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Book Review: “White Boat Coming up the River:”
Animalia, a Counter-Archive of Animal Histories

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Burton, A., & Mawani, R. (Eds.). (2020). *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times*. Duke University Press. \$25.95. pp 248. Paperback.

As much as trauma has accompanied me along the corridors at the Department of National Archives, Sri Lanka and in between the pages of commission reports and newspapers, channelling such affective responses towards critical and creative praxis has been the most effective yet challenging mode for scholars, particularly from post-colonies. Reading Sir Samuel White Baker's *Eight Years' Wanderings in Ceylon* at a library nook triggered a similar response; however, thanks to a growing field called animal studies, one is encouraged to see beyond the immediate affective response such accounts generate—a privileged response, if I may add.

On my return to Newera Ellia, I found a letter informing me that the short-horn cow had halted at Amberpusse, thirty-seven miles from Colombo, dangerously ill. The next morning another letter informed me that she was dead. This was a sad loss after the trouble of bringing so fine an animal from England; and I regretted her far more than both carriages and horses together, as my ideas for breeding some thorough-bred stock were for the present extinguished (1869, p. 31).

Writing from a post-colony, entangled in a web of colonial hiccups, here, there or anywhere, I am confronted with the task of exploring and navigating my subject position as an implied reader of any text, particularly those that engage with postcolonial histories. Reading *Animalia: an Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times* (hereafter referred to as *Animalia*) challenged such subjective boundaries and enabled me to think about the British enterprise beyond its anthropocentric colonization/imperialist mission. What is significant to the review which follows is this subjective experience and the larger racial, ecological, geo-political, economic,

sociopolitical contexts that produce such experience. In such a context, I read *Animalia* as a possible methodology to conceptualize the post-colony through multispecies histories produced/mediated by human intervention.

Animal studies scholarship which focuses on a post/decolonial line of thought has argued that the relationship between animals¹ and the British imperialist and colonial mission is uncertain and fluid, despite the sustained effort of the British imperial agenda to identify, classify and index them. On the one hand, this is to prove man's dominion over nature (here, 'man' is used intentionally) on the other, to impose a classification on physical/manual labour. While such efforts have resulted in imposing universality on the particular/singular, such teleological trajectories often generate their own fissures and contradictions-- to invoke Hegel. For the British imperialist agenda, animals (both native and foreign) offered companionship, indulgence, food and labour, curiosity, anxiety and power. As its implied reader, what is significant to me about *Animalia* is that it offers a respite from mundane, romanticized renderings of animals and provides a compelling account of the socio-cultural, economic and ecological nuances of the relationship between humans and animals in the form of a bestiary. It hinges upon anti-imperialism, often invoked through "troublesome, disruptive [multispecies] histories" (p. 10), conceptualizing animals as agents of provocation capable of multiple, illegible forms of resistance. In the context of past and contemporary texts on Animal Studies, *Animalia* offers a counternarrative to the long-standing effects of empire and how animals have been instrumental in accomplishing, thwarting and challenging British imperialist agendas. The book establishes itself at the intersections of postcolonialism, animal studies, critical race studies, critical indigenous studies and environmental humanities and perhaps pokes fun at their established, masochistic boundaries. Despite being identified as a "reference book," organized in an alphabetized, non-linear format, the editors/contributors have painstakingly argued against the crisscrossing of white supremacy and species supremacy-- they write about animals as well as animalization, a racial trope on which the ideological boundaries of the empire were expanded. At a time when "the order of knowledge, social crisis, and the environmental havoc of our age [are] framed in ecological terms" (Anker, 2001, p. 1), the British colonial and imperialist mission which was guided by a similar, yet different agenda is crucial to discussions and scholarly interventions on animals. As Anker observes, "the emergence of new ecological orders of knowledge as tools for imperial management of the empire" (2001, p. 3) has driven the mission forward; for example, the idea that the British mercantile class considered themselves "God's pamper'd people" (Dryden, 1871) bestowed them with a nature so diverse and rich which required to be planned. Sarah Irving (2008) argues that this connotes "the original dominion that Adam commanded over nature in the Garden of Eden" (p. 1). The primary purpose was "restoration of man's original empire over nature" (Irving, 2008, p. xiii). Thus, colonies became hotspots for unravelling the encyclopaedic knowledge of flora and fauna which Adam seems to have possessed. This significantly reframed the ways in which human-animal labour was conceptualized. Thus, as Anker (2001) argues, "the history of ecology [i]s a product of human and not environmental agency." (p. 5) In this complex web, interwoven is the discourse on species-- inter-species, intraspecies, multispecies-- that dominate today's ecological reasoning paradigm. It is in this context that the editors reiterate that British empire is a "multispecies enterprise" (p. 1).

The contributors drive the central thematic in different directions, situating their accounts in transhistorical and transimperial contexts-- the book makes a tour across New Zealand and Australia all the way up to the Indian subcontinent and South Africa. The focus of the histories is

"the British Empire from the 1850s to the post–World War I period" (p. 12). As the editors observe, "[t]ogether, they illuminate how the ideological and practical contests of empire, which are too often traced only through the archive of human subjects, are thrown into bold relief when explored through animal form" (p. 6). The entries reflect an intellectual, and to a certain degree, an affective investment in the subject, contrary to what a classified entry or a bestiary would reflect. It is this affective register of this work that makes *Animalia* a powerful rendition of multiple histories intersecting with geo-political, socio-economic, cultural, ecological and ethical axes of identity, subject-making, classification and allocation of life. Alphabetization and bestiary are two forms re-appropriated to suit the purpose of the text-- the editors are of the view that a) "the alphabetic form allows for juxtapositions that generate unexpected connections" (pp. 5-6) and b) to show "how thoroughly imperial histories have been shaped by nonhuman animals in the Anglophone imperial world" (p. 8). These forms illustrate how human control over animals, and nature, has been established, classified and glorified. Furthermore, the fact that naming, registering, and regulating is a deeply political process rather than an objective scientific or educative process is clearly highlighted. Thus, *Animalia* is a counter-narrative-- a counter archive of animal histories-- and "a mode of reading that is opposed and antagonistic to the protocols of conventional empire history" (p. 13).

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