



## Between ticks and people: Responding to nearby and contentments



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### ABSTRACT

Ticks, their bodies, the affects and emotions they inspire, the diseases they potentially carry, raise questions that are different, though not unrelated, to those concerning the dogs, lab rats, chickens, or wolves more typically encountered in Animal Studies. Engaging with such questions leads us to consider a 'geography of nearby' that attends to the spatial, emotional, behavioural, taxonomic, historical, ecological, topographies that tie particular humans and creatures together in particular ways. As an example of how this geography of the nearby infuses material encounters, practices and theories, this paper attends to the way that ethics is framed within the Animal Studies literature. Setting the emotional registers inspired by ticks against those typically adduced in framing ethical responsibilities to other creatures we might come to recognise the politics and ethics of inclusions and exclusions which shape much literature in animal studies. To make such a move is not to criticise or dismiss work within Animal Studies but to demonstrate how the animals we think with shape the theoretical, practical and political consensus we reach. The paper concludes with a move toward 'contentment' as a register for encountering ticks.

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### 1. Introduction

This is a response to small, blood sucking arachnids and how, as they buried themselves into my skin in search of the nourishment blood provides, they also inserted themselves in the theoretical texts I was reading. As I moved through various emotional registers in response to their presence, these small critters at this particular moment diffracted what I was reading and thinking about in the summers of 2010 and 2011. They have stubbornly stayed with me.

Ticks. Their discovery raises affect/emotional responses in humans such as disgust, repulsion and violence. They are plucked from the skin and killed in a variety of mechanical and chemical ways. This may be the limit of the tick–human interaction except they carry diseases such as TBE (Tick Born Encephalitis) and Lyme disease (Borreliosis). Such possibly life threatening diseases raise justifications for killing, but they also cause anxiety, both personal concern and national immunisation programmes. The combinations of ticks, humans, technologies, bacteria and viruses create significance and have personal, social and economic consequences.

The attention within the natural sciences focuses on either epidemiological studies of the diseases for which ticks are vectors,

or studies that engage with the ecologies of different ticks.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the natural sciences, the focus is almost entirely on human health (there are a few exceptions e.g. Smith, 2013 or Hatley, 2011). This foregrounding of disease, however can be seen as hiding ticks and the relations they create in favour of the medical challenges they pose to humans, thereby reducing ticks to vectors of disease. Ticks therefore, along with a range of less charismatic creatures, could be considered as "invisible animals" as they are both socially out-of-sight and absent from wider academic enquiry. The diverse ecological relations of "invisible" animals however, offer much to our understandings of our more-than-human socialities; the "invisible" animals of this world – the ticks, the microbes, bacteria and fungi, indeed worms, insects, fish and rodents are far more numerous than the visible creaturely presence witnessed as pets, companions, farm/food animals, laboratory and zoo subjects/objects. Further, their presence is more marked than humans give them credit for. The challenges of the microbial – from infectious diseases to the fungal rotting of our homes and monuments – are as significant as the possibilities of mycoprotein food substances

<sup>1</sup> There are at least 907 species of tick (Bowman and Nuttall, 2008:x), grouped into three phyla *Ixodidae*, *Nuttallidae* and *Argasidae*, though such categorisation is contested (Barker and Murrell, 2008).

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(e.g. Quorn), pharmaceuticals (e.g. insulin) or waste processing and as Hird 2009 has so clearly demonstrated bacteria are worthy of academic scrutiny without needing to reduce them to uses for or threats to human ways of being. Therefore, while there has been increasing attention in recent years to the more-than-human<sup>2</sup> aspects of our social worlds (see for example Whatmore, 2002), there has been a tendency to focus on interactions between people and large, often mammalian, animals.<sup>3</sup> Thus academic accounts of animals often (unintentionally) engaged the more obvious kinship bonds between humans and animals like us; animals that are spatially, emotionally, behaviourally, taxonomically, ecologically nearby.

Barbara Hernstein Smith (2004) discusses the 'ethical taxonomies' of kin and kinds that run through popular and academic accounts of biological relatedness. Hernstein Smith notes that when the notion of 'the human' is unsettled there are no 'naturally' obvious points at which kinship stops, and therefore no rational groupings to which differing levels of responsibility apply. But within these relations, knots of significance or kinship continue to have significance in individual lives, socially and politically as animals play roles in spaces as diverse as the home, the laboratory, the plate, the wilderness or environmental policy. As a consequence of these knots of significance the emotional, political and cultural ways that humans negotiate sameness and difference becomes particularly relevant. It is through a discussion of what I term the geographies of nearby that this paper engages these negotiations and points to their implications in both theory and practice.

The aim of this paper therefore is threefold. First to highlight how a geography of nearby creates a particular animal for 'Animal Studies'.<sup>4</sup> Second, the paper will examine the role of emotions in tying these topologies of significance and kinship and consequentially discussions of ethical responsibility. Third and in response to the questions that ticks raise at the emotional, bodily and theoretical levels, the paper attempts a move towards contentment as a route for engaging ethical responsibilities with animals that are currently not seen as significant. First however, it is necessary to position ticks within the wider body of work that has emerged over recent years dealing with more-than-human perspectives.

## 2. Creating nearbys – placing ticks in 'animal studies'

Recent work from a range of disciplines has highlighted the role that animals play in human lives. For example, Wolch (1999) identifies how animals can become bound up with urban life and Anderson (1995) discusses the manner in which zoo animals help construct ideas about "the human". Animals also have more active roles (rather than oppositional) as they are inherently bound up with national (Potts and White, 2008), diasporic (Jerolmack, 2007), and personal identities. In addition, the literal and practical consumption of animal bodies and body parts as food, clothing, leisure, or transport emphasises the corporeal presence of animals in

<sup>2</sup> I use more-than-human here as a broad category encompassing all that has traditionally been excluded from understandings of 'the human' but is crucial in determining the human. I cannot review this work within the constraints of this article, but the more-than-human might include non-human animals, technology, and biotic and abiotic elements of 'environments'. While positioned within literature addressing the more-than-human in its broadest sense, the specificities of this paper with ticks as its focus, speaks most directly to animal presence.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest that there have only been studies engaging large mammals – see further discussion below.

<sup>4</sup> Animal studies is a diverse and interdisciplinary field rather than a specific discipline. It has however emerged in recent years as a significant critical turn in various disciplines and has dedicated journals and conferences outside of specific disciplinary contexts. Whilst it may not be considered a recognised discipline it is a recognisable field within the social sciences, arts and humanities.

everyday life. Equally the role of animals in scientific and medical advancement highlights the fundamental presence of animals in human lives (Haraway, 1997). This diverse significance of animals in seemingly exclusively human social worlds has drawn increased attention from the social sciences and humanities.

It has been suggested that animals rub uncomfortably against classical social theory (Myers, 2003; Nibert, 2003); they challenge the seemingly rigid social, cultural, historical and conceptual boundaries that hold "us" apart from "them", animal from human, nature from society. Further, to include animals in academic enquiry challenges the boundaries between academic disciplines (Segerdahl, 2011); consequentially, animals permit us to move between different taxonomies and unpack seemingly dichotomous categories. Thus "animals are good to think with" (Levi-Strauss, 1991), as their plasticity and movement within and across social and cultural boundaries make them relevant to exposing wider social and cultural norms, expectations and attitudes. Indeed as Whatmore suggests, we are increasingly forced to 'admit and register the creative presence of creatures and devices amongst us, and the animal sensibilities of our diverse human being' (2007, 345). I am curious however, to question which animals have become most frequent companions in our human thinking and writing, and ask which animals are good to think with, and what implications those animals have for theory, practice and policy?

While as Philo and Wilbert suggest, "animal" remains an open category in which multiple imaginative geographies are constantly operating (2000, 10–1), I would suggest that the recent engagement with animals in social and cultural theory has tended to focus on relatively large, charismatic, mammalian, land-dwelling animals. Most often the animals concerned have a recognisable 'face' and are generally benign. Fascinating, insightful and important as these interventions are, accounts of dogs, cats, lab rats, cattle, chickens or wolves reflect what I would call a geography of nearby within animal studies.

This geography of nearby is not limited to a physical proximity in terms of locality but a dynamic topography that ties species together along lines such as domestication consumption, companion animals, or taxonomic class. Framing relations in terms of the nearby emphasises the context specific ways in which ties are made. To talk of animals as nearby is, in part, shorthand for the long interlinking chains of spatial, emotional, behavioural, taxonomic, and ecological connections that lead to specific encounters.<sup>5</sup> Derrida and his cat, Levinas and bobby, Haraway and Cayenne or oncomouse, came about as a consequence of various ties that make certain animals pets and others models for human bodies. The benefit of expressing these chains in spatial terms is that as it both describes these interconnections and offers a route for commenting on these associations; the ways that core and periphery is created.

Identifying this geography of the nearby is not to dismiss existing work, nor to frame it as 'mundane', 'everyday' and therefore less important. I hold that this work is, for the most part, important, critical and challenging. It is also not my intention to connect an awareness of the nearby to the criticisms levelled at certain persons and areas of work, such as the dismissal of work conducted by women with their canine companions (such as Haraway, 2008) as 'indulgent'. Susan McHugh (2012) in her rebuttal of such claims demonstrates both the fallacies in the dismissals and the possibilities offered by such work to continue to inform theories

<sup>5</sup> My proposal of the geography of nearby, though closely related to, is not synonymous with Anthropocentrism. Nearby is a more situated way of discussing the issues relating to anthropocentrism. It is about the happenstance, the incidental connections and relations we find ourselves in as we do research, which may or may not be anthropocentric.

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