lacuna during fieldwork. Themes include, first, scholar- and worker-activism, in which many multispecies researchers had experience and political commitments that shaped their ethics. A second theme is the challenge of unintended consequences. Researchers speaking to this theme discussed the many uncertainties of research and particular risks of multispecies work. Third, researchers recognized that vulnerability was not only asymmetric while doing multispecies research, but also multidirectional. Fourth, contributors discussed how their ethical questions and paths were entangled with aesthetic and embodied politics. Last, and zooming out, contributors drew attention to the problematic contexts in which multispecies research is often conducted, from legislation to colonial legacies. Together, the Special Issue contributions offer a series of techniques and thoughtful stories for conducting ethical multispecies research.

Keywords

Multispecies research ethics, animal studies, animal geographies, more-than-human geographies, animal research, animal ethics



Researchers in the social sciences are increasingly engaging with the more-than-human world, acknowledging the deeply and unevenly interconnected nature of relations between humans, other-than-human animals, other living beings, and the environment more broadly. Such research seeks to trouble the anthropocentrism, humanism, and speciesism implicit in much of ‘modern western’/eurocentric/colonial knowledge paradigms. In turn, it gives attention to the animacy, agency, subjectivity, or lived experiences of other-than-human beings. This proliferation of multispecies scholarship raises pressing questions concerning the ethics of conducting research with diverse and more-than-human participants: How can ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) be worked through in the field, and in the absence of formal guidance on respectful (anti-anthropocentric, anti-colonial, anti-speciesist) research relations with other-than-human participants? What challenges or opportunities are created by approaching multispecies research as a scholar- or worker-activist? How can we consider and articulate the embodied, nonrepresentational, and practice-based dynamics of multispecies research and their ethical import? How can we be sensitive to balancing the competing needs and vulnerabilities amongst human and other-than-human groups with whom we interact? There is a vital need to speak to these questions, to foster dialogue concerning how researchers can ethically engage with other-than-humans as agents, subjects, and research participants, and to create solidarity in resistance to intersecting systems of domination.

This Special Issue emerged from a Panel discussion at the 2019 American Association of Geographers’ (AAG) Annual Meeting on ‘Ethics in multispecies research’ in which one of us was the organizer (HR) and one of us a panelist (LVP). The aim of the panel was to share experience navigating the ethical complexities of research with other-than-humans, in particular given that such conversations typically fall into an ethical lacuna between institutional regulations for research with human participants (e.g., Institutional Review Boards [IRB], Research Ethics Boards [REB], etc.) and invasive research on animals (e.g., Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees [IACUC], Animal Use Protocols [AUP], etc.). As noted by Collard (2015, 135) “the lack of a relevant ethical review process for multispecies field research serves to further subordinate meaningful discussion about the ethics of animal research practice in non-experimental social science.” In this Special Issue, Ayala elaborates the degree of exclusion, writing, “[m]ost of the terrestrial biomass remains outside the field of vision of institutional review boards.” This Special Issue takes this gap as its focus, assembling diverse experiences of field research involving more-than-human participants and collaborators, and reflecting on the challenges of fostering research relationships with the other-than-human world in way that meaningfully resists objectification and domination. Most of the interventions compiled speak to other-than-human animals in particular, including dogs, donkeys, coyotes, cats, tigers, wolves, curlew, and octopi, but microorganisms, trees, and broader environments are also considered.

We were motivated to compile this Special Issue as we had each grappled with these dynamics in the context of our research. For HR, in my doctoral research with sanctuary chickens (e.g., Rosenfeld, 2021), I found myself in situations in which I had qualms about the care and working conditions at a few sanctuaries. Simultaneously, though, as a sanctuary volunteer and advocate, I wanted to avoid catalyzing situations that might put sanctuaries at risk, given the already precarious landscape of farmed animals and animal activism in the United States. I found myself in late-night phone conversations about this quandary with a friend who managed another sanctuary. Later, I spoke with a former member of an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), who said that I could probably convince the university’s IACUC to review my ethical protocol. I opted not to, as from that conversation and from my knowledge of IACUC, it seemed that my research process would have remained unchanged except for a tangent into learning more about laboratory animal testing. Nonetheless, the ethical gap stuck with me, and led me to see if there was interest in what became the AAG panel. For my own research, I continued to converse with the friend mentioned above and a few others about any major decisions and a number of minor ones in my project (they were friends, after all), along with drawing to process and reflect (see



Figure 1. Heather Rosenfeld, 2017

Katz, 2014). The comic in Figure 1 above is one such example, and it hopefully illustrates sanctuaries' struggles (The ASPCA is the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the sanctuary referenced is not, for those who are wondering, one of the sanctuaries that led to my original dilemma). The combination of informally conferring with sanctuary friends and comrades, emailing with my advisor, and drawing to offer perspective led me to make decisions about field sites and activities, interview locations, confidentiality, and more that were beyond the scope of my IRB (and beyond IACUC's purview, for that matter). I opted not to write a piece for this Special Issue – consciously out of wanting to create space for others, although in retrospect, imposter syndrome might have been in there as well.

For LVP, in both my master's research with feral cats (see Van Patter and Hovorka, 2018), and my doctoral research with urban coyotes (see Turnbull and Van Patter, this issue), I decided to pursue both human and animal ethics clearance through my research institutions. As noted by others (Collard, 2015; Collard and Gillespie, 2015), both avenues seemed wholly incapable of providing the guidance that I sought: ensuring that the other-than-humans (specifically nonhuman animals) engaged in my research would be safeguarded to the extent possible. Although I embarked upon my research with the best intentions, I really wanted to create space for thinking through and dialoguing potential research impacts. For my doctoral research I therefore convened an arm's length ad hoc committee of four scholars with a range of perspectives and experiences concerning research with animals (an animal geographer, a political philosopher, a conservation biologist, and a comparative psychologist). I delineated a set of guiding principles (later further developed and published in Van Patter and Blattner, 2020), and set out procedures for how my proposed research methods would align with these principles. The committee

flagged several concerns and considerations, and I revised my methodology based on their feedback. I found the exercise extremely valuable. Challenging myself to think through how the objecthood of animals could be subverted within mixed socio-ecological research opened up new ways of conceptualizing participation, collaboration, and responsibility. Starting from principles, which were then applied to planned research methods, was a useful means of thinking through scenarios I might encounter, how animals might be harmed directly or indirectly through the research, and what I could do to mitigate these risks in advance or in the moment. Although fieldwork is always more messy and complicated than planned, I am glad I went through this process and would highly recommend it to others who are endeavouring to navigate the advisory lacuna in which more-than-human or multispecies research is situated (for further details see Appendix E of Van Patter, 2021).

Given our experiences and the lively discussion generated by the AAG panel, we decided this topic was worthy of sustained attention and organized this Special Issue. The papers compiled herein delineate the ways in which multispecies researchers have navigated the tensions associated with prevailing humanist and colonial paradigms in social research. They explore questions of research ethics in an expansive sense, moving beyond institutional definitions, and asking how diverse critical lenses and alternate epistemologies can contribute to moving these conversations forward in the context of multispecies research. They reflect on individual experiences, lessons, and challenges encountered while conducting empirical research, and propose diverse principles, strategies, or processes for engaging ethically with the more-than-human world during fieldwork. Contributions feature diverse focal species and environments, relationships, and methodological interventions, including multispecies ethnography, walking interviews, walking backwards, and storytelling.

We also wish to acknowledge from the outset that interventions in critical animal/multispecies geographies stem from disproportionately white, cis- and hetero-normative, and ableist scholarship. Inasmuch as critical animal geographers want to contribute to social and environmental justice, we must therefore work to diversify and decolonize post/more-than-human/multispecies research (Sundberg, 2014; Tallbear, 2011; Todd, 2016). We must practice a thoughtful and inclusive politics of citation, challenging problematic norms about knowledge production and knowledge producers (Mott and Cockayne, 2017). Although there is still a long way to go, we endeavoured to assemble interventions that contribute to these efforts by engaging with diverse approaches and voices.

The collection has several emergent themes, which we discuss in the remainder of this introduction. The first of these is *scholar- and worker-activism* (and the fact of its emergence in the contributions makes us especially grateful to be working with ACME). Johnston recounts how her desire to help shelter animals directed her path from street activist to shelter employee to scholar. Likewise, Eccles describes her work with a dog training, boarding, and daycare facility. This both informed and shaped her research on “contested companionship” with pitbull-type dogs. She describes how she was able to draw on the resources of her former employer to support one such contested companionship between a dog needing extra support and their human companion, the latter of whom was in a precarious living situation. Approaching scholarship as a worker or activist creates tensions, but also opportunities to link theory and practice, access experiences, and foster a pathway for the outcomes of research to channel more directly into impacting positive change, by either challenging or guiding policies and practices. While of course academic co-option of activist priorities is also a risk of this sort of work, these papers demonstrated the opposite, as their experiences as activists gave them expertise that not merely informed but also directed their research.

A second emergent theme is *unintended consequences*. As Turnbull and Van Patter write, “[w]e need to be accountable to our *uncertainties*, and also to our *noninnocence*.” They turn to kitchen table reflexivity (Kohl and McCutcheon, 2015) as a tool for dialoguing and reflecting on ethical questions, including thinking through potential consequences of various interventions they could take as

researchers. While these cannot entirely remove the possibility of unintended negative consequences, they allowed both Turnbull and Van Patter to approach research decisions with greater confidence and clarity. Unintended consequences are also a concern of Holmberg. In her interrogation of the colonial epistemology that undergirds anthropomorphism at the Vancouver Aquarium, she attempts to be careful to avoid “reiterating colonial violence by plundering Indigenous thinking in the service of projects that are not accountable to and do not serve the people who animate this intellectual work.” And Johnston offers a cautionary tale about the unintended consequences of activists, including scholar activists, in making information visible. In her situation, activists’ work likely had negative consequences on both cats and a former shelter employee, who was blamed for a structural issue with the shelter’s policies. Last, Ayala suggests that “do no harm” be a principle for relational ethics, on the basis of her research on the biosecurity of kauri trees, working with forest pathologists and tohunga Māori.

A third theme is the experience and analysis of *mutual, but asymmetric, vulnerabilities* between the researchers and researched. Aalders and Monson sought to include dogs and donkeys more actively in their research process, while recognizing that they had been bred for walking-with humans, as the proverbial beasts of burden. They suggest that action research principles might ultimately be helpful as a next step to address and minimize the inequalities in such research. Nijhawan, Marino, and Fry note the tensions inherent in centering the nonhuman, which necessitates a de-centering of already marginalized human groups. Both human and nonhuman groups experience intersecting and divergent vulnerabilities in their case studies, and balancing local community needs and practices, the needs of threatened species, and individual animal welfare is a complex task requiring relational, situated practices of attachment, detachment, and exclusion.

A fourth theme is that of *aesthetic and embodied politics*: that ethics in multispecies research are also entangled with aesthetics and corporeality. Indeed, on the theme of asymmetric vulnerabilities, Johnston described how cat images on social media could render them more charismatic to the public, but that this also made them more vulnerable if they were not adopted quickly. This vulnerability could be deadly, leading to the cats’ killing. Aalders and Monson discuss walking-with as a way to emphasize the affective relations between each of them and their donkey and dog companions, respectively. Walking-with enabled them to be more attuned to their physical environments, not as a way to completely flatten power relations, but as a way to see their research subjects more actively, rather than passively. Eccles also used walking interviews as a way to decenter the human researcher’s perspective, finding that her attention was drawn to the muzzle requirements for pitbull-type dogs, causing visceral discomfort for her canine companions.

A final theme is that of *problematic contexts*. Unlike the (neo)liberal individual or humanist approaches of ethical review boards, a recurrent theme in this Special Issue was the fact that the context in which a researcher was working itself posed ethical quandaries. Eccles faced breed-specific legislation, working in what she called “hostile geographies.” Nijhawan, Marino, and Fry note how the multispecies relations under investigation are interconnected with wider political and economic structures of resource use and access, which must be taken into account in dialogues around ethics in human-animal relationships. Holmberg sought to recognize the colonial history and present of the Vancouver Aquarium without herself repeating colonial practices in her thinking with Indigenous scholars. She ultimately suggests that attending responsibly to other species must be intertwined with decolonizing more-than-human geographies. Ayala similarly critiques the limits of western ethical review, learning from the Māori process for research on native flora and fauna. Her research was subject to the Ngāi Tahu Consultation and Engagement Group, which placed emphasis on the researcher’s history of engagement with Māori, necessitated an informed consent process that acknowledged the land and established clear intentions, and emphasized reciprocity, imaginative nature, and the intrinsic value of land. She comes to

the conclusion that “the ethical way to proceed was to develop familiarity, building a bond and, most importantly, becoming accountable.”

Research is never just research. Research is a worldmaking practice, and the ethical implications of our relations with the more-than-human world as researchers are too often neglected in anthropocentric, colonial, neoliberal university settings. Our research contributes to knowledge, shapes the world, holds political import, and has the potential to improve – or worsen – the lives of the more-than-human Others with whom we work. It is striking that the careful thought and practices enacted by the contributors to this Special Issue, and many other multispecies researchers/practitioners, remain optional and come down to individual discretion and judgement. As humans within anthropocentric research contexts, we can – but are not required to – choose to practice these sorts of care, within broader social systems in which animals (and other life forms) are objectified as property, mass produced for consumption, entertainment, or other human uses, and killed as pests. The dialogues herein stand out in stark contrast against these prevailing injustices, striving for accountability where it is not often required. They provide hope for other ways of relating to living beings within the realm of scholar-activism and critical scholarship, while remaining accountable to the attendant ambiguities and challenges.

We set out to assemble this Special Issue out of a desire to bring stories of ethical non-invasive, more-than-human research to the fore in the fields of more-than-human/animal geographies, and as part of broader growing dialogues in animal/multispecies studies. There is much work that remains to be done in this area, including more explicitly engaging with de- and anti-colonial struggles and relationships to the land, especially in the settler-colonial contexts of lands now called Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, on which the majority of interventions in this Special Issue are situated. A range of approaches and perspectives are valuable in challenging the anthropocentric and colonial roots of dominant knowledge-making paradigms, and reflecting on individual experiences of research with more-than-human, primarily animal, participants is just one such avenue. We hope this Special Issue sparks further critical inquiry and dialogue, and disrupts the anomie in research with other species. We look forward to continuing the conversation!

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