Yael Burstein, Untitled (yet), 2007, Montage, 95x115 cm

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# Eating the Problem

## Biodiversity, "invasive" species, and the luck of the draw

Humans are very good at putting things into categories. I would go so far as to suggest that it is something of an obsession of ours. Arguably we do this to try and make sense of the world, but we also use it as a controlling measure—making sense of the world and trying to control it seem to be intrinsically linked for us. Just one of the ways we categorise animals (and plants, but I want to concentrate on animals in this essay) is as "native" or "invasive" (or "feral", or "pests", or "vermin"). But how do we define these terms? I haven't been able to find agreed upon definitions of terms such as "native" and "invasive", even when considering them only as they are applied in my home country of Australia.

Kookaburras, an iconic Australian bird, are an interesting case in point. Until the arrival of Europeans in the late 18th century, kookaburras were only found on the eastern mainland of Australia, but were introduced by European colonisers (or, more pertinently,

invaders) to the states of Tasmania and Western Australia in the late 19th / early 20th centuries. This is something I suspect that many people are unaware of, including a lot of Tasmanians and Western Australians. While indisputably a native Australian bird, do kookaburras count as "native" to Western Australia and Tasmania? Not if you go by one Australian definition, which is that non-native species are those introduced by humans after European settlement in 1788.[1] Or does that definition only count for species that have come from outside Australia? Even if you stick with the "1788+species from outside Australia" definition, there is some evidence that cats arrived well before 1788 with Dutch shipwrecks or Indonesian trepangers[2] in the 17th century in the north-west of Australia,[3] and so according to that definition, cats may be native to Australia.

Dingoes are a particularly interesting example when it comes to defining what, or who, counts as native[4] (not to mention trying to define what a dingo is).[5] Dingoes are believed to have arrived in Australia around 4000 years ago with Asian mariners, and they are commonly blamed for the extinction of the thylacine or Tasmanian Tiger on mainland Australia. The dingo is certainly deemed to belong in Australia by indigenous Australians. However

1 See for e.g. New South Wales Department of Primary Industries, "Non-native animals" and Caulfield, *Animals in Australia,* 293.

2 Trepangers traveled from what was then Sulawesi to Arnhem Land in the far north west of Australia to harvest sea cucumbers, known in Indonesian as *trepang.*

3 See for e.g. Koch, Algar, Searle, et al. "A voyage to Terra Australis" and Franklin, Animal Nation, 23.

4 Carthey and Banks, "When Does an Alien Become a Native Species?

5 See Probyn-Rapsey "Eating Dingoes", and "Dingoes and dog-whistling" for an extensive discussion of the complexities of defining what a dingo is, and how this relates more broadly to issues of race and culture.



their uncertain status as wild or domesticated,[6] their propensity for killing sheep, and the fact that they may choose to crossbreed with other dogs has resulted in their persecution as an unwanted pest, with the Western Australian State Government, for example, declaring that dingoes are not native.[7]

Ultimately, when it comes to other animals, we humans give ourselves a decidedly anthropocentric license to determine who does and doesn't belong, and the consequences can be fatal for anyone that is seen to transgress whatever category or place we have decided that they belong in. For the most part the post-colonial introduction of species to Australia has been intentional and so, for a while at least, these animals were deemed to belong. A good number of such species are still seen to have a place, and these are generally the ones we like to eat. In a colonised country such as Australia, cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, and even trout, remain welcome. These animals avoid being labeled as invasive because we (mostly) have them under our control, and we benefit from their presence for food and financial reasons. However, once we feel like we have lost control of a species, fear, frustration, and guilt tend to result. For those animals who are labelled invasive, it is all too common for us to demonize them, giving us justification for treating them in ways that would otherwise be deemed unconscionable. We kill them in huge numbers in whatever way we see fit, which often results in protracted and painful deaths. In addition, successful newcomers often exist in such large numbers that we rarely manage to kill them all, such that the killing just goes on and on in regular cycles, resulting in untold suffering. And so, we might start to feel guilty at wastefulness of all these animals we kill, leading some to the conclusion

6 Ballard and Wilson, "The Australian dingo: untamed or feral?"

7 Bamford, "Dingoes to remain classified as non-native wild dogs."

that we should, for example, eat them. Eating these animals, some might rationalize, gives them "value", as all too often animals are only worth whatever value we humans ascribe to them.

The idea that eating invasive species is a good idea was behind an invitation I received in April 2017, to contribute a short essay to a book titled Eat the Problem[8] to be published by MONA, the privately run Museum of Old and New Art, in Hobart, Tasmania. The brainchild of Kirsha Kachele and her husband David Walsh, the wealthy owners of MONA, Eat the Problem was proposed as primarily a book of recipes, with the email invitation that I received stating: "The problem, here, is invasive species. And our solution, as you may well have guessed, is to eat them."

There is no doubt in my mind that the short text I was asked to contribute was expected to provide a counterpoint to the book's premise. My invitation was received at the very time I was engaged in a robust, and at times public,[9] debate with Walsh about animal rights and veganism following his decision to program 150.Action by Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch,[10] into 2017 Dark MOFO winter festival. The event, described in the festival program as "A bloody, sacrificial ritual",[11] required the slaughter of a bull and caused a furore, with local activists, included me, campaigning hard to have the event cancelled. However, despite complying with all editorial requests, when Eat the Problem was finally published 2 years later,

8 MONA, "Eat the Problem book."

9 I was named (and shamed) in David Walsh's blog as well as corresponding privately via email over several months. There is a whole other essay I could write about this matter!

10 Nitsch's "actions", which he has been undertaking since the 1960s, involve the dismembering and tearing apart of animal bodies, copious amounts of animal blood, with participants, who may be naked, rolling around in and stomping on the animals' entrails.

11 Dark MOFO "2017 program: 150.Action."



to my surprise and dismay, my text was not included—all that was included was a recipe I offered as an afterthought, for (eggless) meringues made with human blood.

In some ways this essay is an expanded version of that which was intended for Eat the Problem. My concern, as I outlined in the brief 500 words I was ultimately allocated, was that the project was fundamentally flawed, as it was based on humans assuaging their guilt while simultaneously avoiding the real problem; that the single biggest contributor to species loss is habitat destruction, and the greatest reason for habitat destruction is animal agriculture.[12] The impact of animal agriculture goes beyond land clearing; animal agriculture is one of the biggest contributors to the greenhouse gases that are resulting in the devastating climate change that is driving more species to extinction. So, as my unpublished text pointed out, we are in fact already eating the problem, and in doing so, we are also contributing to the problem. However, as noted earlier, while the animals we farm are also introduced, we don't consider them "invasive" because we have them under our control.

Eat the Problem is essentially based on an anthropocentric sense of self-importance that puts humans at the top of the food chain and so we consider it our right to eat animals, even though most of us have no need to, regardless of the effect this has on the animals, the environment in general, or our health. This self-imposed position of dominance means that humans also consider it their right to control the ecosystem so that it conforms to what they

12 See Morrel, "Meat-eaters may speed worldwide species extinction" and United Nations, "Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented'." I do note that the Eat the Problem website states "The ultimate invader is, of course, the human, and it is our taste for boring / cruel / unhealthy things like cows that is causing the most damage of all." See https://mona.net.au/museum/kirsha-s-portal/eat-the-problem#eat-the-problem

think it should be like, and thus do whatever they think necessary to achieve this. But the "do whatever it takes" attitude to invasive species is being challenged, with the Compassionate Conservation movement a growing force. The University of Technology Sydney, for example, has a Centre for Compassionate Conservation, and to quote the website "With the guiding principles of first, do no harm, individuals matter, inclusivity, and peaceful coexistence, compassionate conservation is forging a new path to enable positive human-wildlife interactions."[13] [original emphasis]. I think that Kirsha Kachele, David Walsh, and the contributors to the Eat the Problem book are genuinely driven by environmental concerns, but are locked into an old anthropocentric model that refuses the individuality of the unwanted aliens, and in doing so extends little or no compassion toward them. We worry about losing species, but if you are a wallaby, do you worry about whether it's a thylacine or a dingo or a wild dog (or a human) that is taking you down? The irony of all this is that the really successful introduced species (the ones not under our control that is), especially those that have been around for a while, are so well established that they often become intertwined with natives. In Australia, rabbits, for example, are a favoured prey of native raptors, and black-headed python numbers have increased since the introduction of the cane toad,[14] which is otherwise seen to have been one of the more disastrous post-colonial errors of judgement, having been introduced in 1935 to control the cane beetle in sugar cane farms. The cane toads failed miserably at doing the job they were imported to do, while negatively impacting

13 University of Technology Sydney, "Centre for Compassionate Conservation."

14 This is thought to be due to the goannas, that usually eat the python eggs, preying on cane toads and being poisoned in the process, this reducing the goanna numbers. See https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-04/native-animals-recovering-after-cane-toad-havoc/8317384



on native species either by eating them, or by killing them when the unwary natives tried to eat the toxic toads.

I am undeniably annoyed that I was not advised that my text for Eat the Problem would not be included, as if I had been informed I would likely have chosen not to be a contributor at all. But my concerns about this book, and the bigger project, go beyond a personal frustration, and are based on the use of the creative arts to engage usefully with social and environmental issues. At the time I received the invitation, I assumed that the book's premise was more a tongue-in-cheek provocation than a serious proposition, and I felt that there was value in contributing a counterpoint. However, given the decision to exclude my brief text, and the organisation of follow up events, including a series of dinners where the bodies and other products derived from those species designated as "invasive" were served, I wonder if in fact Kachele and Walsh intended their "solution" to be taken more seriously than I had initially thought. It is hard to be sure, as there is an undertone of wry provocation that runs through Brand MONA, and a determination to be perceived as "edgy", evident in this quote from the Eat the Problem webpage:

> *Option A is to rub [humans] out (and cook us with plantain leaves under hot stones). But if we're not game for that the least we can do is alter our eating habits, and in doing so change an ecological nightmare into something totally delish. And morally superior. Also, it means Kirsha can wear fur without feeling guilty (made from nutria, which was where this whole thing started: Kirsha's encounter with the invasive nutria of Louisiana). The fur is the main thing. Plus morals etc.*[15]

15 MONA, "Eat the Problem project."

This quote is indicative of the disrespect shown to the animals who are the focus of the project's premise and whose individuality and sentience is subsumed by being damned with the label of "invasive". These animals are reduced to being the subjects of a very expensive joke. Herein lies another concern of mine about the Eat the Problem project; the matter of privilege that comes of wealth and social status, and its connection to environmental destruction. The project tackles the issue of invasive species by the production of a cookbook and a series of dinners, all of which are priced such that they are only available to those with significant financial resources. This is perhaps another reason my text didn't make the cut, as it contained a cheeky title and provocation to the wealthy Walsh and Kachele, that, as meat eating is aligned with wealth and status, if we are to "eat the problem", maybe we should "eat the rich"?

I'm not suggesting that we should be careless about introducing other species, or that invasive species have not had deleterious effects. But what we face is a truly wicked problem, and if any kind of eating might help this problem, it would be to not eat animals at all. This would not only help slow climate change, it would open up large amounts of agricultural land for return to native vegetation. This seems to be the least risky approach.

Before bringing this essay to a conclusion, I want to return to the matter of categorising animals. Why do we feel it is so important to divide fauna into native and invasive in the first place, and having done so, why do we feel the need to get rid of the invaders? I think it comes down to issues we have with guilt, purity and control. We feel bad that we introduced new animals, and we feel bad about the impact they may have had on the environment and pre-existing species. We also have an unhealthy obsession with purity. We like to imagine a return to a pre-colonial utopian world that is not polluted by



impure aliens, even if the invaders have effectively become a part of the ecosystem. We do all we can to try and control the ecosystem so that it looks like we think it should look like, based on some unstable utopian concept. We even try and control animals' choice of mate—we despise the hybrids that come of the interbreeding of natives and newcomers (dingoes should NOT get the hots for Labradors. Pacific black ducks should STOP getting it on with European mallards). We long for the purity of the old world before we messed it up. We believe it is our job to bring things back under control. We want, dare I say, to make things great again, and in doing so, rather than solving the problem, we often just make a bigger mess.

The messiness surrounding human categorizing of animals was behind an exhibition I took part in in 2014 titled Beautiful Vermin. For this exhibition I designed a set of playing cards made up of images of animals, fish, birds and insects which have at some time been declared pests or vermin in Australia. Titled Luck of the Draw, the set of cards also included locations, modes of transport, and methods by which animals are caught/killed. Humans were the "wild cards" or jokers, who could be given various roles such as scientist, hunter, politician or fisherman. While I provided the cards, I did not supply any rules – it was up to the players to devise the rules, just as we humans do when it comes to our decisions on which animals are vermin, and which are not. A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to sit down with a diverse group of artists and experienced playing with the cards with them. It was a wonderful thing to be able to witness the conversations and engagement with the issues prompted by the cards. A great deal of attention was paid by the players to the complexities of the issues around devising the rules to play by, and how this affected the way that the animals were categorised.

Ultimately in our attempts to make things great again we play a dangerous and often nationalistic game. There are many examples of our strategies to fix the problem of invasive species backfiring, just as we made mistakes in deciding which animals should be introduced in the first place. It's a game in which we deal the hands, we give ourselves license to change the rules at any time, and if you're a nonhuman animal, whether you win or lose is very much the luck of the draw. If there is one good thing to come of the frustrations I feel about my involvement with the Eat the Problem project, it is that I feel motivated to revisit the set of cards with a view to making them available as affordable, printed sets, that act as a counter to the polemics of Eat the Problem. Who knows, maybe I can even convince MONA to sell them in the museum shop.

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Pavel Wolberg, Abkhazia horse, 2015, C-print, 90x80 cm