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**Stories of Human Exceptionalism:
Writing through the Impasse between
Care and Domination**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

The coalescing socio-political and environmental crises characterising the epoch of the Anthropocene raise fundamental questions about what it means to be human. Underpinning these tensions is a tendency that has become predominant within Western societies: an assumption that humans are ‘above’ the natural world, as if somehow ‘exceptional’. This strains our relationship with the other. Human exceptionalism culminates in the impasse between care and domination. Relations of care and domination are inextricable: attempts to care for the other cannot be divorced from the forms of domination upon which those efforts are predicated. Yet as Alenka Zupančič (2017) affirms, this contradiction is not inherently problematic. What is problematic is when this contradiction is disavowed, for this is when human exceptionalism is reified.

In questioning how we might care in a way that does not tacitly reinforce exceptionalist forms of dominance, I draw upon Zupančič’s object-disoriented ontologies as a means of working through these interdisciplinary concerns. This involves attending to those objects that object to the discursive rationalities that we script about them. In a move that turns Zupančič’s theoretical postulations into a distinct methodological orientation, I use autoethnography—specifically, an *object-disoriented autoethnography*—to work through experiences within my own life that elucidate the impasse between care and domination and thereby the disavowal of our exceptionalism. These experiences demonstrate three fields of social interaction that are complicit in the reproduction of human exceptionalism: the university’s administration of an ethical subject; the making and unmaking of nature through conservation programmes; and the practices of death involved in the sustaining of life.

Taking my place within the contradictions I seek to understand, this research thereby puts my own subjectivity on the line. In doing so, I illustrate how *object-disoriented autoethnography* enables a means of working with the limit points of our exceptionalism. In the process of re-scripting our stories anew, new insight can be revealed. In this instance, a generative capacity lies in the naming of the forms of violence encapsulated within care.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The Impasse between Care and Domination

We walked down the stairs and were led to a room that was sectioned off from the rest of the house. A passing comment was made as I stepped in: “You guys are okay with taxidermy, right?”. Though only a small room, the space was filled with the spoils of human entitlement. Smothering the walls were artefacts of a trophy hunter’s pleasure: this was his showroom. There hung the lives of a dozen animals; their presence overwhelmed all other objects around them. Impala, deer and various types of antelope indicated the extent to which this person had travelled in his accumulation of lives as possessions. The sheer size of his collection was an amassment that bode a self-fulfilling ego. The room culminated in the fruits of his labour, years of meticulous dedication to a hobby that was like no other. It was a moose that hung proudly next to a display of guns that was his most prized treasure.

A state of complete shock and bewilderment overtook me, my mouth hung open. Having never had the privilege of seeing a moose in the wild, I found myself lost in its utter enormity as it hung low on the wall... its eyes level with mine. Left speechless, I dissociated from those (humans) around me; their conversation and laughter became a background blur. My eyes watered, yet did not quite form tears as I was overcome by the uncomfortable beauty of the lives presented before me. I moved slowly around the room, looking deep into the eyes of each creature I met. All I could express was an inaudible yet reoccurring murmur, a silent muttering, “I am sorry, I am so, so sorry”. The sombre, sobering encounter was in stark contrast

to my memories of seeing those same animals in their natural habitats... alive. The innocence of my inner child was stripped as I stood eye to eye with the stuffed faces of the memories of my past. My ideals of the natural world were swiftly repackaged as relics.

My experiences captured within this vignette are filled with politically fraught tensions regarding the worthiness of one life over another. Underpinning these tensions is a tendency that has become predominant within Western societies: an assumption that humans are 'above' the natural world, as if somehow 'exceptional'. This tendency towards 'exceptionalism' is evident in the human desire that justified the accumulation of lives as possessions. In the exercising of a perceived 'right' to superiority, these animals were rendered an insignificant 'other' and thereby able to be hunted, stuffed, and invariably consumed. Yet within these salient relations between the human and more-than-human, a more striking relationship can be found: the impasse between care and domination.

Throwing into question the relations we hold with 'the other', this profound deadlock draws attention to the way relations of care and domination are inextricable. Bound within the story of a trophy hunter's opulent display of dominance are the subtle workings of care. Practices of care were entwined within the preservation, veneration and exhibition of those animal bodies in ways that paradoxically rendered them immortalised. Familial relations of care were captured in the tales that accompanied each item within that grand collection: tales of a bond between father and son, the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, skills and values, along with shared experiences that extended around the globe. Considerable effort would have been needed to execute the exuberant trips that navigated not only the natural terrain in the tracking and hunting of those animals, but also the political minefield required to be worked through to bring those animals home. The artefacts thereby also demonstrate practices of care to oneself; a conceited affirmation of one's own identity and accomplishments.

The task of giving recognition to the relations of care that are bound to those artefacts of blatant domination is an uncomfortable undertaking. These feelings are only intensified when consideration is given to the commonality of this impasse in contemporary social relations and within social theory itself. Discourses of care are often compounded by dominating practices. In popular culture, for instance, David Attenborough's insistent calls for wider planetary care are haunted by his suggestions that the unparalleled growth of certain human populations is the cause of environmental harm (Tran, 2013). This conflicting undercurrent is also evident within the interrelated domains of development studies, social policy and human rights. These pivotal and indeed necessary fields operate with the incentive of generating cumulative forms of care for others. Yet they are also predicated on politicised binaries that continually reposition the self, or the provider of care, as distinct from those who are the recipients of care, along with the conditions that necessitated such care in the first place (Beasley & Bachi, 2005; Esteva & Escobar, 2017; Fassbender & Traisbach, 2019; Hardy, 1981).

These examples challenge the idea that 'care' is a simple 'corrective' to society's ills. Despite ongoing theoretical debates regarding the conceptualisation of care (Beasley & Bachi, 2005; Lavoie et al., 2005; Tronto, 2017),¹ "care has re-entered the [scholarly and political] zeitgeist" as an alluring buzzword (Hobart & Kneese, 2020, p. 1). This is because of its transformative potential, as Stirling (2015) suggests. Care can be thought of as both a tool and an act of 'political warfare' because it can be employed in efforts that disrupt the conditions of inequality (Ahmed, 2014). It can issue accountability to those in positions of power for their role played in the continuation of social struggles (Hobart & Kneese, 2020). Yet, unable to operate outside of the capitalist economy and its "opportunistic commodification of all that lives" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 35), discourses of care remain

¹ That is, debates surrounding the manifestation of care as an ethical (Barnes et al., 2015; Levinas, 1985; Taylor, 2005), relational (Conley, 2016), affective (Lynch, 2007; Lynch, Kalaitzake & Crean, 2021; Oksala, 2016), or labour practice (Federici, 2011; Fraser, 2016; Hochschild, 2012).

at risk of appropriation. The proliferation of the imperative for ‘self-care’ is a key example of this point; self-care is a solution to but also a symptom of the exhaustive conditions of late capitalism (McGee, 2020). Avoiding the romanticisation of care thereby requires a reckoning with the relation care holds to domination.

This is the task that this thesis seeks to achieve.

Finding Political Possibilities within the Limit-points of Human Exceptionalism

The impasse between care and domination emerges as a consequence of human exceptionalism. Human exceptionalism—the belief and subsequent practices that support the proposition that (certain) humans are somehow ‘above’ the natural world—has not only resulted in the overconsumption of the planet, of its resources and of its capacity to carry our waste, but it has worked to normalise these very conditions. Exceptionalist tendencies thereby continue to take place with little regard for the more-than-human world, such as animals and plant species, with whom we share, and to whom we owe our existence. The normalcy of these seemingly dead-end circumstances is further perpetuated by the ceaseless development of the capitalist economy whose all-encompassing reach is now global (Fisher, 2009; Jameson, 2003). As these exceptionalist conditions “seamlessly occup[y] the horizons of the thinkable” (Fisher, 2009. p. 8), attempts to rethink what it means to be human similarly become bound within a state of impasse. This is true in the case of the Anthropocene.

By demarcating the current geological period as an epoch of ‘the human’, discourse on the Anthropocene was thought to be the stepping-stone towards remedying the exceptionalism it defines. Notwithstanding the continued categorical debates as to when the period began, along with its problematic homogenisation of human activity, the notion of the Anthropocene paradoxically references the human

as both the “marker of destruction and of achievement” (Chiew, 2015, p. 2).² Though a discourse propelled by its concern for the future of the planet, the Anthropocene is “wedded to a position of human exceptionalism insofar as it distinguishes human sociality as the autonomous source of corrective for environmental devastation” (Chiew, 2015, p. 3). The Anthropocene thereby points to the imprint of human agency at the time when human agency is most bereft of the ability to reverse its impacts (Toscano, 2016, 2018). Discourse on the Anthropocene subsequently deploys exceptionalism in its troublesome cloaking of the very exceptionalism upon which its logic depends.

The impasse between care and domination thereby demonstrates not only our inability to step outside humanist perspectives, but the problematic ramifications that can come from the normalisation of exceptionalist tendencies. Rampant within our realities and in our attempts to make sense of the world in which we find ourselves, this impasse illuminates the mechanisms through which human exceptionalism is not only (re)produced in both social life and social theory, but also the ways exceptionalism is commonly disavowed. The magnitude of this exceptionalist impasse thus highlights the broader political project at stake within my work. As Guattari (2000) has similarly pondered, what capacities might enable the human to act anew? As both the “subject–author of life *and* an object authored by life” (Chiew, 2015, p. 5, emphasis in the original), how might we work with the exceptionalism to which we are bound?

To contemplate what it means to be human during this time opens up what could be considered a self-referential puzzle—a contradiction that forces an inward gaze. My research follows this lead. To question how the human subject negotiates not only the impasse between care and domination but its exceptionalism, I put my

² Key conversations within this debate include works by Adams (2016), Chakrabarty (2016, 2017), Chiew (2015), Haff (2017), Lewis and Maslin (2015), Lorimer (2017), Malm and Hornborg (2014), Mansfield and Doyle (2017), and Moore (2016, 2017), see also Hartley, 2016).

subjectivity on the line. I use a distinct form of autoethnography—*object-disoriented autoethnography*—to situate myself within this very contradiction. This enables me to theoretically engage with my own experiences of being caught within the impasse of care and domination, and to make inferences on how these experiences represent the workings of exceptionalism at the societal level. As will become evident, challenges arise when human exceptionalism is disavowed.

This thesis demonstrates how tendencies of disavowal lock us into practices that subsequently reproduce the very exceptionalism we attempt to overcome. Recognising that this is fundamentally problematic, I identify the possible emergence of new capacities for engaging with human exceptionalism to confront these commonplace tendencies. I do this by investigating the points of impasse or structural negativity we encounter within our lives. These are moments that do not make sense and are often easier to ignore. Three examples of structural negativity are presented within this work: the presumption of a knowable subject (chapter four), the making and unmaking of nature (chapter five) and the death required in the sustaining of life (chapter six). These examples illustrate different fields of social interaction caught within the bounds of human exceptionalism. They are, in other words, fields that attempt to care yet are also enactments of domination.

In working through these tendencies of disavowal, my thesis explores where we might find new capacities for understanding within the limit points of our exceptionalism. Ultimately, I find these new capacities within methodological approaches that can traverse the disavowal to which the impasse of care and domination may otherwise lead. I suggest this lies in the potential of *object-disoriented autoethnography*. What follows is a documentation of how I have worked through these tensions.

Thesis Outline

This thesis sits alongside the push within the humanities and social sciences to decolonise knowledge (re)production by relinquishing epistemological debates in favour of ontological discussions. Though epistemological inquiry anchors itself in competing planks, including positivism, interpretivism and dialectics, these frameworks presume the pre-eminence of human thought—often a distinctly Western form of thought—that reasserts the supremacy of certain ways of knowing as a guiding presumption within knowledge construction. This is the silenced bedrock upon which thought work commonly begins (Lowe & Manjapra, 2019). Recognising these tensions, the next chapter, ‘Theoretical Considerations’, maps particular methodological moves within the scholarship of the ontological turn that attempts to re-examine how we engage with the world and how we understand our relationship to not only each other, but also other life forms. Yet these efforts are invariably problematic. The discussion thus turns to Alenka Zupančič’s object-disoriented ontologies as a countering response.

Chapter Three, ‘Methodological Orientations’, explores how we might come to use the notion of object-disoriented ontologies, and more importantly, how it might be employed in a manner that does not tacitly reproduce the forms of exceptionalism evident within the moves demonstrated in the ontological turn. A solution is framed in terms of the method this thesis employs. The chapter examines the merging of psychoanalytic and feminist trends in the suggestion of an ‘object-disoriented autoethnography’—an autoethnography grounded in tales of encounters with disorienting objects—as a possible means of working with our exceptionalism.

Chapters Four to Six demonstrate an autoethnographic grappling with the tendency evident within contemporary Western societies that sees us commonly disavowing our exceptionalism. Specifically, these chapters explore three seemingly disparate yet interrelated fields that showcase attempts to ‘better’ relate to the

other: the institutionalisation of ethics within the discourse of the university; the deployment of ethics through conservation programmes; and the consideration of who or what becomes food. Despite the best efforts and intentions employed within these contexts, the impasse between care and domination is reproduced through the disavowal of the exceptionalism operative within these fields. As will become evident in each of the examples presented, it is only through an examination of disorienting objects that this observation of disavowal can be revealed. Chapters Four to Six will thus begin with an autoethnographic account of an object that appeared to not belong, yet was nonetheless intrinsic to its context.

The final chapter offers a summary of the quandary that is human exceptionalism. As a condition that characterises our current socio-political and ecological climate, and which plagues the wider academic project, it is the consequences of human exceptionalism that require us to reconsider our commonplace practices of relating to the other. This concluding discussion speaks to the remaining challenges and impossibilities of human exceptionalism, particularly the violence of disavowal. What is put forth is thus not necessarily a theoretical exposition of how we might move forward or beyond exceptionalism, but rather, a methodological proposition for how we might move *with* the exceptionalism to which we are bound.

A Note on Terminology

Within the expanse of scholarly debates speaking to our relations with other species, various points of reference are used to denote those which are other to the human form (see Ducros, 2021). The task of mapping the multispecies landscape in which we are embedded is one simultaneously bound within discourse's politicisation. That is, whether a decision is made consciously or not, one's choice of terminology is a political decision for each reference gives rise to particular assumptions about the state of human relations with alterity. Framing multispecies relations as the human versus the 'non-human', for instance, enforces a dichotomy

that denies not only sentience to species other than human, but also their variance and uniqueness.

To counter these presumptions, the term ‘more-than-human’ is used within this thesis. This is my way of acknowledging our humanist limit points in a manner that recognises the liveliness of objects and beings that exist in ways well beyond human experience and our capacity for understanding. Probyn (2016) agrees. She prefers the term “more-than-human” because it is “ontologically and materially relational, and opens up new epistemologies” that recognises the “diverse and shifting relations between and among humans, and the many different aspects of that are so much more-than-human” (p. 110). Importantly, however, this thesis uses the term ‘more-than-human’ to refer to not only other species—animals, plants and fungi alike. For me, ‘more-than-human’ also encompasses the elements within ourselves that exist beyond our immediate reach, including phenomena considered psychological or pertaining to the realm of the unconscious. My framing also encompasses the ‘more-than-human’ effects of our collective action, notably the movement of societies and of social structures which, like capitalism, appear to have taken on a life of their own.

The intentional framing of ‘more-than-human’ capacities within this thesis thereby directly opposes human exceptionalism and our tendencies of disavowal, for it is only with such explicit references to the liveliness of that beyond human rationality that we might begin to find new capacities within our exceptionalism.

Chapter Two

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Introduction

Scholarship of the humanities and social sciences has seen a resurgence in the popularity of ontological thought. Building on Spinoza's monism, Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, and Marx and Engel's historical materialisms, for instance, this contemporary spin on the 'turn to matter' advocates for the abandonment of traditional epistemological debates. Rather, a deep interrogation of 'objects' that exist beyond the centrality of discourse, and thereby human experience, is thought to be where movement might be found within society's socio-cultural deadlocks (Fox & Alldred, 2016). Proponents of this ontological (re)turn thus place hope in the idea that attuning our attention to objects will bring the pre-eminence of the human subject into question. 'Things', in other words, might yet provide a means for human exceptionalism to be reckoned with.

The (re)turn to matter features an array of theoretical positions and philosophical approaches. This developing miscellany includes and is not limited to, actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), posthumanisms (Braidotti, 2013, 2016, 2019; Haraway, 2006), new materialisms (Barad, 2007; Coole & Frost, 2010; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012), new material feminisms (Alaimo, 2018; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Åsberg, Thiele & van der Tuin, 2015), object-oriented philosophies (Harman, 2018), and speculative realisms (Meillassoux, 2008), amongst others.

Each of these threads places importance on the material conditions of objects, yet they represent distinct takes within the wider ontological rubric. Harman (2020) is clear on this point. Notwithstanding the various disciplinary lineages from which these threads stem, the character of these inquiries often differs as to whether their operative is more ethical (see Barad 2007; Haraway 2016) or aesthetic (see Harman, 2018), for instance. These differences reflect the current repackaging of ongoing epistemological debates within the neoliberal academe (Latour, 2004; McLennan, 2006). Despite their nuances, the countless yet often overlapping neologisms distinguishing the tenors of the ontological turn are used interchangeably when discussing the turn at large. For the purposes of this chapter, this will also be the case. The differentiations of each thread will not be described in greater detail.

More generally, the resurgence of ontological thought disperses into three key moments. This dispersal specifically pertains to the following: the relationality of the new materialism and their philosophical kin; the critique of those new materialisms, particularly in respect of the problematic repackaging of Indigenous thought and the political challenges born from the flattening of affect; and finally, the question of object-*dis*oriented ontologies as a direct counter to the prevailing 'object-oriented' connotations of the ontological turn. This chapter is structured following these three key themes. I explore the methodological possibilities and implications of the various trajectories deployed within the ontological (re)turn, questioning not only what they might mean for how contemporary social theory is constructed but, also, the potential these orientations hold for our ability to work with the limit points of human exceptionalism.

The New Materialisms and their Philosophical Kin

In its interrogation of objects both animate and inanimate, the new materialist vector of the ontological (re)turn considers materiality to be an agentic force in its own right. This perspective perceives agency as a form of 'vitality', where it is the

‘liveliness’ of objects that both create and characterise their ability to affect and be affected (Bennett, 2004, 2010). Drawing on Heidegger's (1962) analogy of a broken tool, this affective capacity is captured by Harman (2012, p. 186):

When using a hammer... I am focused on the building project currently underway, and I am probably taking the hammer for granted. Unless the hammer is too heavy or too slippery, or unless it breaks, I tend not to notice it at all. The fact that the hammer can break proves it is deeper than my understanding of it.

This example illustrates that sheer interaction between objects can create ripples in the way those objects materialise. Evidenced in the affective and tangible repercussions that would follow in the breaking of the hammer, the ‘vitality’ of objects conjures implicit and explicit relations between humans and more-than-humans alike. This, new materialists would argue, occurs irrespective of whether we are conscious of this or not. This is because agency extends well beyond the narrow realm of the human body. All material, social and abstracted entities, whether animate or inanimate, exist and more importantly are only produced because of their relations with other “contingent and ephemeral bodies, things and ideas” (Fox & Alldred, 2015, p. 401).

Relationality is at the core of the new materialist agenda. This object-oriented standpoint proposes that entities like care or domination occur through the networked relations of the animate and inanimate. These relations are considered to be perpetually in a state of kaleidoscopic movement—or what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) term an ‘assemblage’ in their influential rhizomatic philosophy of becoming. From this theoretical perspective, it is through the fluidity of these continually unfolding relational movements that new potentialities are born. Given the coalescing socio-political and ecological crises of our present juncture, where it is the continuation of both human and more-than-human life that is at stake, this relational viewpoint holds value in the explicit attention given to the way humans

interact (or ‘intra-act’ as Barad (2003) would put it) with the environment. The significance of this relational form of inquiry is best summed up by Coole and Frost (2010, p. 4):

What is at stake here is nothing less than a challenge to some of the most basic assumptions that have underpinned the modern world, including its normative sense of the human and its beliefs about human agency, but also regarding its material practices such as the ways we labour on, exploit, and interact with nature.

This ontological narration attempts to reconfigure the politicised landscapes shaping our understanding of material relations—namely, in an apolitical manner. The relationality of the new materialisms conjures images of a ‘flat ontology’, where no singular object holds greater or lesser significance than another (Morton, 2011). In this framing, power ceases to exist. With its roots firmly anchored in Spinoza’s monism (Fox & Alldred, 2018), the ‘flatness’ of these ontological accounts is demonstrated in Latour’s (2005) ‘Actor Network Theory’ or DeLanda’s (2006) ‘ontology of assemblages’ whereby all objects are afforded equal capacity in their ability to affect and be affected. These ‘sociologies of associations’ thus promote a cartography of ontologically homogenous relations that is rampant with an undercurrent of agential realism (see Barad, 2003). Though this account advocates for an understanding of relations devoid of power, its agenda is paradoxically political. This is evidenced in the incentives that inform the new materialist positioning.

Building on the ideas advanced by historical materialisms, proponents of this ontological (re)turn seek an engagement with relationality in a manner that goes beyond what they consider to be the limiting constraints of humanist rationality, thought and discourse. New materialists argue that structuralist and post-structuralist knowledge forms are inadequate because they are limited to the realms of human perception (see Meillassoux, 2008). Writers within this scholarship

proclaim that the predominance of humanist traditions within thought practices has had the effect of concretising inequitable power dynamics, and Cartesian dualisms in particular. In a move to diminish the limelight historically cast upon the ‘human’, this standpoint operates in the desire for an ‘egalitarian’ or ‘democratic’ impulse to be married within an account of ontologies (Bryant, 2011a). The (re)turn to matter has thus emerged as a means of grappling with these problematic dualisms that are often reified within anthropocentric discourse.

The new materialisms and their philosophical kin thereby operate within the broader quest to decentre the human and the anthropocentric hubris that categorically privileges the hegemony of the discursive Western subject, most often in its phallic form. In this desire to deconstruct the persistent dualisms existing within scholarly thought and to undermine the basis upon which categorical distinctions are made, the ontological (re)turn’s broader thesis of relationality is wedded to a “conviction of a world that exists independently of human access” (Lemke, 2017, p. 137). Following the philosophical foundations of realism, this theoretical commitment to an articulation of ‘the real’ outside of human existence exemplifies a means of reckoning with the exceptionalist practices that come to characterise knowledge in the discursive turn (see Barad, 2003; Guattari, 2000).³

In this quest to dismantle the binaries that unequivocally present ‘the human’ as the point of difference from the material world which we inhabit, the integrity of the human as a stable construct is brought into question. The combined works of Kirsch (2013, 2014, 2015), for instance, demonstrate the potential of an object-oriented approach to transform the landscape of anthropocentric inquiry. Yet this objective seems paradoxical in relation to the flatness of the new materialisms’

³ Works within this field, particularly those classified as posthumanist and new material feminists, also hold weight in their ability to grapple with the entrenched rubrics of domination, and thereby exceptionalism, that have become embedded within the way knowledge has historically been constructed. This is specifically in reference to the predominance of a Eurocentric, male gaze commonly cast across scholarly thought which diminishes other ways of both knowing and being.

apolitical agenda. To this end, the ontological movement cannot be divorced from its critiques.

The Limits of New Materialisms: The Politics of being Apolitical

Ontological discourse harbours a set of uncomfortable and largely overlooked tensions that quietly build a propensity of scepticism in and amongst the conviction of object-oriented claims. This is propelled by a contradictory undercurrent operative within this scholarship: the politics involved in new materialisms' seemingly apolitical agenda. This section moves to discuss two areas where proponents of object-oriented ontologies come to meet their limit points: the risks of appropriating Indigenous thought and the flattening of affect.

Ontology as another word for colonialism?

Affirming the existence of objects beyond humanist means of representation, the object-oriented zeitgeist is alluring because its emphasis on relationality places a spotlight on the shared responsibility that we as humans have in constituting the state of the material world (Rosiek, Snyder & Pratt, 2020). Evidenced in the likes of Barad (2007), Lather (2017) and Latour (2004), scholarship within the object-oriented lineage has developed out of a longing to generate both a theory *and* means of inquiry that "acknowledges the protean materiality of things as a source of meaning" (Rosiek et al., 2020, p. 331). Yet, as Coulthard (2014), Todd (2016) and Watts (2013) amongst others explain, these ideas have long existed within Indigenous thought, where a conception of ethical responsibility to the more-than-human could be considered the given starting point of any analysis. As Jones and Hoskins (2016, p. 85) outline, "Indigenous (Māori) ontologies always already assume a profound sameness, and therefore sense of recognition between the abilities and sensibilities of objects and those of humans". Put differently, for Indigenous scholars, the insights offered by materialist scholars are far from revelatory. Rather, they risk verging on being forms of expropriation.

In efforts to decolonise social theory, Indigenous thought has been signposted as a response to the predominance of Eurocentrism within the academe and in knowledge production more broadly (see Chao & Enari, 2021; Connell, 2018; Bhabra et al., 2018). Opening deep philosophical discussions about the way scholarly inquiry is conducted, Indigenous thought is reshaping the future of the social sciences in post-colonial, settler societies (Smith, 2006). Though the new materialisms' recognition of the agentic capacities of the more-than-human resonates with Indigenous thought, the wholesale lack of engagement between materialist philosophies and Indigenous scholarship has been called into view. Rosiek, Snyder and Pratt (2020), for instance, suggest that the presently missed opportunities for theoretical conversation are a consequence of new materialisms' anchoring within traditional "Western practices of knowing characteristic of the best poststructuralist social analysis" (p. 331). In other words, in carrying the effects of its encounter with the discursive turn, new materialist articulations venture not too far from that which it seeks to critique. Unable to be divorced from the privilege that has historically been afforded to Westernised catechisms more generally, object-oriented accounts risk a disavowal of the racialised identity politics that inform the hierarchical rubrics of the academe.

This has profound political implications for not only the way new materialist knowledge is produced, but for the potentialities that exist in the ways that this knowledge might be used. Notwithstanding notable exceptions, such as the work by Turnbull and Van Patter (2022) or Watts (2013), the sustained silence of the ontological (re)turn in its recognition of and engagement with Indigenous scholars already working with parallel concepts means that its protagonists often "end up reinforcing ongoing practices of erasure of Indigenous cultures and thought" (Rosiek et al, 2020, p. 332). This systematic 'forgetting' risks reproducing settler-colonial exploits that are rampant with patriarchal forms of dismissal. This also surfaces a performative contradiction within object-oriented ontologists' wholesale push for the ethical. Boundaries that result in processes of domination are often worked into

the fabric of new materialisms' agenda for the care of the more-than-human other. Positioning 'objects' as 'the thing' that might yet reinvent the mechanisms through which scholarly insight is gained—a potential 'solution' to the impasse between care and domination—the ontological (re)turn risks becoming a caricature of the colonialist project as it finds itself complicit in the 'consumption of the other' (see Said, 1978). Though this might present as a harsh critique, 'ontology', as Todd (2016) puts it, 'is just another word for colonialism'.

The flattening of affect: What happens to the human object/subject?

These tensions are a consequence of the flattening of affect. The rendering of all objects ontologically homogeneous has the potential to transgress human exceptionalism. Though this is considered a distinct strength of the object-oriented lineage, it is also ironically where the limit points of this perspective begin to surface. Namely, this framing sidesteps the question of how objects have come into being (Lemke, 2017). The monist accounts promoted within the new materialisms are thought to be detached from the material workings of power (Fox & Alldred, 2018; Latour, 2005). If, according to this logic, 'everything matters', then "we cannot understand why some things matter more than others" (Pohl, 2020, p. 82). For instance, how might we account for the sustained influence that the human, as an object, has had on the environment? Questions about the impact of objects' magnitude or duration thus tend to be cloaked from the realm of admissible discussion within new materialist scholarship. This is in addition to overlooking "the question [of] what objects are when they are not acting" (Haman, 2016, p. 7). Recognition of these tensions leaves me with further questions: what happens to the human when agentic capacities become diffused into an array of relations, and could the influence of history and contextuality be offered as a recourse?

The miscellany of object-oriented ontologies promotes a politics devoid of any "particular subject or agent of political sovereignty" (Bayly, 2021, p. 4). Under these terms, the prioritisation of subjects gives way to the emergence of abstracted 'objects' upon which "publics and counterpublics form themselves in chains or

networks with other non-human entities" (Bayly, 2021, p. 4). The political issues giving rise to these 'objects', and the different affects they imbue, mean that these object-oriented accounts of social life come to exist in a state of perpetual motion. Change, from this perspective, only occurs because of the chain-like action that stems from 'object-issues'. Even if there is no forceful, human-like incentive, whereby actants are merely 'swayed' by the motion of the continually unfolding assemblage, a politicised force remains. Who or what enabled such momentum in the first place?

The idea that it is a politicised, yet depoliticised public that forms around particular 'object-issues' by virtue of their capacity to affect comes to contradict the very 'de-anthropocised' project that the ontological (re)turn promotes. Put simply, the disproportionality of the 'human object' is disavowed. As Bayly (2021, p. 7), expresses:

When it comes to the thing as a non-human object, it is as if what is most contaminating in the thing is precisely a political humanism that was forged within a specifically European philosophical tradition. It is the recalcitrant presence of this tradition of politics at the heart of the thing that complicates a politics that seeks to include other-than-human things.

In shying away from a deep interrogation of what the 'human object' is, let alone its relationship with or to other objects, proponents of the ontological (re)turn lose sight of the influence of the human subject. These matters are further complicated when consideration is given to who might be the one constructing a materialised cartography, and the hierarchical relations informing their relative position (see Alaimo, 2014; Åsberg, Thiele & van der Tuin, 2015). This is where humanist assumptions are smuggled back in. A particular form of 'human object' is required. In order to describe and examine relations, let alone reconfigure them, there would need to be an object 'exceptional enough' to be able to remove itself from the relations with which they are entwined. In this erasure of situatedness and

contextuality (Lemke, 2017), it is the subject-object dualism that object-oriented ontologies attempt to overcome that ironically becomes the cause of its own demise.

This disavowal sees a revived form of humanist subjectivism, and thereby exceptionalism, consequently emerge. Viewing the impasse between care and domination in this ontological fashion would thereby open discussion about the material impacts of both practices of care and practices of domination, and how these materialised objects are continually held in relation. If we were to afford care and domination equal agentic capacity, how are we to account for the context in which these material relations are embedded? More importantly, how might we address the bedrock of unjust relations that exist within the human world, let alone in and amongst human and more-than-human relations? These ponderings highlight the struggles that can emerge when we attempt to cognitively map material relations to explore their potentialities. There is a risk of unintentionally silencing existing power struggles. This raises further challenges: this framing detaches any sense of responsibility from the impact of the ‘human object’ on other agential relations. Is this not an act of exceptionalism in and of itself?

Considering the impasse between care and domination in these terms raises a potentially more challenging question: upon what basis might we be able to recognise the emergence of a subject that can both acknowledge its exceptionalism, and also try to work with it differently so that there is potential for movement? Though proponents of the object-oriented (re)turn have disputed the use of ‘subject-oriented’ approaches, suggesting that such approaches are inherently anchored in a humanist perspective and thereby ‘useless’ to the object-oriented project (see Bryant, 2011b; Harman, 2018; Latour, 1993), it could be argued that a ‘subject-oriented’ approach is better placed to take seriously the mattering of matter. This is because “by declaring the subject as the main focus of every matter”, subject-oriented traditions like psychoanalysis, for instance, stand “in

direct opposition to the ideas of a ‘flat ontology’” (Pohl, 2020, p. 72). This potential comes to the fore in Alenka Zupančič’s (2017) ‘object-disoriented ontologies’.

A Counter Proposition: Object-*dis*oriented Ontologies

Zupančič (2017) draws upon the Lacanian traditions of psychoanalysis to address the challenges of the (re)turn to matter. She suggests that the contradictions firmly anchored within our understanding of philosophical concepts like logic, ontology and the subject, have the effect of reproducing themselves in the ways we engage with other objects. Extending upon Lacan’s proclamations, she stresses that what becomes problematic is not the contradictions themselves, but rather, the disavowal of those contradictions. She explains:

Contradiction is ‘fundamental’ in the sense that it is persistent, and repeating... it can become, and be ‘used’ as, the source of emancipation from the very logic dictated by this contradiction... [but the] contradiction does not simply disappear... the way it functions in the discourse structuring our reality changes radically. And this happens as a result of... taking our place in it. (p. 72)

The final sentence of this extract is central to the ideas advanced within this thesis. It speaks to methodological possibilities for where movement within the impasse between care and domination might yet be found. To understand the significance of this suggestion, we need to first unpack Zupančič’s account of ‘object-disoriented ontologies’.

In contrast to the ontological (re)turn’s dissolution of the subject into an amalgamation of variously acting actants, the argument that Zupančič proposes in *What is sex?* rests on the provocation that any materialist ontology necessitates the existence of a subject. The Deleuzian underbelly of the new materialisms advances a form of ‘realism’ that “implies radical desubjectivation, [whereas] for Lacan (the effect of) subjectivation is the very instance (or ‘proof’) of an irreducible Real”

(Zupančič, 2017, p. 119). The differences between Deleuze's 'realised ontology' and Lacan's 'Real ontology' hinge upon the role played by the figure of the subject. For Zupančič, the point becomes not the primacy of matter—for, it exists as an impossible contradiction—but rather, the 'primacy of the cut'. It is through the parallax of matter's impossibility that the subject is formed. This is because "the subject is not a mega-actant that posits/constructs material reality" (Sbriglia, 2018, p. 39), but the subject "is an *objective* embodiment of reality's contradiction" (Zupančič, 2017, p.121, emphasis in original). Human thought thereby functions as a 'short circuit' between the discursive and the material. It is by virtue of this 'short circuiting' that the contradictions holding materiality together become accessible.

Zupančič's object-disoriented ontologies demonstrate an explicit move of bringing the subject into a materialist account. The disorienting character of her approach is represented by the attention given to objects' capacity to leave their observers and companions readily thrown. This observation rests upon Zupančič's engagement with psychoanalysis. Counteracting the commonplace dismissal of psychoanalytic theory's ability to engage with the questions posed within the ontological turn, Lucas Pohl (2020) argues Lacanian analysis has never questioned the wholesale existence of objects. It has instead insisted on the existence of an additional 'object' whose location and form we can never quite put our finger on—what Pohl describes as a 'spectralising immaterial surplus'. The uncertainty of this object, which Lacan called '*objet a*', is depicted by its continual transformation and intrinsic ambiguity. This is the means through which objects can disorient.

Disorientation occurs when we try to make sense of our own antagonisms as 'things' in and of themselves. Zupančič suggests that whenever a 'thing' is thought of as a complete entity, we become closed off to the impossibilities existing within the 'thing' itself—all that which it is unable to be, yet all that which it is at the same time. This is demonstrated in her discussion of the limit points of a Freudian notion of sexuality and the suggestion that sex is nothing at all. As abjections to commonplace conceptions of sex and sexuality, these ideas are often met with

defence. For Zupančič, these are the points that are the most telling. They provide insight into the normalisation of disavowal. She consequently calls into attention the normative responses generated when we are confronted by things that we are unable to comprehend—those things that are often easier to accept as a given truth, as if they were self-explanatory, rather than face interrogation and risk the exposure of one's inconsistencies. How these affective responses are normalised reveals the limit points of both reason and logic.

Pohl (2020), for instance, explores this affect, or rather, ontological object, in relation to the role played by anxiety. He suggests that "it is precisely the impossibility of localization that enables an object to disorientate the subject" (p. 71). More simply, the inability to locate anxiety (as *objet a*) becomes the source of its haunting. Leaning on Lacan's (1963) tenth seminar, Pohl's resonances with Zupančič's object-disoriented ontologies is illustrated in his following explanation:

Fear is oriented toward an object located 'out there', while anxiety is based on an object that is fundamentally unlocatable and thereby disorienting. What is crucial about anxiety is not that it lacks a proper object, but rather that this object lacks a proper place. This non-place is what Lacan calls the Real. Through the encounter with an object of the Real, the subject loses its orientation: 'I am no longer in my "here" perceiving an object situated somewhere "over there"'. (p. 74)

Bayly (2021, p. 8), on the other hand, expresses these observations of disorientation as: "staying with whatever is it that troubles the psychoanalytic ambivalence about the thing permits another point of access to the paradoxical workings of the thing as a political object". This is the function of *objet a*: it is imbued with impossibilities that are in and of themselves possibilities. Bayly (2021) offers a useful analogy to help conceptualise Zupančič's object-disoriented ontologies and the force imbued by *objet a*:

“Sure, that sounds good, but the thing is ...” What is the thing introduced by this particular figure of speech? With “the thing is...,” the thing mutates into something that interrupts and redirects what otherwise seems like the way “we” should go, introducing a subtle but intentional glitch into the smooth operation of an assumed human like-mindedness. With “the thing is ...,” a nameless non-human something is introduced from the outside into the midst of human talk: one thing is interposed in another thing. (p. 11)

The dead-ends in which we often find ourselves when attempting to script the disorienting affects we encounter reflect the instability of language. Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests that the human is thrown into language and thereby lacks reference points outside of the phenomenon by which it might be understood. These internal contradictions, or ‘non-relations’, to which language is bound, give rise to the evaluative grounds upon which subsequent language operates. As Zupančič (2019) explains, ideas such as ‘good’ presume a radically opposing other to their existence, as in this instance, ‘evil’. These competing discursive conceptualisations have no material grounds. Rather, they only arise when perceived in a specific context. Framed as independent from each other—a binary in competition—the dichotomous character of commonplace discursive framings creates political challenges in the way that power relations are assumed as inherent to discourse itself. Politicisation is not necessarily problematic, but the disavowal of it is.

It is within these challenges that the internal contradictions of the ‘non-relation’ surfaces: evaluative ideas encompass an element of their own opposition. This is the point of materialised disorientation. Inferring that distinctions are dialectically produced by points of similarity, Zupančič (2019) draws on Lacan’s concept of extimacy to characterise this non-relation as “something that belongs to me, yet at the same time strikes me as utterly foreign” (p. 90). As a concept that intends to capture the impossibility of locating or grounding *objet a*, Lacan’s “extimacy not only calls the separation between inner (French *intimite*) and outer

(French *exterieur*) into question but also helps to understand why certain objects can have disturbing effects on the subject, just as it helps to explain why our most intimate feelings can be perceived as peculiarly alien to us" (Pohl, 2020, p. 74). In the same manner that the idea of 'good' is nonetheless bound to and exists within the concept of 'evil', the relationship between care and domination can be delineated by their extimate character. As constituents inherently contingent upon one another, describing this impasse in these terms stresses that care cannot be divorced from domination, nor can domination be separated from care.

Zupančič's discussions thereby illuminate the ways our discursive practices often produce a form of disorienting extimacy that is subsequently disavowed. Like the contradiction between care and domination, the disavowal of extimacy can be found across sites of human activity, as it manifests in commonplace practices of subjectivity, dominant politics and the capitalist economy. We can see this play out, for example, in contemporary practices of othering that occur alongside waves of migration and the outsourcing of labour. Practices of othering emerge as a consequential fear of the 'theft of enjoyment' (Hook, 2018)—those who are subjected as 'others' are thought to be 'taking' what one perceives to be their right. Yet this commonplace rendering of the extimate other merely offers a script through which capitalist processes can continue; the extimate is "the 'human face' of the faceless global capitalist economy" (Zupančič, 2019, p. 107). The points of difference we observe within the other merely cloak our shared positioning as waged labourers, similarly trapped within capital's belly of vast 'unfreedoms'. Once again, we are confronted with the disorienting realisation of our own contradictions. The extimate other might coexist within our subjective experiences and the broader social structures we commonly navigate, yet our ability to grapple with this underlying tension often remains beyond reach unless attention is given to the disorienting effects of the objects under discussion.

Zupančič's framing thereby interrupts the assumptive binaries bound to processes of 'othering'. Understanding the extimate character of a normative notion,

like ‘good’, has the potential to shift the way we relate to those perceived to be radically other, including those considered more-than-human. This requires going beyond the notion that ‘the other’ is someone ‘just like me’ because the very act of perceiving ‘the other’ through oneself works to reduce ‘the other’ to oneself; a discursive act that symbolically violates all that they are and all that oneself is not. This is what the new materialisms’ flattening of affect risks. Rather, it can be thought of in the way that the subject is an extimate other: a parallax of materiality’s contradictions. We are bound by and to our own impossibilities. Rather than exceptional, we are the exception; the animal that never quite fully formed (Bjerre, 2018). We are *objet a*.

Zupančič’s object-disoriented ontology is thereby both a theoretical and methodological framework that taps into the affective capacity of objects. It recognises the sense of haunting, discomfort and discombobulating uncanniness that an object can have upon us. It is in this moment of affect—of disorientation—that not only does the object become politicised, but also those who are imbued by its affects. This is where the politicised subject is brought into consideration, and it is also this very moment that object-oriented ontologies disavow. Zupančič’s (2017) thesis thus offers a philosophical and politicised recourse to these tendencies of disavowal, for as she argues, “if there is an ontology that follows from psychoanalytic (Lacanian) theory, this can only be an ontology as ‘disoriented’ by what he calls the *objet a*” (p. 24).

From theory to method?

A sense of unsettling can be felt when recognition is given to the disorienting forms of extimacy bound within the impasse between care and domination. This is because it reveals the impossibilities we come up against when we attempt to describe and make inferences from the worlds in which we find ourselves. This is the trap object-oriented ontologies find themselves caught within. Similar to the way new materialist scholars unintentionally turn in on themselves when efforts are made

to describe the relations under discussion, object-*dis*oriented reasoning also comes up against its own limit points: the practice of inscription remains a mechanism through which practices of exceptionalism can come into play. Optimism can be found, however, in the way that discourse is easily unsettled: its inherent politicisation means it is unstable and full of slippages. Recognition of the context in which discourse is being used thereby becomes altogether important, as this is what gives rise to the expression of non-relations like that between care and domination. If we work with the assumption that we are unable to step outside of our exceptionalism, for doing so would thereby be a re-enactment of exceptionalism, then the question that remains is how might we be able to deploy the contradiction of the ‘non-relation’ and draw upon ‘objects’ that resist the fabric of their discursive representation—the disorienting *objet a*?

In bringing to the fore the agency exhibited in ‘things’ beyond our immediate control, Zupančič’s object-*dis*oriented ontologies is a mechanism through which the impasse between care and domination can be viewed. This is because of the undue attention this perspective gives to the influence of the subject. An emphasis on the performative impact of materialised objects upon the subject, and of the subject upon objects, means that at the core of object-*dis*oriented ontologies is the potential for movement. Put differently, the vitality that objects (both subject and object) enclose holds the potential to performatively shift the way an assemblage develops or unfolds. As Zupančič (2017, p. 123, emphasis in original) attests:

If we cannot think something without a contradiction, we should not take a step back from this impossibility (recognizing and accepting it as impossibility, or inaccessibility to thought); instead, and on the contrary, we have to take this contradiction and impossibility *as the very Real which IS accessible to thought*.

If we consider the broader context in which this unfolding occurs, what happens when explicit attention is given to the ways objects themselves come to speak? In

the case of my own experiences described in the opening of this thesis, why was it that I was so abruptly overcome by the taxidermic miscellany, by its simultaneous beauty and disgust? Within this affective, bodily experience, it was the confrontation that occurred when faced with objects that spoke, which had the effect of leaving me speechless. The discursive rationalities informing my understanding of the world were dislocated by these objects that on the surface were of clear domination, but contained within them their own extimate other: they were also objects of care. The way I was unconsciously thrown by the care and domination encapsulated within these artefacts of pleasure exemplifies Zupančič's articulations of object-disoriented ontologies. The extimate other to which these inanimate objects attested was also the liveliness of exceptionalism; they contained the human other. The anecdote thus speaks to the way we can be thrown by objects that object to that which we script about them. The way this plays out within the broader impasse of care and domination sheds light on not only our impossibilities as *objet a*, but also the possibility of movement within our exceptionalism. The means of how this might yet unfold is the topic of the following chapter: turning Zupančič's theoretical orientations into a question of methodology.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS

Introduction

In conversation with the ontological turn's renewed interest in objects, Zupančič's object-disoriented ontologies bring into light that which is often easier to ignore: objects that object to the humanist logic that is scripted upon them. Rather than pushing these uncomfortable objects to the side-line, Zupančič suggests that this is where we should be attuning our attention. This is because disorienting objects offer insight into the contradictions operative within their governing logic. This is a clear methodological suggestion.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the utilisation of disorienting objects in sociological research. Specifically, I translate Zupančič's theoretical exposition into a methodological orientation. I suggest that potential for this translation lies within a distinct form of autoethnography—what I term *object-disoriented autoethnography*. Accordingly, this chapter not only addresses how we might engage with disorienting objects, but it gestures to the value that this might bring. I explore how the process of storytelling enables a reckoning with not only the subjective unconscious, but also the contradictions that shape our collective experiences. Attention is thereby given not only to those objects that object, but to the conditions under which encounters with those dislocating objects occur. This is because in doing so, I argue, we might be able to wrestle with our exceptionalism.

The Unconscious: Bridging the void between Subjectivity and Objectivity

Engaging with disorienting objects is important because they offer a portal into the contradictions shaping the society in which our experiences are embedded. Yet for these insights to occur, it is what Zupančič calls the ‘primacy of the cut’ that becomes an important methodological consideration. Understanding the influence of the non-relation upon the operation of society necessitates an awareness of our subjective anchoring. How is it that those disorienting objects come to affect us personally? After all, as researchers and as individuals, we are not exempt from the contradictory conditions of society nor from the role of disorientation upon our unconscious processes.

This connection is demonstrated in Pohl’s (2020) investigation into the ‘Ghost Tower’, an abandoned skyscraper standing poignantly in Bangkok, Thailand. Though urban planning regulations prohibit the continued development of the tower in its current form, the consensus as to why the building remains a ruin speaks of an altogether different cause of concern: it is widely believed to be haunted by a ghost. Formally known as the Sathorn Unique Tower, the building has long been a subject of both national and international contention. This is linked to a suicide that took place within the building, along with it being the topic of a local horror film. Yet for locals, there are many other reasons why the building is haunted. Some believe the haunting is a result of the tower being “built on a former graveyard and therefore doomed from the start, [while] other people state that the ruin is haunted because of its shadow falling onto the temple nearby” (p. 75). Though various cultural and political controversies shape public perceptions of this building, the affective responses it garners appear to be unanimous: it haunts. For Pohl, we can understand this collective experience by considering the disorienting character of the building.

Pohl contends that the source of the tower's haunting is linked to the way anxiety transforms that which we cannot explain into an object of the Real. Supporting both Lacan and Zupančič's propositions, Pohl illustrates how forms of disorientation, like anxiety, are typically unanchored. In moments where we are unable to find words that offer a sense of reason, objects are often labelled as the point of disorientation because the visceral feelings they generate lack a 'proper place'. In the inability to firmly identify the cause of the ill feelings surrounding the building, it was transformed into a disorienting site of haunting.

This was evidenced by the rhythmic, metallic echoing that Pohl and his assistant, a local journalist, encountered in their exploration of the tower. As Pohl describes, the imposing sound seemed to not only "reveal that we were not alone; it was also a demonstration of something we could neither see nor explain, something beyond the imaginary and the symbolic" (p. 79). For May, Pohl's assistant, the inconspicuous sound confirmed the fact of the tower's ghost. The disorientation had become Real. In contrast, for the sceptical Pohl, the sound merely warranted the need for further evidence before he could evaluate his convictions. Though he was not ready to confirm the existence of the ghost, he was not ready to dismiss it either. In the encounter with the unidentifiable sound, Pohl and May became one with the consensus surrounding the Ghost Tower's haunted state—not that the ghost was necessarily 'real', but that the Tower conjured disturbing feelings that were unexplainable.

The unanimous belief in the haunting of the Ghost Tower speaks to the influential role of the unconscious; it is a mechanism for understanding the effects of the non-relation. Zupančič, along with other followers of Lacanian psychoanalysis, would suggest that Pohl's illustration of a thrown subject can be signified through unconscious processes. This is exemplified in a remark by Lacan with which Zupančič begins her book *What is sex?*: "sublimation is the satisfaction of the drive, without repression" (2017, p. 1). It is through the unconscious that signifiers, be they discursive or affective, come to emerge within subjects. Its unruliness outstrips that

which the subject can control. In other words, “the unconscious *thinks*” (Zupančič, 2017, p. 2, emphasis in original). This is the process of sublimation. Extricated from the constraining logics of representationalism, the unconscious bridges the void between subjectivity and objectivity.

Zupančič’s testimony of the unconscious lies in that which Freud would suggest to be ‘primally repressed’. Often characterised as painful experiences that trouble us, that which is repressed is born from the limits of discursive representation. This is evidenced in the widespread sense of discomfort surrounding the Ghost Tower, where no coherent reason could be given as to why it is haunted. Primal repression can be understood as the unconscious filtering of experiences and perceptions for their “‘out-of-jointness’ with the symbolic” (Kunkle, 2018, p. 5). This is where we try to make sense of that which appears ‘out-of-joint’, yet in turn, merely script this ‘disorienting Other’ into our discursive framings. Consequently, what is primally repressed often emerges within ingenious dreams that leave us wondering, jokes that are funny for reasons we cannot explain, or slips of the tongue that reveal more than intended. As objects, these discursive representations of primal repression are significant because they give insight into the contradictions at work within not only the subject, but the societal conditions shaping our experiences. In the words of Zupančič, the “unconscious [thus] comes to us from the outside” (p. 11).

Primal repression is thereby implicated in the construction of knowledge. When ‘negativity’ (the out-of-jointness that exists within our unconscious but which we cannot name) becomes formalised as Real (such as through the slip of the tongue), attempts of scripting ‘positive’ knowledge become bound by their own impasses and paradoxes—that is, by their own structural negativity. Discursive representation, otherwise known as knowledge, is thereby confined to the broader unconscious it represents. Zupančič subsequently argues that whatever new signifiers (‘logics’) emerge from the unconscious are only relevant to the context from which they have been generated. She uses Marx’s coining of class conflict as

an exemplifier of this point. As both a radical and revolutionary new signifier at the time in which it was conceived, a reflection of Marx's experiences and the relationships he observed within the society he was embedded in, class conflict is now a commonplace discursive representation of the dislocations experienced under the capitalist system. The contradictions giving rise to these shared experiences remain, yet the way they materialise differs depending on how those contradictions move through the subject. In other words, attention to the effect of disorienting objects upon the subject can garner 'objective' insight into societal conditions. Discernment of the inconsistencies within logic thus necessitate a point of partiality.

The Turn to Feminist Partiality

The significance of subjective experiences as a means of understanding objective conditions raises questions as to how we might emphasise the 'primacy of the cut', as Zupančič would suggest. I find this capacity within the corpus of feminist research.

As a methodological orientation, feminist research brings positionality to the forefront. This is on account of the silences that have historically been embedded within the fabric of knowledge construction (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006). The insistence of patriarchal values and its subsumption within the capitalist political economy (see Federici, 2004), along with the continued dismissal of indigeneity under the colonial project (see Coulthard, 2014), illustrate that discursivity cannot be divorced from the irrevocable contentions giving rise to dominant discourses. Feminist scholars argue that the power play bound to the privileging of one form of knowledge as objective over all other subjectivities can thereby be understood as the simple functioning of rhetoric (Code, 1981; Harding, 1986). As "power moves, not moves towards the truth" (Haraway, 1988, p. 576), knowledge claims are merely practices of power grabbing reinforced by the logic of the rhetoric itself.

Complementing the ideas advanced in Zupančič's object-disoriented ontologies, feminist scholars argue the impossibility of abstracting the subject from the object of one's inquiry. This is because researchers' experiences, views, values and beliefs shape the assumptions that inform how research unfolds. A simple word choice, which never really is that simple, can shed light on who the writer is. Feminist partiality, or what Haraway (1988) describes as 'situated knowledge', signposts subjectivity through research that is critically reflective of the distinct positionality of the author. As Braidotti (2019, p. 34) explains, this is where attention is given to "one's locations in terms both of space (geo-political or ecological dimension) and time (historical memory or genealogical dimension)" which has the effect of grounding research within a "political subjectivity". Recognition of the influences shaping our collective subjectivities additionally works to denote the contextual limits and contradictions of our 'situated' ways of making sense within the world.

Though there are various threads of feminism working alongside one another as co-travellers within the broader feminist project, their point of unification is the acknowledgement of the significance partiality plays in research.⁴ As Haraway

⁴ Marxist feminists, for instance, highlight the fetishisation of patriarchal gender relations within capital's process of primitive accumulation (Federici, 2004, 2011), and how through the divorce of waged and unpaid labour we have become embodied within capitalism's own contradictions (Fraser, 2016). Ecofeminism calls for the uniting of feminist agendas with wider environmentalist movements on account of patriarchy's appropriation of women and the environment (Gaard, 2017; Mies & Shiva, 2014; Salleh, 1997). Feminist political ecology questions who are considered actors within environmental conversations, and thereby the means through which ecological knowledge is constituted (Sundberg, 2015, 2017), honing its analysis on the gendered power struggles that occur in conjunction to caste, class, race and ethnicity (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter & Wanger, 1996; see also Elmhirst, 2011; Nightingale, 2006). Material feminists seek to unravel humanity's broader hubris by "imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo, 2008, p. 238). This position forges a reconceptualisation of the human as integrally intertwined with the more-than-human, acknowledging the interconnected spaces where ecological systems, the animate and inanimate, human bodies and their social structures, along with the consequences of

(1988) explains, "the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly...", yet it is because of this recognition of one's 'situatedness' that feminist projects are "*therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another" (p. 586, emphasis in original).

Bringing the psychoanalytic tradition informing Zupančič's work into conversation with feminist scholarship proclaims the impossibility of outright objectivity. These perspectives reject orthodox forms of objectivity on account of our entanglement with what we attempt to describe and because of our subsequent inability to abstract ourselves from the material workings of power. For feminist scholars, we are constrained by the limited expanse of our visionary perceptions—physically, temporally, ideologically and conceptually. Emphasis thereby needs to be given to that which influences our ways of knowing and all that which we are incapable of knowing. As Haraway (1988) expresses, "feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn *how* to see" (p. 583, emphasis mine). For Zupančič, challenges arise as a consequence of the inherent politicisation of discourse, where claims of objectivity typically reflect the tendencies of those dominant. These critiques call for an engagement with the tensions that hold society in place, particularly those that culminate within our humanist limit points. Our points of incoherence thereby turn the question of objectivity into a question of subjectivity, as Zupančič argues:

[The subject] is not simply an object among many objects, it is also the form of the existence of the contradiction, antagonism, at work in the very existence of objects as objects.... The subject exists among objects, yet it

human actions, all come to coalesce—yet how the unfolding of these relations remains politicised (Alaimo, 2018; Gough & Whitehouse, 2020).

exists there as the point that gives access to a possible objectivation of their inner antagonism, its inscription into their reality. (p. 122)

Accordingly, the subject is continually held in a state of contemplation by the ways in which it gets thrown; held by its own contradictions.⁵ Since we are part of the issues we seek to describe, simultaneously forming the very contradictions we seek to unravel, Zupančič contends that "the criterion of objectivity... is thus not neutrality, but the capacity of theory to occupy a singular, specific point of view within the situation" (p. 3). It is thus through feminist partiality that we might yet find insight into the workings of human exceptionalism. In doing so, a state of objectivity (albeit, in a very distinct form) can be accessed because, as Zupančič suggests, the unconscious does not exist within the individual. It is revealed through discursive representations of primal repression that reflect what could be considered a 'collective and historicised unconscious'—or as Fredric Jameson (1983) might put it, the political unconscious.

Returning to the case of the Ghost Tower helps clarify these propositions. Pohl (2020) details the intergenerational experiences of haunting imbued by the abandoned tower. Though the incomplete architecture stands in clear view, a monument able to be explored by the daring few, it is ghostly. The general state of uncomfortableness that the tower creates amongst locals is not something that can be easily pinned down. It is as though the soul of the tower has left the building (its body), yet its spirit (*objet a*) now lingers. Like the Holy Ghost in Christianity, this spirit makes its presence known only to those who believe. This was demonstrated by the apprehension of Pohl's assistant: it was the "whole energy in the building [that] made her feel uneasy" (p. 78). Her subjective experiences reflected the broader objective state of anxiety held within her community.

⁵ It is the work of ideology that attempts to pull the subject away from this state of contemplation by giving account to situations that exorcise all awareness of systemic contradictions. This is in the fantasised hope that the subject might yet exist as a whole. In these moments, 'episodes' of subjectivity emerge in and amongst the unfolding of clichés, momentarily appearing when thrown by that which it cannot anticipate.

In contrast, Pohl held the position of an outsider. As a researcher intending to study the effects of anxiety in regard to the spectrality of objects, Pohl embodied the condition of one who both knows and who seeks to know. In this seeking to know, understand, explain and give reason, the rationality of his Western disposition made him a disbeliever of the community's ghost. This was evident in the opposing dispositions Pohl held with respect to his assistant: "May *knew* that we had encountered something... [whereas] I told May that we had to investigate this 'ghost', and that I needed more evidence in order to evaluate its existence as a proper result of my research" (p. 79, emphasis in original). Pohl's engagement with that which haunts was only possible from the role of an outsider, one who does not believe in the haunting and who is not immediately affected by it as such. Yet this has the effect of pacifying the storytelling of the dislocation. It also erodes the possibility of a 'collective and historicised unconscious' because the affective representation of the unconscious (anxiety) was firstly assuaged and then set aside for his discussion. This raises the question of what an insider perspective of someone affected by such a haunting might look like, and, more challengingly, what the telling of these tales might involve.

The Proposition of Autoethnography...

Though Zupančič argues that the subjective unconscious exists as emblematic of the collective, her proclivities infer that it can only be accessed through discourse: when signifiers are offered to map the contradictions to which we are bound, and which we repress. This can be achieved through the process of storytelling. In taking seriously Zupančič's contention of the impossibility of an outright form of objectivity, and the feminist imperative of accounting for the factors influencing the way we come to understand the world, this thesis takes on autoethnography. This is a method of storytelling that comes to put my subjectivity on the line as a way of investigating the impasse between care and domination, and the broader contradictions of human exceptionalism that my experiences represent.

In exploring the intricacies of one's life experiences as the focus of the research design, autoethnography is a form of qualitative research that forges conversations between theory and experientiality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As with other types of narrative inquiry, autoethnography operates upon the assumption that as humans, "we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through story" (Trahar, 2009, paragraph 1). This foregrounds, or rather privileges, a sensitive awareness of the socio-cultural particularities upon which the narrative is based, and thereby emphasises the distinct political conditions that give rise to those experiences. Redolent of a feminist partiality that is cognisant of the way knowledge is situated, autoethnography is thereby a method of storytelling that analyses personal experiences to extend knowledge about the social structures and cultural practices in which those experiences occur (Anderson, 2006). This opens readers to the connections held between the teller's interpretations and the social construction of their reality, along with the societal conditions that shape how their experiences unfold (Trahar, 2009). These inner workings are captured by Ellis and Bochner (2000), who outline that practitioners of autoethnography often 'display multiple layers of consciousness':

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of the personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 739)

Accordingly, narrative inquiry involves gathering "knowledge *from* the past and not necessarily knowledge *about* the past" (Bocher, 2007, p. 203, emphasis in original). Autoethnography relays narrative in retrospect. In the process of looking back to script their narratives, subsequently reflecting on the societal conditions which one's experiences represent, autoethnographic researchers can attribute sense to their stories. This is particularly the case when different analytical or theoretical frameworks are employed in the sense-making process. In the fluidity of the

reflective motions with which autoethnographers move in the composing of their narrative accounts and subsequent analysis, notions of temporality and spatiality become woven into their scripts. It is in this historicisation that the generative capacities of autoethnography can be found, as Jameson (1983, p. 35) explains:

History is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.

Jameson's ideas reflect Zupančič's testimony to the ability of signifying practices to offer insight into the workings of the non-relation upon both the subjective and 'collective and historicised' unconscious. In identifying and examining the influence of history upon the present, and of societal contradictions upon individual experiences of disjuncture, autoethnography is a method that fits within Sartre's (2004) conception of the antipraxis. It not only acknowledges how historical practices now shape the present, but recognises that those practices will live on, influencing the direction and form of the future in a manner that exceeds human's abilities to control (see Toscano, 2018). Given the broader environmental context of this inquiry and the magnitude of current socio-political dislocations that are occurring in conjunction with ecological collapse, a method that can reckon with the subjective experiences of the coalescing crises of human exceptionalism is not only fitting, but it is also necessary.

It is a rare form of autoethnography that has the potential to open portals into the strictures and idioms shaping collective experiences. This is because irrespective of its various strands (see Sparkes, 2020), autoethnographies can verge on being impressionistic and representationalist—hedonistic even (see, for instance, Campbell, 2017; Delamont, 2009; Jackson & Mazzei, 2008). Part of this risk of self-indulgence lies with the way autoethnography can stipulate the self as a fully formed subject. Anchored in this position of surety, the narrative accounts that

follow often correspond to the process of deductive reasoning, and subsequently serve to be exemplars of preconceived ideas. Autoethnographies of this kind typically weave together different threads of one's identity, exploring why and how their sense of coherent subjectivity has come to be formed (e.g., Hao, 2020, Smith, 2011). These forms of autoethnography often operate in defence of an orderly subject; they knit subjectivity together in a way that presents to the reader the author 'that is'. This generates a reductionist tendency within the narrative. As Haraway would remind us, this risks a disavowal of all that which we cannot see.

Though autoethnographies are grounded in personal prose, a fetishisation of the self need not be implored. If we were to attune narrativization to Deleuzian ontologies, for instance, and give greater attention to those with whom we are in relation and the strictures by which those relations are held, what then might be enabled? Abandoning the desire for simplicity in our conclusions—or the euphemism that in the end, all is well—a feminist recognition of the way our stories are situated can enable autoethnography to offer insight into the contradictions that leave us collectively thrown. Harnessing this potential, however, requires going beyond simple concerns of my own identity or the desire for a sense of coherence. For this discussion, who I am is not particularly important. Though I am in the stories soon to be shared, I am merely a character amongst others and thereby my significance need not be signposted. For me, greater interest lies in what those stories tell in reflection of the broader socio-historical context in which the stories are anchored and for the contradictions they reveal.

... of the dis-orienting kind.

The value of autoethnography lies in its ability to rescript our experiences anew. It is a method of social analysis that enables a contentious engagement with various positions of dislocation across multiple registers, and therefore the contradictions within our society that lead to problematic tendencies of disavowal. This is because, as Zupančič would likely attest, autoethnography operates as a discursive practice

that uses storytelling as a mechanism to bring forth new practices of speech that can reflect upon one's life experiences, yet also stage the contradictions that give rise to collective states of disorientation. My research follows this line of thought. I explore how we might use personal narrative in a manner that enables us to understand the workings of human exceptionalism, and the way it is collectively forged in the impasse between care and domination. I believe these possibilities can be found in a distinct form of autoethnographic inquiry: an autoethnography driven by disorienting objects.

In drawing attention to those objects that object, Zupančič's object-disoriented ontology finds footage where there are no grounds to stand upon. Unlike the new materialisms which tend to romanticise the philosophy of 'becoming' as an organic, generative process devoid of possibilities of terror or angst, Zupančič suggests that embodying the contradictions of 'becoming', and being thrown by its very inconsistencies, is the only means through which progressive or altogether radical prospects might be engendered. An engagement with those objects that object works to open a "space of truth" by demonstrating the "irreducible link between the discursive and the Real" (Kunkle, 2018, p. 5). Disorienting objects thereby offer a portal into the "logic at the point of ontological impasse (the breakdown of signifying consistency)" (Zupančič, 2017, p. 3). The dislocation experienced within these moments represents a confrontation with the end-points of (discursive) knowledge. It is where we can no longer deploy that perceived as common-sense or the norm, and as such, there is the potential to be 'freed' from the paradoxical inconsistencies of the dictating logic at work within a particular situation.

Storytelling in this manner necessitates attention to the points at which our rationalities no longer come together: where we are confronted by *objet a* and that which has been primally repressed. As Kunkle (2018) explains, the possibility of new human capacities lies with us taking "our place within this contradiction of reality (at the ontological level) which would in turn offer us an opening to emancipate

ourselves from the very logic dictated by this contradiction” (p. 3). This methodological insinuation of ‘taking one’s place’ within the contradiction sought to be understood, is the move Zupančič’s postulations suggest. The present research is of this kind.

Embodiment of these theoretical perspectives in the telling of personal narratives, placement of oneself through narrative within the contradictions by which we are confronted, gives rise to what I consider to be an ‘*object-disoriented autoethnography*’. This is an inquiry that is propelled by an engagement with those moments where we are left thrown, confronted by objects that object to the discursive rationalities that we place upon them. Thrust within this state of disjuncture, an autoethnography of this kind can highlight the state of indeterminacy born at the crosswords of subjectivity and historical location. Attending to those objects that haunt us in an autoethnographic form can tap into the societal contradictions underlying our experiences and perceptions. It is in the methodological processes of writing through this state of disorientation that we might find movement within the exceptionalism to which we are bound.

Autoethnographic accounts of disorientation, pain or disturbance, offer insight into the collective suffering endured as a consequence of colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal footholds. They enable a recognition of the "relations between sexist oppression, speciesism, and environmental degradation" (Kirjner, 2015, p. 136). This form of writing entices a reckoning between one's singular conscious existence and the location of our struggles within social structures that are nonetheless able to sustain personal survival. In the process of writing one’s experiences anew, an object-disoriented autoethnography can generate new practices of speech that are illustrative of the broader societal conditions in which individual experiences occur. This is sociological writing *par excellence*. Writing of this kind is thereby able to speak to a sense of feminist alignment with the more-than-human other, or what Kirjner would suggest, to be a subject-position embodying the ‘first-person plural’.

Writing through Disorientation: The Generative Capacity of Re-Signification

To better understand the significance of this methodological approach and the role played by signifiers, let us reconsider the value that Zupančič finds within the theory of object-disoriented ontologies: it is a perspective that can grapple with the end-points of humanist rationality on account of the representational function of discourse.

The flaws of logic ('non-relations' or contradictions) that are embedded within objects, whether tangible or conceptual, come to the fore when those objects are naturalised within everyday discourse. Zupančič explains this tendency via the 'fact' of sex. Sex emerges as a 'thing' in speech, yet when faced with the task of describing what it is, we often fumble. Is it an act of encounter? A practice of the self, of the other, or in relation with the other? A biological process? A tool of scientific categorisation? A sin? A celebration? For Zupančič, 'sex' is an example of a discursive signifier that can hold the 'gap' formed in the contradictions that emerge when attempting to grapple with that which exists at the limit point of our discursive rationalities (knowledge). She describes sex as "the operator of the inhuman" (p. 7)—the point at which our inconsistencies and ambiguities culminate as something we are unable to explain. These tensions tend to be disavowed under the 'fact' of sex itself. Sex is thereby "a factor of radical disorientation, a factor that keeps bringing into question all our representations of the entity called 'human being'" (p. 7). For Zupančič, it is through an examination of objects of 'radical disorientation' that new insight can be found. For the present work, they offer snippets of insight into the dark underbelly of exceptionalism giving rise to objects that form under a condition of (human) knowledge.

It is when we meet our end-points and confront the disjuncture born of such moments that Zupančič suggests the potential for 'new signifiers' to emerge. These

new signifiers name the contradictions holding that tension in place, and thereby shed light on the conditions giving rise to that state of dislocation. Rather than going along the path of attempting to solve particular problematics, signifiers operate as a mechanism that further enables the development of thought. This is because they allow us to move through commonplace tendencies of disavowal in the way in which they bring disorientation to the forefront.

Zupančič proposes that when we come up against our limit points, yet continue to ask questions, the discursive practices that follow have the potential to bore into the network of signifiers that both emerge around complicated issues and contribute to their difficulty. The nuanced connections between climate change, global warming, the Anthropocene, environmentalism, and so on exemplify this. The metaphor of boring down into these nests of signifiers demonstrates a discursive act of working through these interconnected concepts, theories, neologisms and popularities, with the image of a new signifier that might yet emerge which could name the underlying contradiction that holds these terms together as if for the first time. The identifying concept comes to operate as a placeholder for the complexities of the contradictions that give rise to their existence; it holds those tensions together in a way that opens possibilities for movement and new understanding. Signifiers thereby enable new starting points for discussion and analysis. Yet Zupančič (2017, p. 66) reminds us, “the right word is not the right word by virtue of what it means, but by virtue of what it accomplishes”.

Despite arguing that signifiers “have a consequence for the reality which they formalise” (p. 66), Zupančič herself does not end up with any new signifiers in *What is sex?*. This is because the task itself is a mammoth asking. For one, assessment of the relative impact of acts of signification can only be discovered in retrospect once time has allowed for the examination of whether a change has occurred because of such naming. In addition, challenges emerge in the generation of new signifiers because politics cannot be divorced from discourse. Signifiers thereby run the risk of silencing ongoing power struggles, finding themselves complicit in the

contradictions they seek to comprehend. If power struggles cannot be revealed within the coining of new signifiers because politics cannot be divorced from language, then what substantive use might the generation of new signifiers bring? Matters are further complicated when consideration is given to the extent to which a new signifier represents an epistemic fallacy (Bhaskar, 1986), or whether it falls into the capitalist trap of epistemic accelerationism as Braidotti (2019) would likely argue. Would this merely re-invoke human exceptionalism?

Returning to Zupančič's example of sex helps demonstrate the movement that still exists even within these potential critiques. As a signifier, sex constitutes a filling of a 'gap' between what can be known and what is; a bridge between the Real and our unconscious that "tantalises the gap between knowledge and the subject" (Zeihner & Grimshaw, 2018, p. 1). It is in this representative gap that the signifier of sex can capture the messiness of its ontology and the inconsistencies of its politicised and politicising discourse. In Zupančič's words:

Sex is messy because it appears at the point of the breaking down of the signifying consistency, or logic (its point of impossibility), not because it is in itself illogical and messy: *its messiness is the result of the attempt to invent a logic at the very point of the impasse of such logic.* (p. 43, emphasis mine)

When sex is unable to capture the diversity of its tangibility or its multitude of experiential and affective forms (the unconscious), this is where disjuncture is born. This disjuncture represents a point of ontological disruption, where words used to describe an ontological situation do not adhere to the way those objects to which we are in relation come to act. As Kunkle (2018, p. 9) elaborates:

When we come to an impasse of epistemology, it tells us something not just about our limits of knowledge, but also something about the ontological status of reality itself; that is, our ontology itself must be configured as something incomplete and inconsistent, and this in turn is how Zupančič formulates a short-circuit between epistemology and ontology.

When objects object to the discursive rationalities that we place upon them, the "structure folds in upon itself [such] that we are offered a different perspective of both our formalizations and their limits" (Kunkle, 2018, p. 5). This impasse of formalisation, that is, the limit points of knowledge and our ability to script the Real, is the political space that Zupančič calls to be embodied in her object-disoriented ontologies. It is within this politicised space of inconsistency and tension that the partial subject forms because we are bound within the 'thing' that is represented by the signifier. As Lacan would remind us, this means "we need to think about what we are complicit in when we are faced with that which perplexes us" (Zeihner & Grimshaw, 2018, p. 1). Feminist researchers would agree. What becomes more significant then, is not the signifier, but the disjuncture. Accordingly, taking our place within the contradictions we seek to describe is where generative potential might yet be found. This is precisely the space in which an object-disoriented autoethnography operates.

Towards an Object-Disoriented Autoethnography

The use of Zupančič's theory of object-disoriented ontologies to shape an autoethnographic methodology positions the object of inquiry at the points where things do not come together in discourse. An object-disoriented autoethnography is a narrative inquiry premised on objects that disorient; these are objects that present themselves in ways that cannot be integrated with the knowledge we have about them. It uses storytelling to express the broader state of 'out-of-jointness' that personal experiences of dislocation represent. This can tap into the underlying pulse of the situation, of the non-relation that gives rise to the state of structural negativity.

As a unique strength distinct to this research practice, the emphasis that this method places upon disorienting objects works to encourage the forging of new connections. It opens new means of explanation that bring to the fore the contradictions to which our experiences are bound. Peppering autoethnographic accounts with those objects that disorient also helps to work through the potential

traps in which autoethnographies can find themselves caught. The retrospective reflection embodied within the autoethnographic method pushes for critical analyses of that which occurs beyond our immediate ability to grasp or capacity to access (*objet a*, but also those new signifiers of the greater problematic at stake). As a method, object-disoriented autoethnography thus facilitates the re-signification and thereby re-understanding of our contradictory human condition.

It is the interrogation of both objects of dislocation and that which they reflect about their socio-historical contexts that can have real effects. This is because of the confrontation that this form of interrogation generates. Rather than going along with commonplace tendencies of disavowing that which is too difficult to explain, the practice of re-signification that is embedded into an autoethnography of this kind enables new meanings to be ascribed to the objects and experiences we encounter. An object-disoriented autoethnography is thus a way of not only bringing to the fore the questions of subjectivity that Zupančič raises (that is, with attention given to the intimate and mundane, and less focus on the more abstract philosophical tenor of her work), but is also a means of teasing open possibilities that lie latent within impossibility of human exceptionalism. This includes its manifestation in the inextricable relation between care and domination. This is because the 'exception', or the point of dislocation, becomes both the subject and object of interrogation.

Acknowledging my subjectivity and position of partiality, and thereby my own situated knowledge, this research explores my own experiences of disjuncture. Drawing on Zupančič's work and feminist research traditions, this object-disoriented autoethnography reflects upon objects I have encountered that have left me dislocated by the exceptionalism they represent. This includes, for instance, a taxidermy collection that immortalised death (Chapter One), a bullet found in an unexpected location (Chapter Five), and an unanticipated intervention offered in a bowl of butter chicken (Chapter Six). As part of the storytelling process, multiple moments and dislocating encounters will be woven together to demonstrate the

ongoing negotiation with human exceptionalism that is necessitated under the conditions of contemporary Western society. It is in the exploration of these stories that I will demonstrate the potential of this method in its capacity to analyse the inner paradoxes that those objects represent. This is because the non-relation bound to those objects that never quite fully form is marked by an intersection of my individual experience and their historical context. In the way in which these objects have dislocated me personally, they also showcase the forms of discomfort characterising their socio-historical location. Critically engaging with these objects in situ thereby enables me to reflect upon not only how I have negotiated human exceptionalism, but more importantly, the role of associated socio-political and cultural practices of the society in which I live and through which those stories occurred.

This thesis demonstrates how the disavowal of human exceptionalism is reconstructed through the relation between care and domination. Using personal narratives of encounters with dislocating objects to illustrate how the impasse of care and domination is reproduced, I will elucidate how this relation is constantly evolving and transforming in respect of unfolding politicised socio-ecological relations. This will be illustrated through examples from varying spheres of interaction. The chapters that follow thereby offer different readings of the way the impasse between care and domination materialises, where each chapter will draw upon different sets of theoretical coordinates. This includes, for instance, the fields of psychoanalysis, feminist political ecology, critical animal studies, and ecofeminism. Conversations presented within these chapters will therefore oscillate in their focus: how practices of care and domination come to shape the relations between the human and more-than-human other, but also between humans alike; how the (human and more-than-human) body is a site in which these relations are institutionalised; and how disavowal plays an active part in the unfolding, transforming and reproduction of these jaded relations.

In demonstrating the capacity of an object-disoriented autoethnography to reveal new insight into the conditions of the societies in which we are embedded, the subsequent chapters of this thesis map different passages within my life to showcase the far-reaching impact of what could be considered a dictum of disavowal. In doing so, my autoethnography highlights the passage of time in a way that demonstrates the lasting influence of dominant discourses and the forms of exceptionalism they represent. It also showcases the consequences of their normalisation; particularly in respect of the violent forms of labour that are revealed as the means through which practices of care remain inextricable to domination. My theoretical engagement with disorienting objects and the subsequent weaving of reflection and analysis that I embed into this autoethnography is what enables the extension of social theory. This is because it is a methodology that not only brings to the fore our practices of exceptionalism but, also, necessitates a contentious engagement with the consequences of the commonplace tendencies of disavowal.

Though the telling of autoethnographic tales of dislocation can develop Zupančič's theoretical postulations into a methodological orientation, there are critical ethical deliberations that need to be considered before one might embark on such a feat. This is the place to which discussion now moves.

Chapter Four

THE ETHICAL PARADOX: A LOGIC OF DISAVOWAL

Introduction

The use of Zupančič's object-disoriented ontologies to develop an autoethnographic methodology opens a pathway for the interrogation of relations that underpin moments of disruption. In proposing this use of personal narrative as a practice of re-signification, the previous chapter demonstrated a means of engaging with disorienting objects and described the value that this might bring to our understanding of human exceptionalism. What stems from these ponderings, however, is a prickly question of ethics: what happens when we do this? What ethical consequences follow from a methodology of this kind, and what might this mean for our engagement with human exceptionalism?

The purpose of this chapter is to not only discuss ethics *per se*—that is, how I might conduct this research as per the universalist moral principles of ethics as scripted and regulated by the university—but to also engage with the relationship between ethics and politics that human exceptionalism sets in motion. This chapter hereby centres on the relation between ethics as a signifier and its manifestations in practical or concrete situations. An examination of the dynamics underlying this relation reveals that ethics is not politically neutral. Where ethical logic is deployed, human exceptionalism is not only operative but it is also disavowed. This chapter thus seeks to address larger questions about the dictum of exceptionalism in this current socio-political moment, and the challenges bound to the processes of

turning ethical ideologies into ethical practices. What follows is an account of how I attempt to work with these tensions in my autoethnographic research.

Ethical Discourse: A Disavowal of Animality

In the first draft of this chapter, I found myself writing in a manner that felt awfully constricted. I scripted an account of how this thesis might fit within the institutional frameworks of research ethics, and of how I might adhere to the universal ethical principles of autonomy (respect for persons, informed and voluntary consent, respect for privacy and confidentiality), non-maleficence (the avoidance of harm), and special relationships (see Massey University Human Ethics Committee, 2017). Bound to these normalised ethical frameworks governing research conduct, my writing had become prescriptive. Consequently, this chapter came across as a box-ticking exercise. I had assumed that in the context of my inquiry, adhering to ethical frameworks meant that I would need to codify the relation of the self with otherness in a way that would meet the anticipation of particular (institutional) audiences. I thereby wrote what I thought an ethics committee would expect to see in a piece of research of this kind, and I subsequently produced a few thousand words that were admittedly rather dismal. They were boring. They lacked affect. Perhaps, more importantly, they lacked me.

From sentence to sentence, word to word, I was faced with the contradictions underpinning our attempts to script knowledge. I was debilitated by a disavowal of the politicisation associated with the very moments we use discourse. Nagging questions lingered in my mind as I uncomfortably reflected on how I had become so abstracted from my writing, from a chapter whose purpose was to discuss how I would do that very writing. How might the ethical be defined? Who decides and how has that voice of authority come to be? How could this thesis even be carried out in a manner that does not reproduce the same exceptionalist logic that it seeks to critique?

In contemplating this point at which ethics seemingly became unethical, I was struck by a paradox. The power-laden disputes that are embedded within the processes of signification mean that the prestigious voice of the ethical, characterised by its externality, neutrality and virtue, is an impossibility. Despite often being presented as an emblematic form of righteousness and moral principle, ethics cannot be divorced from relations of power. After all, who is the one defining such ethical neutrality? This thorny relation manifested in the paralysing consequences I experienced as a researcher and as a writer. I was unnerved by the disjuncture born of commonplace ethical discourse because of the non-relation (that is, the human) which it encapsulates. It left me unable to write.

At the core of this dislocating experience is the exceptionalism that is woven into the human as a speaking species. Being human is largely a matter of continually describing that which is around us in relation to our own positioning. Concepts like the ethical provide a means by which we represent these relations to ourselves and, through their routine use, we unconsciously embed ourselves into the signifying process. Evidenced in the Westernised fetish with scientific classification and categorisation, these representationalist practices, filled with our humanist tendencies and problematics, come to constitute the fabric of knowledge production. These acts of signification, however, often negate what lies beyond the realm of representation—what Lacan might call the Real. As Dolar (1991) explains, the conditions of the Real render it to be that which “can never be dealt with directly... it emerges only in an oblique perspective and the attempt to grasp it makes it vanish” (p. 21). The exceptionalist belief that we can talk our way through things in a manner that might readily access the Real whilst simultaneously creating a coherent subject, exemplifies the non-relation innate to the human condition. It is this non-relation that underpins the ethical paradox.

As Zupančič (2017) explains, the non-relation is the "cause of the oddities and difficulties within all concrete relationships" (p. 23). It is the obstacle that precludes us from forming any substantive understanding of concrete situations, yet

it is only in the existence of this non-relation that we might be able to access those relations. The non-relation is not simply an absence of a relation, but could be considered as a formalisation of an impasse in that it moulds the biases of the discursive space in which we are located. We can think of this through Adam Smith's metaphor of the 'invisible hand of the market,' which speaks of an unlocatable force that orchestrates a sense of equilibrium within the economy. Henrik Bjerre (2018, p. 74) similarly describes this phenomenon of the non-relation as the "negativity (entropy) of the social order". Through this example, he insists that the idea of 'society' is merely a discursive means of 'stitching up' the lack of the social found under the conditions of late capital. The impossibility of the non-relation thereby dictates the conditions in which relations might be possible. It is this "discursive space curved by the non-relation" that, Zupančič (p. 23) suggests, is responsible for the generation of subjective disorientation.

Disorientation makes its appearance as something within human society that "exceeds or deviates from nature... [or] as Zupančič formulates it, it represents nature's own inherent deviation (from itself)" (Bjerre, 2018, p. 71). This state of the non-relation (the human) is described by Kunkle (2018, p. 6) to be "the point at which Nature experiences a negative part of itself". It is also why Zupančič designates the human to be "a half-finished animal, that is to say, an animal that does not work/function as it is supposed to" (p. 87). As an impenetrable stain constantly surfacing within nature's work, humans could be considered the piece that never quite fits. We are the exception of an animal, yet also an animal that never quite fully formed. Exemplified in every moment that we attempt to speak, where we reveal the limit points of knowledge and our (in)ability to script the Real, "the speaking being is the real existence of an ontological impasse" (Zupančič, 2017, p. 93). We are nature's own extimate other. This disorienting relation of the human as the non-relation is what is revealed, but also disavowed through practices of representationalism.

As a representationalist practice, ethical discourse is an object that can disorientate because it disavows the non-relation that it contains within. It is an object of human exceptionalism. At its core, ethics infers the notion that humans can dictate their actions in a manner that somehow goes beyond the persuasive influence of unconscious processes. This standpoint also implies an ability to know how others might come to act. In this presumption of an untrammelled ability to not only steer a situation but also predict it, this discourse operates in the desired hope that an ethical position can be adopted if one were to simply follow *x*, *y*, and *z*. Ethics thus lies beyond the realm of admissible discussion, merely existing in an abstract form. This abstraction rests upon moralised and therefore politicised conceptions of the ethical that reiterate the dualistic distinctions of knowing 'right' from 'wrong'. This materialises in the dichotomy of 'good research and good researchers' as held up against 'bad research and bad researchers'. Yet these depictions are in and of themselves ambiguous; their descriptions often have little substance beyond the superficial clichés that are often used as marketing points (see Zupančič, 2019).

Ethical discourse thereby takes liberty in the supposition that by virtue of the idea of the coherent ethical human subject, the unruliness of the non-relation that coincides within the human will be able to be brought into symbolic order. This position presumes that the imponderable nevertheless remains within anything that is scripted under the ethical signifier. The language of the ethical thereby operates as a logic resembling a facade; a fictitious smokescreen attempting to blanket the very ambiguities and antinomies it encapsulates. This process of disavowal that implicitly disregards the instability of the human subject, along with the inherent politicisation of its discourse, is the means through which ethics imposes the logic of exceptionalism. The deployment of this logic is therefore carried out in the humanist hope that the irrepressibility of the non-relation, of its contradictions and undecidability, can be effortlessly resolved. This negates our animality. We are unable to divorce ourselves from propensities towards the 'bad' and we are unable

to know how we might come to act. The desire for the cogent ethical subject does not attend to our own extimate other: "the subject is not the ego or the individual or the person or the human being, but it is that *inhuman* (thing) *in* humans, which 'articulates' nature's own inherent negativity" (Bjerre, 2018, p. 79, emphasis in original). Exceptionalist practices, in other words, like the administrative discourse on ethics, become a disavowing mechanism to counteract that we are nature's exception.

What enables these exceptionalist tendencies to continue is not simply a consequence of their unwieldy status that has become commonplace. Rather, it is a consequence of the power that is attributed to representationalist logic that works to disavow its humanist limit points and its own non-relation. Consider, for instance, the case of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium. Despite undergoing lengthy renovations in an attempt to "confront its colonial demons" and undisputedly unethical past, this museum continues to be an exemplary site of exceptionalist disavowal (Psaledakis & Lohman, 2018). In an uncomfortable re-enactment of colonial logic, stolen artefacts remain in the exhibit in and amongst contemporary African art. This is counter to the museum's desire to be more ethical. What results is not a triumphant Congolese voice of post-coloniality, nor is it a depiction of a once deemed 'uncivilised', 'violent' or 'savage' other. What is on display is the disavowal of the power dynamics that go into the act of staging such a (representationalist) curation. The museum displays a presumed ability to (re)script another, all whilst shaping the political dynamics of their relations in a way that assumes a rectification of the Belgium nation's previous wrongdoings. Put differently, what is on display is not only the artefact of the other, but the performance of being able to do the process of othering. This dominating process is disavowed, yet it remains as the underlying subtext of the exhibit that never gets spoken.

It is the normative sensibilities that overlay these exceptionalist logics and their associated representationalist connotations that give rise to their problematic.

Ideas of the ethical become an indomitable and indisputable force because of the underlying power dynamics that are often overlooked and subsequently left unchallenged. Signifiers like the ethical closet not only what they mean, but moreover, what one might do with them as conceptual or ideological objects. Responsibility is thereby given away to the signifier itself. It holds the tension of the non-relation so that we do not have to. In the power that is attributed to signifiers as knowledge, a disavowal of the non-relation underpinning representationalism is formalised. This is the work of exceptionalism as it becomes operative in the relation between ethical discourse and concrete situations. As Anna Tsing (2012) would remind us, "*human exceptionalism blinds us*" (p. 144, emphasis in original). The hope that is thereby attributed to signifiers like the ethical sheds light on the foibles of institutionalised discourse and raises questions as to what they mean when in practice.

The Bounds of Administrative Ethics

The tendencies towards disavowal that reproduce exceptionalism are evidenced in the academic setting. Heralded under this administrative domain, institutionalised conceptualisations of ethics have become the predominant mode for the consideration and evaluation of both potential and actual consequences of our actions within the research context. Within the domain of qualitative research, in which the present inquiry sits, administrative ethics comprises two interrelated dimensions: procedural ethics and 'ethics in practice'. Procedural ethics consists of professional codes of conduct that are in place to help shepherd the unfolding of research. At Massey University, the revised code of ethical conduct from the Human Ethics Committee (2017) covers not only universal ethical principles of autonomy, the avoidance of harm (non-maleficence), beneficence, justice and special relationships, but also an incorporation of mātauranga and Tikanga Māori to align the code with obligations held under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. As outlined in section one of the code, these Te Ara Tika principles include whakapapa (purpose and

relationships), tika (research design), manākitanga (cultural and social responsibility) and mana (justice and equity) (see Hudson, Milne, Reynolds, Russell & Smith, n.d.). Researchers are thus expected to seek approval from the ethics committee by detailing how they intend to adhere to these ethical principles and customs prior to undertaking research.

Meeting the requirements of procedural ethics often gives rise to prescriptive applications. This is because the status that is attributed to ethical codes and principles within academia work not only to define one's research milieu, but also to hold the integrity of the academe in place. As Fry, Marino and Nijhawan (2022) testify, applications are typically crafted in a language that matches what is anticipated by review boards. This scripting demands careful consideration of the implications of the words used to define the research context and to describe one's intended course of action. This was the trap I found myself slipping into in the early drafts of this chapter. I attempted to fit myself and my research into a predetermined mould. Consequently, rather than being the one engaging with the task of writing this chapter, it felt as though I had already been spoken for. It was as if the chapter had already been prewritten for me. The homogenisation that this discourse not only implies, but also imbues, thereby further complicates matters of ethics. Ethical guidelines are not always feasible, practical, or outright achievable when put into practice. This is particularly the case with autoethnographic research.

The retrospective manner in which autoethnographies are conducted means that issues of autonomy, for instance, are particularly fretful. How might one 'go back in time' and gain permission to offer commentary on the events that occurred? In navigating this ethical conundrum, some autoethnographers compile their scripts with those who feature in their stories. In examining the transformation of her role and experiences in motherhood following her teenage son's unexpected stroke, Yeats (2013), for instance, was deeply aware that the stories she shared were not only hers but also her son's. Before commencing her research, Yeats endeavoured to explain to her son the intricacies, nuances and challenges of conducting her

autoethnography. She opened conversation to explore his opinions, address any queries about the content and structure that would be taken, and offered her support in the conclusion he came to as to whether he felt comfortable for her to continue. At various intervals throughout her research, Yeats conversed with her son, clarified details, and gave him a chance to review the material before continuing. This enabled her to gain his consent on each segment written to ensure that the telling of her side of the story also accurately reflected his. Consequently, on an ethical account, Yeats' research could be considered a 'collaborative autoethnography' (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). For other authors, such as Smith (2011), similar tactics of review are taken to ensure that those who feature within the stories shared are satisfied with the way those narratives are scripted.

However, with the passage of time and the writing of stories in reflection, consent of this nature is not always possible or pragmatically feasible. This includes when relationships have become distanced physically and/or emotionally, when there has been a passing of those mentioned, when an extensive number of individuals featured in various stories makes attempts of reviewed consent impractical, or when the complete identity or contact details of those mentioned are unknown. Andrew Dickson (2011), for instance, aptly captures some of these challenges when considering how consent might be gained for an autoethnographic account that reflects upon a childhood experience:

In this [story] I mention my parents, my brother and a few other family members. The story I tell is uniquely my own, my construction of events that we were all present to *at the time*. It is not possible to untangle an autonomous individual from this experience, either me or another family member as each subject took part only in relation to the other subjects present. There are no autonomous participants from which to gain consent. In addition, enforcing a 'voluntary nature of participation' is particularly troublesome. One is not voluntarily part of a family; we cannot disengage from the relationship in such a way that would allow any volunteering (as

understood by the discourse of the university) to occur. (p. 17, emphasis in original).

Dickson's commentary highlights the likelihood of change that coincides with the passage of time. This limits researchers' ability to codify their relations with others in the static form that ethical codes typically imply. For example, how might we account for the feelings and perspectives of our younger or previous selves? The ethical project within academia presumes that we can accurately anticipate what might arise in research. Yet, what might be deemed ethical can often only be known in hindsight. We are unable to know what we might be faced with, what might surface its way into the conscious, or what might leave us thrown. In these moments of dislocation, the emphasis placed on ethical discourse risks losing its bearing. As a discourse swirling in a whirlpool of politicised signifiers, each attempt to strike a claim to be ethical could be considered a conceit.

The broader anthropocentric, colonial, patriarchal and neoliberal context in which contemporary research is situated influences the messiness of the politicised landscapes in which we work. This list of politicised and politicising influencers is neither complete nor definitive—nor could it ever be. Each context brings to the fore new and intersecting vectors of messiness. These matters are further compounded when consideration is given to the often multidisciplinary nature of present-day research, where a confluence of disparate disciplinary traditions need to be held in relation to researchers' beliefs, values and commitments. These factors create complications for the logistical application of universal ethical procedures within the diversity and complexity of concrete situations. The 'helpful' role that these standards play thereby becomes questionable.

The institutionalisation of ethical discourse, administered as 'knowledge' cordoning human interactions, merely operates on the probability that the following of such moral discourse will alleviate the unfolding of harm—that it will keep those who are interacting 'safe'. Ethics is thereby a form of risk management. This is of

course not unwarranted. One only needs to be reminded of the Stanford Prison Experiment (Le Texier, 2019; Zimbardo et al., 1971), or the ‘Unfortunate Experiment at the National Women’s’ (Cartwright Report, 1988; Coney & Bunkle, 1987). Yet for inquiries that are risky in and of themselves, what does ethics then become?

An autoethnographic project grounded in disorienting objects is fundamentally risky. By engaging with moments of dislocation as the starting point of my writing, the administration of risk must be done away with to be able to engage with this form of research. If I were to codify the ethical relations presented within this thesis to that of the traditional ethical principles as scripted and regulated by the university, my thesis would emulate a contradiction within my subject matter which is the very contradiction I seek to illuminate and problematize. I would merely reproduce human exceptionalism. This raises a bemusing question of how I might adhere to the ethical codes to which this thesis is bound, yet still conduct this research in a manner that contends with the underbelly of exceptionalism.

The Emergence of an Ethical-Political Subject

As a form of political discourse set in motion by human exceptionalism, ethics regulates not only the conduct of research, but relations with the other more broadly. This places institutionalised boundaries upon the human subject by preconfiguring with whom we can be in an ethical relationship. Yet the disavowal that underpins this cordoning of human action exposes the limited reach of traditional ethical conceptions. When confined to representational notions of consent or autonomy, for instance, how can we think about ethical relations with others to whom we cannot speak, or those to whom we cannot know or understand beyond the bounds of human rationality? What does ethics then become? This humanist hangover that presents itself in mainstream ethics is particularly unsettling for authors like Turnbull and Van Patter (2022, p. 152), who focus on the matter of relations with the more-than-human, because the “ontological baggage concerning who or what animals are and how we should relate to them” subliminally influences

our judgments. How do we not only account for this baggage but, also, attend to the consequences of our engagement? It is the commonplace responses to this broader ethical conundrum to which this chapter now turns. I will examine some of the distinct forms of the ethical subject that become problematic under an object-disoriented autoethnographic methodology.

A dominant strategy employed by researchers in an attempt to wrestle with these underlying tensions is the idea of 'situated ethics'. Situated ethics recognises that blanket statements of the ethical are problematic because they are unable to account for the unique contingencies and configurations of power that can be at play within any situation. This includes the various dimensions of struggle and domination woven into the fabric of not only human and more-than-human relations, but within human relations as well (Alaimo, 2018; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Gough & Whitehouse, 2018, 2020; Hughes & Lury, 2013). As a way of mediating our 'ontological baggage', situated ethics attempts to decentre the human subject (Plumwood, 1993, 2000, 2002) by questioning that with which we are complicit when we try to give voice to the more-than-human other (Buller, 2014, 2015, 2016). This requires going beyond the Westernised catechisms of category and classification, of the bifurcation of 'mine' from 'yours', and of the self-fulfilling haughtiness of the expert.

Leveraging her work in conversation with Haraway (2003, 2008), Tsing (2012), associates situated ethics with ongoing engagements with sites of encounter—with those spaces where relations with the other occur and transform. This is exemplified in her research with mushrooms. Tsing demonstrates how appreciation of mushrooms' unique forms necessitates an awareness of the distinct relations they develop across time and space. Her situated ethical strategies include practices of naming and noticing to unpack these relations: the specific tree where the mycelium lives; the animal disturbances that catalyse transformation; and the seasonal landscapes that remind us that the 'world has always already been without us' (see

Toscano, 2016).⁶ Not only does this positioning recognise and appreciate the wider multispecies context in which the observer is situated, but it does so in a way that is anchored both spatially and temporally. Tsing suggests that this can enable the development of stochastic knowledge of the 'natural' history of one's particular location and the associations to which that location has flourished.

The commonality of situated ethics across the feminist, multispecies and environmentalist corpus speaks to the emergence of a particular subject position. The reflexive subject has not only become routine, but it has come to be expected.⁷ This is because the suitably reflexive subject position is framed as a means of mediating the tensions born of the constraints of humanist rationality. This is often implied in the way the miscellany of these interdisciplinary texts deals with the ethical issues associated with engagement with the other: reflexivity is the antidote. Kohl and McCutcheon's (2015) 'kitchen table reflexivity' offers a clear example. Strongly informed by the long-standing history of feminist research imperatives (Haraway, 1988; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003), kitchen table reflexivity involves working through 'ethically important moments' with introspective processes of reflection and communicative dialogue with and between companions, mentors and collaborators.⁸ Reflexivity is thereby an active practice that considers the role of situated ethics, positionalities and relations of power. It introduces into conversation

⁶ In this regard, Tsing speaks of the co-development of the British colonial system and dry rot as an example of liveliness of the world in ways that go beyond human intent. Through other species, the changing practices of humans become evident (see pages 144-145).

⁷ Being reflexive within one's research means operating "with the aim of producing more inclusive methods sensitive to the power relations in fieldwork" (England, 1994, p. 80). Reflexivity involves theorising one's social worlds in distinctively relational ways, cognisant of the power relations that are embedded in those relations (Sweet, 2020). This necessitates an account of the social structures mediating the way relations unfold and demonstrates the importance of locating analyses within the larger socio-historical context of the work under interrogation. Moreover, reflexivity requires unravelling the patterns of social life for which we are accountable. This entails a consideration of how our identity and relative positions of privilege shape our insights, and from the positions we occupy as those powerless, how might our experiences recast the voices of those dominant?

⁸ Guillemain & Gillam (2004, p. 262) describe 'ethically important moments' as "difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research".

the factors that influence the relations observed and engaged with by the researcher, whilst also considering how those relations change through the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). It is because of this that reflexivity is thought to be able to bridge procedural ethics and ethics in practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Reflexivity can exert a transformational effect upon the subject. It is argued, for example, to lead to an embrace of 'vulnerability' that can awaken a form of care for oneself and care for others (Zizzo, et al., 2021), whilst also promoting an 'ethic of humility' that welcomes all that we do not and cannot know (Turnbull & Van Patter, 2022). Holmberg (2022) further suggests that this "can teach researchers to articulate less anthropocentric ways of being human and speaking about more-than-human others" (p. 182). Moreover, it is proposed that reflexivity can lead to "more inclusive and attentive storytelling practices, enabling a deeper exploration of researcher's own positionality in relation to multiple research subjects... and guid[e] them through the disturbing task of confronting the darker side of multispecies encounters" (Fry, Marino & Nijhawan, 2022, p. 240). These laurels of situated reflexivity were demonstrated in Gillespie and Collard's (2015) sobering yet humble personal accounts of live animal auctions. Mulling over their reticence about being ethnographic observers to the brutality of domestic and exotic auctions, these authors opened challenging conversations about the unintended consequences of research: when human careers are developed and therefore dependent upon the exploitation of the natural world, how do we conduct research in a way that does not further proliferate such violence? Accordingly, the value of the suitably reflexive subject position cannot be entirely disregarded because it can lead to attention being placed on that which is commonly disavowed.

These strategies of being situated, reflexive and vulnerable are not inherently problematic. What is problematic is when they culminate as political ploys of an 'achievable' ethical subject. Though at times overlapping, each perspective proposes a particular kind of subject, an ethical subject, who might come into being and thereby act differently—to act ethically. Posed as ethical practices, these

approaches are more-so ethical-political in their orientation. This can be seen in how they invoke conservative forms of subjectivity. In their confrontation with the disorienting character of the non-relation (the human), the slippages that emerge in these responses demonstrate the gravitational pull of Cartesian dualisms.

The tensions that emerge in the way these frameworks present the idea of an achievable ethical subject have implications for research practices. Drawing on Gruen's (2015) work of 'entangled empathy'⁹, Gillespie (2016), for instance, argues that 'staying with trouble' necessitates 'bearing witness' to "the lives that are rendered ungrievable" (p. 572). Doing so, she suggests, can reveal the inner hierarchies and workings of power that are embedded within the relations held between marginalised multispecies bodies. The political function of bearing witness to that power thereby entails an emotional engagement between the bodies involved. There exists a dubious question, however, as to the relationship held between those witnessing and those witnessed. To what extent might these practices invoke the thorny relation between care and domination? Moreover, how might "bringing animals back 'within sight'" (Turnbull & Van Patter, 2022, p. 158) go 'beyond anthropomorphism' (Holmberg, 2022) in a way that does not tacitly recentre Eurocentric dominance through the appropriation of other's epistemologies, including those of Indigenous peoples? Braidotti (2019) makes a similar point regarding an enactment of 'deceleration'. She suggests that the inclusion of other voices into the rubrics by which the construction of knowledge proceeds in the university may counter a state of epistemic accelerationism associated with late capitalism's continual proliferation of the 'new'. Yet, how can we ensure that the bringing in of these 'silenced voices' is done in a way that does not further exploit those already marginalised?

⁹ Gillespie (2016) describes entangled empathy as "a type of caring perception focused on attending to another's experience of wellbeing. An experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize that we are in relation with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities" (p. 579).

Cognisant of our weaknesses as researchers, reflexive ethical practices frequently dovetail with the customs of bringing in ‘experts’ to act in an advisory capacity to help guide the ethical conduct of research. These experts may include Indigenous peoples on the basis of knowledge they hold of the multispecies subject matter, and who are therefore considered to have a greater ability to represent the more-than-human other. Though Holmberg (2022) acknowledges and incentivises the values of this approach, she is aware that doing so risks an appropriation of the very other from whom knowledge is sought. She is not alone in her trepidations (e.g., Brannelly & Boulton, 2017; Rosiek, Snyder & Pratt, 2020; Watts, 2013). Massey University’s integration of te ao Māori into the expression of ethical principles is an example of this point. On the one hand, this framing is immensely valuable as it demonstrates the interrelation between ethics, politics and situational contexts by aligning institutional frameworks with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. However, in the blurred boundary that exists between ‘leaning on’ and appropriation, the employment of Indigenous standpoints could come across as a box-ticking exercise for the acquisition of an ethical position.

A universal statement of ethical accountability, like the subjectivist argument of situated reflexivity, risks rekindling a neo-colonial hubris. The hegemonic form of the idealised ethical subject has the potential to give rise to petty fascisms within the ways we come to exercise care, and how care, or an ethic of care is managed¹⁰. This double-edged sword is evidenced in Felix Guattari’s (2000) promotion of an ‘ethico-politicality’ as a means by which to grapple with the crises of politics, ecology and subjectivity, whose intersection now characterises society under late

¹⁰ The process of disavowal that runs alongside the idealised form of the ethical signifier can also be exploited by subsequent exercises of power. Corporate entities premised on ethical orientations, for instance, are illustrative of an exceptionalist exploit of the ethical in operations geared towards profit. These entities carve a space within the market for the ‘ethical consumer’, those inadvertently complicit in a self-fulfilling hubris of ‘doing good’ through their consumption patterns, which proliferates green consumerism whilst sidestepping corporate responsibility (Jones, 2020). Ethical discourse and its underlying exceptionalism are thereby reinforced with each swipe of a credit card and the following growth in shareholder profits.

capitalism. That said, Guattari cautions against “the entropic rise of a dominant subjectivity” (p. 68), of an idealised ethical subject. The emergence of such a subject would, after all, reproduce a colonialism that takes the very form of the human exceptionalism which 'the ethical' seeks to counter.

Ethics: An Impasse between Care and Domination

The promotion of a particular form of writing that gives rise to an idealised ethical subject, works to reveal both the operation and disavowal of human exceptionalism. Ethics becomes a means by which to ensure the care of those entangled within the research-assemblage (see Fox & Alldred, 2015); a praxis that might enable the conduct of research that does not harm. What becomes evident, however, is that the political positioning of 'the ethical' typically exercises a form of dominance. On the flip side of the caring reflexive subject are the administrative protocols that not only gauge whether one is sufficiently reflexive enough, but that also evaluate whether the 'correct' or desirable form of reflexivity has eventuated. One only needs to question who scripts ethical discourse and how have they come to be in that position of power to see the subtle workings of domination that are often disavowed in the commonplace attempts to adhere to such ethical framings.

In the regulation and policing of the ethical subject, a troublesome dynamic that operates between the desire for care and the control it necessitates works to demonstrate how ethics exists in a state of impasse. We thus return to the same ethical paradox with which this chapter began. We are faced with the fallacy of the humanist hope that the subject can act independently of unconscious processes along with a capacity to read, steer and redirect the unfolding of relations with others. The impasse between care and domination is thereby embedded in the exceptionalist roots of representationalism, and in the power that is disavowed when forms of discourse are granted universalist authority. This raises a question of how we might work with not only the consequences of ethical discourse and practice, but of the relations born of care and domination.

For Zupančič, this work begins with an abandonment of hope for coherence in the human subject. This choice of starting point comes because the scripting of a desired subject type is vulnerable to the development of regulatory regimes that police the suitability of evolving subjects. To sidestep the potential slippages towards exceptionalist dualisms, the question of the instability of the subject should remain firmly open. The maintenance of an ethical position within this context thereby requires researchers to remain politically engaged by not only taking responsibility for the ramifications of their work, such as by being cognisant of the challenges and limitations born of ethical practices¹¹, but by also attending to that which is commonly disavowed. This is precisely what my research aims to achieve. By attending to objects that have an impact upon the subject in unimaginable ways, this object-disoriented autoethnography can contend with the dynamics of care and domination because it is a means of exploring the unfolding of new capacities that exceed the bounds of representationalism. These capacities cannot be predetermined, nor can they be evaluated at the point of their emergence. Writing of this kind thus becomes a practice that is simultaneously methodological, ethical and political.

As a logic born of the disjuncture between attempts to script relations with the other through the terms of a given methodology and the consequences thereof, ethics could be considered a disorienting object. Yet it can also bear the repercussions of the encounter if recognition is given to the effects of its disorientation, that is, if we contend with the exceptionalist non-relation that ethics represents. As Fry, Marino and Nijhawan (2022) express, “ethical relations with other beings... do not ignore the dark or awkward side of multispecies encounters but require us to emerge from these with a productive sense of discomfort, uncertainty and humility” (p. 229). Engaging with such discomfort in an object-disoriented

¹¹ Most notably, we can never fully know the extent of the relations comprising any given situation. This limitation, much like the resounding critique of Latour’s (2005) ‘Actor Network Theory’, rests upon the inability to name all those to whom we are in relation. How might we understand or work with the concept of boundaries?

autoethnography is thereby a way of bridging the humanist void through an attendance to the more-than-human relationality that spans across sensory and bodily experiences of kinship, care and violence. This is evidenced here by how the research parlays with the limit points of humanist boundaries, through its conveyance of tales about encounters with multiple ‘others’: with the more-than-human other, particularly animals; with the human other, often of a structural kind; and with the other within the self that is born of estimate dislocations by angst, confrontation and the surreal. An object-disoriented autoethnography is thereby a methodological, ethical and political practice that confronts the exceptionalism that not only shapes the broader ethical context, but is typically disavowed in the moments when encounters with the other occur.

Concluding Reflections

This thesis pivots upon moments of disturbance. It attends to objects that haunt both in the way the stories are told and in the elicitation of the stories worth telling. Though these moments might not necessarily generate disturbance in others—those who were present within the story, but also readers who now come to relive these moments through my writing—they feature in this thesis because of the way the contradictions that they represent have come to disturb me, as the author. The processes of working with objects that haunt and of interrogating the moments in which those objects were encountered raises challenges for me as both the object and subject of this research. I am simultaneously an insider, yet a distanced observer. In the oscillation between discomfort and intellectual analyses, the unique, specific, contingent and contextualised particularities of writing this autoethnographic thesis, coupled with the delicate, disturbing subject matter which it involves, means that the potential for researcher harm becomes an altogether crucial point of consideration. How might I keep myself safe from the emotional load that comes with not only sitting with experiences of discomfort, but also writing about them?

Comfort can be found, however, in the strength of this approach. An autoethnography of this kind presumes a lack of recourse as to why we have found ourselves thrown. Instead, it is through the process of writing that we can work through not only the impact of the dislocating object upon us, but also the processes of disavowal that precede them. In my attention to objects that dislocate, I am seeking to attend to the forms of power that sit behind those objects and that which gives rise to their disorienting character. The objects upon which this thesis focuses have emerged as symptoms of their socio-political location and have subsequently become normalised as part of their broader architecture. Acts of disturbance could therefore be considered to arise in the realisation that we are far more complicit in the workings of underlying power relations than what we might have previously realised or acknowledged. It is then through the act of writing that new insights can be revealed.

Maggie O'Farrell's (2017) stoic memoir, *I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes with Death*, is a striking example in this regard. Written as a form of encouragement and inspiration to her daughter to not live her life in fear, nor to let her potentially fatal allergies dictate her possibilities, O'Farrell vividly expounds seventeen encounters that have punctuated her sense of self—but that have not defined her. As events that could have resulted in her death, yet did not, O'Farrell's narrativization speaks to the significance of being thrown by the 'non-thing' (i.e., the non-relation). Despite the terror that these (non-)events invoked and the angst they instil upon readers, O'Farrell's writing coaxes both herself and readers to move with and thereby through restlessness. In continually coming up against the fragility of life, or what could be considered the limit points of our exceptionalism, O'Farrell showcases that hope can be found within those moments of confrontation—by writing through the reasons why those 'non-things' have become objects that dislocate. Though her work might not be classified as an object-disoriented autoethnography, O'Farrell's writing demonstrates the value of attending to the

non-relation. It is through the act of re-telling her encounters that she opened new points of reference. Such is the task that this thesis seeks to achieve.

This object-disoriented autoethnography therefore involves a process of reconstruction in which the effects of the wider socio-political context become evident, as revealed in the way disorienting objects emerge as expressions of something out of place yet remain intrinsic to that very place and moment. This process enables an interrogation of the tensions underlying those objects, in a manner that does not tacitly re-invoke forms of power through the production of banal descriptions, for example, of 'the logic and power at play'. Writing the thesis in this manner thereby exposes myself as the ethical question. This is my way of 'taking my place' within the impasse in which research into human exceptionalism also holds me.

The subsequent chapters extend these discussions. My concern regarding the imbrication of human exceptionalism within ethical discourse—as a form of power that disavows its representationalist origins and the effect of the non-relation—is explored through objects that disorientate. This exploration extends to the conditions giving rise to those objects' disorienting characters. The chapters that follow demonstrate that these exceptionalist tensions come to manifest most distinctively in practices of care that are inextricable to domination. This relation is firstly explored via the logic operating within the field of conservation, and secondly within the logic governing our engagement with liveliness, or what could be considered the source of our subsistence. In both domains, it is the body—human and more-than-human—that is subjected to and held in contemplation by the relation of the commonly disavowed forms of power that are made operative through acts and discourses of care.

Chapter Five

SAVING NATURE WITH BULLETS? THE VIOLENCE OF CONSERVATION

Introduction

I was eight years old. We were on the final stretch of a nearly month-long safari trip in Botswana. Before making our way back home to Johannesburg, we stopped at a privately owned game reserve and safari lodge in the Tuli Block, a strip of land running alongside the Limpopo River and situated at the border juncture of Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. The reserve was owned by family friends; my grandfather had been their longstanding bookkeeper. We were subsequently treated as esteemed guests, hastily taken by the lodge owners and their park rangers for a tour of the reserve. Packed into the customary safari-equipped Land Cruiser, we embarked upon an expedition, ready in anticipation for what we had hoped to see: Africa's most famous large fauna. We were going into the 'wild'...

Not long into the tracking excursion, we stopped to walk along an area that the owners had much interest in for some reason of operation or another. My memory of this point has faded, for something was lying on the ground to which my attention had fully succumbed. Amidst the dusty, dry dirt was a bullet, its coppery hues glistening in the harsh sunlight. I knew what it was, but I was in disbelief.

“This is a game reserve, a space where animals are meant to be safe”, I remember thinking. “Why is this here? How could there be bullets shot in an enclosed reserve like this?” My mind was racing as I yelled: “Poachers! Someone has shot an animal! We need to find them! We need to see if the animals are okay!”

My concerns were only exasperated by the normalcy conveyed in the silencing, mumbled response: “Oh it was probably just one of the rangers”.

The bullet had felt so out of place. I could not fathom its necessity, nor its presumed relation to those around me. The adults in my company did not share similar sentiments of dismay. They were altogether unfazed, unmoved by an object that to them was ordinary. The bullet appeared merely a fixture of the landscape, a sordid artefact of events that were not only commonplace, but to be expected. But what were those events? I still could not make any sense of what I had just found. My incessant questioning was brushed off, and then quickly ignored. My imagination ran wild. Scenarios necessitating a spent bullet vividly expounded their literary form. I was rendered speechless. Who or what was being protected became the real question that the bullet coldly held in contemplation.

In the words that were left unspoken, my inquisitiveness morphed into a form of scepticism. I pondered the motives of those around me. I understood the role of the rangers to be that of an escort. As with the other game reserves that I had frequented, rangers used their knowledge of the land and of the inhabiting animals to help guide enchanted and thrill-seeking tourists towards Africa’s finest: prides of lions, herds of wildebeest and elephants... the list goes on. After all, successful animal sightings keep conservation parks and the wildlife tourism industry running. Yet these rangers were more than simple chaperones. Their position within this expansive, lively ensemble was (and still is) heavily politicised. They embodied the moral role of the romanticised protector. As the presumed protector of the land, animals and (certain) people, rangers were depicted as the revered knights safeguarding these treasures from the evil, inhuman(e) poachers, those who would

mercilessly hunt those grand creatures for purposes of profit, pleasure or greed—or so the narratives conveyed in my childhood had led me to believe.

The disconcerting character of this perplexing encounter speaks to a moment of politicisation. Although the encounter described occurred at a time when I was too young to fully understand its significance, nor would I have had the words to describe it as such, the bullet commanded an awareness of the uncomfortable workings of power. I was struck by the irreducible tensions held by the object in front of me, and by my understanding of it. The discomfort that continues to pervade my memory of that bullet signifies the inability of the tensions it encapsulates to form as a coherent whole. As an object of disorientation, it is an illustration of the required moral dissonance that its physical form and function entail. Whether used under the guise of evil or that of the protector, the bearer of the bullet must come up against obscured distinctions between right and wrong, human and other—a fine line that is blurred at best. Evidenced in the silence that met my interrogation of the bullet's existence, I had unknowingly become privy to slippages in humanist rationality that are often easier to ignore. In the horror of what could be, yet what cannot appear until its aftermath, the bullet brought about an unnerving realisation that it is through the act of killing that we care. It was at this moment that I (unconsciously) encountered the thorny relationship held between care and domination.

The violence of the bullet can be thought of as emblematic of the broader tensions held within the principles of conservation. As a deployment of ethical logic, conservation is underpinned by a belief that we, as humans, can and should attend to issues of biodiversity loss through the scientific preservation, protection and restoration of the natural environment and of the wildlife it houses. Despite being an approach for the reconciliation of human relations with the more-than-human other, its underlying incentive of control cannot be ignored. The logic of conservation operates on the presumption that humans can radically control not only the environment, but the human and more-than-human other alike. It is a supposition

born of what could be considered a ubiquitous and at times blinding hope that humans can 'fix' nature. Yet this ability can also be described as an aspiration to preserve or fortify an idealised form of nature so that future generations (of certain humans) can similarly bask in its beauty and reap the fruits of its labour. It is this human exceptionalism that underpins the logic of conservation to which this discussion now moves.

What follows is an elucidation of the reasons for which conservation can be considered an impossibility. The intent is not simply to critique conservation practices past or present, but rather to demonstrate the confines within which acts of conservation, that is, practices of care for the more-than-human other, are paradoxically bound within exceptionalist forces that see them nonetheless operating as sites of domination. As will become evident, it is the ongoing colonial-capitalist relations informing the institutionalisation of conservation logic that guilefully work to silence insights into forms of human dominance over land, people and animals.

Before we begin, I must disclose a caveat as to the scope and contextual focus of this discussion. The term 'conservation' encompasses various forms of environmental management and preservation, including in-situ conservation parks, species tracking and habitat regeneration, along with ex-situ approaches such as zoology centres, seed banks or botanical gardens. Conservation is thereby not restricted to distinct elements of nature. It operates in the concurrent and often overlapping domains of animal, marine, environmental, energy and water, or soil and mineral conservation, amongst others. This discussion will focus primarily on issues pertaining to animal conservation, and more specifically, upon those animals classified as 'wild'. However, because of the predominance of the tendency to conceive humans as fundamentally separate from the environment, the tensions described are relevant to conservation as a whole.

Similarly, because of my first-hand experiences and connections, the extent of international interest from large-scale conservation bodies in the area, along with the significance of the socio-political histories of the African continent, this discussion will place greater emphasis on the contradictions that emerge within conservation practices located in Africa. Though this is the environment in which I am most familiar, I recognise and appreciate that there will be both similarities and variances in how the limit points of conservation play out in other parts of the world.

The Impossibility of Conservation

Conservation is purported as an expression of care for the more-than-human other. By virtue of its underlying ethical discourse, conservation is legitimised as a means of preserving ('saving') nature and its wildlife. Despite its promotion of connections with nature, conservation problematically "exacerbates a sense of separation from the very entity with which it seeks reconciliation" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 226-227). This reflects the oxymoronic logic that abstracts humans from the environments in which they are embedded. It is the exceptionalism that runs through this presumption which magnifies deep-seated contradictions intrinsic to humanist thought.

Philosophical thought since the period of Enlightenment has afforded supremacy to Eurocentric epistemologies and its scientific discourses. Duality has been the dictum. The sense of authority historically ascribed to this discourse has seen conservation similarly be defined, structured, and organised in accordance with these philosophical principles (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Foucault, 1978). Conservation subsequently operates upon a reification of Cartesian dualisms as its commonplace scripting is predicated on historical dichotomies that distinguish 'nature' from that of 'culture'. This abstractive logic crystallises the limit points of our discursive form of rationality because it disavows that we are nature's exception—its own extimate other (Bjerre, 2018; Zupančič, 2017). Woven into the fabric of conservation's underlying intentions, the exceptionalism underpinning this conceptual disavowal is evidenced in the way these logics materialised.

The politicised imposition of these conceptual distinctions manifested in the physical detachment of people from nature, typically in the form of protected areas or fortress conservation parks (Brockington, 2002; Campbell, Gray & Meletis, 2007; Jones, 2006). These areas are defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) as designated “geographical space[s], recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” (Dudley, 2008, p. 8). These moves were backed by a romanticised construction of nature as untouched or ‘pristine’ (Adams, 2004b). This is in stark contrast to the negative connotations of areas initially termed ‘wild’—land deemed unable to fully submit to human control. The conceptualisation of ‘wilderness’ as unruly, barren, savage or a waste is explained by Cronon (1996) to be symptomatic of a biblical hangover. Christian scripture had long painted a picture of ‘the wild’ as a place where one gave into temptation and risked losing their soul to their sins. It was a place that was demonised. Yet as aspirations for an idealised nature unspoiled by human influence grew, sentiments began to shift. The ‘wild’ was reframed as “the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, ha[d] not fully infected the earth” (Cronon, 1996, p. 7). Conservation thus emerged as a means of preserving the past, and protected areas were a way of achieving this.

In the lust for a wilderness that could animate the conception of the human as a saviour and to safeguard what came to be considered the ‘last frontier’ (Cronon, 1996), the creation of protected areas supported the halting of deforestation, habitat destruction and irreversible biodiversity loss (Hoffman, 2022; NPI Alliance, 2015). Yet, conservation was not simply a virtuous act of care for the more-than-human other. A mastery of nature underpinned its euphemism of care. Conservation was a cultural invention; a contradictory system fabricating an idealised nature that is bereft of humanity’s imbrication. This discursive move not only reinforced a categorical chasm between people and nature, but implicitly

underscored a violent form of human dominance over the environment. Under the spurious purposes of care, nature became subject to humanist intent. It has become valued because it is considered to be “fully plastic, malleable to meet human demands” (Adams & Hutton, 2007, p. 152). In what has been described as the period of the Capitalocene (Moore, 2016, 2017, 2018, see also Hartley, 2016), society has come to be built on this presumption that nature is readily available, able to be “understood, manipulated and controlled for social benefit” (Adams & Hutton, 2007, p. 153). The proliferation of a presumed necessity of nature’s protection thus typified an exceptionalist disavowal of not only the dark history of human’s imbrication with nature, but of its concurrency with colonial-capitalist processes, particularly that of primitive accumulation (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015; Harvey, 1990, 2006; Kelly, 2011).

What enabled this exploit of nature, however, was the development and proliferation of scientific discourse. As a form of scientific knowledge, conservation evolved as a mechanism that legitimised the exceptionalist control of nature. Backed by disciplines such as biology, geography and economics, the development of conservation science enabled the abstraction of nature into a calculable and manageable resource that was considered distinct from social or political issues. It was a form of knowledge that further became absorbed by the dual processes of rationalisation and neoliberalism. This rendered nature not only governable, but also profitable. The power attributed to scientific knowledge warranted the control of the environment via politicised bodies who mediate relations between that state, society and nature in accordance with colonial-capitalist principles (Foucault, 1978; Kadykalo, Cooke & Young, 2021). This was evidenced in the way protected areas were commonly framed in ecological and financial terms that precluded any consideration of the social and political ramifications for the context in which those parks were established (Adams & Hutton, 2007).

The institutionalisation of conservation science cemented its entanglement within the politics of control. It was clearly no longer a simple enactment of care. As

Biermann and Mansfield (2014, p. 257) aptly outline, “with its emphasis on making nature live, conservation marks a shift away from a sovereign form of rule that emphasised subduing and controlling nature; today, nature is ruled not by the sword but by science”. As a parallel to the institutionalisation of medical knowledge that culminated as the voice of authority over the right to life and death (Foucault, 1978), conservation emerged as a biopolitical mechanism that self-legitimises the control and exploitation of both human and more-than-human life. This form of biopolitics “moves from controlling individuals to statistically managing populations and species, but... it [also] extends the racialized logic of abnormality in its core notions of biological diversity and purity” (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014, p. 257). This biopolitical administration of life demonstrates how conservation is a discourse of care that is at once a practice of domination. The exceptionalism informing its inner logic considers certain bodies to be more worthy of life than others.

The cohabitation of harm and care under the biopolitical rubrics of conservation discourse and practice rests upon the dual processes of subjectification and objectification. Orchestrating the way population politics is carried out, the exceptionalism embedded within the logic of conservation socially constructs the differentiation of the human and more-than-human other as either political objects or subjects. This categorisation enables not only the governance of life and death, but it determines the forms of anthropocentric goals into which ‘the other’ is enrolled. As put by Hodgetts (2017, p. 24), “the binary subject/object assignation leads to very different forms of political protection: subjects are made to live; objects are excluded, removed, and ‘dispatched’”. As will be demonstrated, these violent exclusionary practices that couple the creation and re-creation of protected areas have profound ramifications.

Conservation can thereby be understood as an impossibility. Its conceptual rationales and resulting manifestations reify a myriad of dualisms that categorically situate humans to be ontologically distinct from nature. Not only does this fundamentally reinforce colonial-capitalist imperatives, but it problematically

disavows our imbrication with nature. It is a disavowing that we are nature's exception: the animal that never quite fully formed nor fit (Bjerre, 2018; Zupančič, 2017). These tensions are captured in the following extract by Cronon (1996, p. 7-8):

Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires. For this reason, we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture's problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem.

In the quizzical boundary that lies between the human and the more-than-human, conservation evades our extimate relation to nature whilst formalising our exceptionalism. This exceptionalism is embedded within the paradoxes that conservation deploys as a means of justification. Informed by a caring ethico-political logic problematically hinged upon long-standing dualisms within thought, conservation exists as a locus of human activity that is caught up in the impasse between care and domination. As a cultural invention unable to be divorced from its own socio-historical relations of power, conservation (unintentionally) reifies colonial-capitalist imperatives through the continued biopolitical domination of land, people, and animals.

The Great Colonial Playground

With its 'caring' yet exceptionalist endeavour to preserve nature, conservation is tethered to forms of domination that reside in the control over land, people, and animals. Though the identification of these sites of domination implies an underlying point of ontological separation, they are intricately interconnected in ways that elude categorical distinction. This chapter now moves to demonstrate the diverse implications of these strained relations. More specifically, I work to elucidate how

the caring incentives of conservation have been taken up by the colonial-capital imagination and transformed into customs ruled by the imperatives of conquest and profitability. These interconnections become evident if we return our thoughts to the bullet with which this chapter began.

My encounter with the bullet took place at a private, white-owned fortress conservation park in Botswana. Like many other conservation parks across Africa and Southeast Asia, this park serves as an emblem of the ongoing legacy of colonisation.¹² The establishment of fortress conservation parks in the late nineteenth century is intimately linked with the processes of colonisation and imperialist expansion—an interconnection that is well-documented in both scholarly literature (Collins et al., 2021; Domínguez & Luoma, 2020; Garland, 2008; Neef, 2021) and popular discourse (Armstrong, 1991; Corry, 2015; wa Mbaria, 2022). Built upon a bedrock of colonial thought that framed these lands as an ‘unspoiled Eden’, these parks were envisaged as the ‘last frontier’ (Cronon, 1996). They were formed as “resort[s] for gentleman hunters, whether traveller or colonial servant, to experience hunt and kill ‘wild’ nature” (Adams & Hutton, 2007, p. 154). These depictions of nature clearly reflected the “unexamined longings and desires” of those conquering adventurers, as the purpose of these parks fulfilled masculinist ideals that conceived success in terms of an ability to tame wilderness (Cronon, 1996, p. 7). Such mastery of nature could not take place without the violence of the bullet.

These strong colonial underpinnings highlight some of the impossible tensions that the logic of conservation works to disavow. From their conception, conservation parks were inherently politicised. This is particularly the case in the African broader context. Framed as ‘terra nullius’, land belonging to no one, Africa was considered to be land rich in resources that the ‘native savages’ would

¹² Some examples include the Etosha National Park in Namibia (Armstrong, 1991), the Kahuzi-Biega National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Luoma, 2022), the Chitwan National Park in Nepal (Mishra, 1982; “*The Racist and Colonial Roots*”, n.d.), and the Kaziranga National Park in India (Saikia, 2009).

unbearably waste (Garland, 2008; Hendlin, 2014). It was therefore conceived as land in need of protection and preservation. Yet for this land to be 'protected', it first needed to be demarcated. Redolent of the colonial wars over claims to Africa, the sectioning off of land for conservation—or rather, for an elitist playground—was a practice commonplace within the colonial-capitalist land grab (Collins et al., 2021; Kelly, 2011; Moore, 2016, 2017, 2018; Neef, 2021). All in the 'caring' effort to preserve animals for the future memories of some, "state-designated game reserve[s] w[ere] underpinned by the British tradition of private reserves where the elite could hunt, and where non-proprietors lacked rights of access and use" (Adams & Hutton, 2007, p. 154). Stolen land was thus swiftly and euphemistically retitled as a 'protected area' or a 'national park' to justify colonial presence.

The fences that separated humans from more-than-human thus simultaneously acted as borders that separated people based upon racial hierarchies. Conservation areas forcefully removed and subsequently erased Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands, livelihoods and means of subsistence (Brockington & Igoe, 2006; Neef, 2021). Placed under these insufferable conditions we can appreciate not only the allure, but the necessity, that these communities faced in their engagement with activities deemed 'illegal' to survive (Adams & Hutton, 2007). In contrast to the demoralising racially-based stereotypes of the poacher that were conveyed to me as a child, what is now considered illegal—such as hunting, grazing, or gathering food on stolen land repackaged as protected areas—was the very means of sustainable subsistence that these communities relied upon for generations. The displaced Ik tribe living near the border of Uganda and Kenya, for instance, were hunter-gatherers long before their land was claimed for the Kidepo National Park (Ford et al., 2020). This biopolitical orchestration of both human and more-than-human life is thus a form of dominance that reflects the deep-seated brutality characterising much of Africa's colonial history. Protected areas were just another mechanism formalising the fabrication of socio-political

ideas as to who is considered in place, and who is thought to be out of place (Cresswell, 2004).

This asymmetry in the circulation of biopower in human and more-than-human interactions demonstrates how processes of subjectification are linked to “various truth discourses about individual and collective well-being” (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 509). Under the self-indulging logic of the colonisers, the preservation of more-than-human life was considered more valuable than the life of the human other. The dubious enactments of care for the more-than-human other were thereby thought to justify the harm imposed upon the human other. In the words of Srinivasan (2014, p. 506-507), these events show that:

Even though biopower is directed at fostering life, violence and harm do not disappear; rather, they are rationalised as necessary for the flourishing of the population... In other words, an entanglement of harm and care goes with the sacrificial logic of the population: individuals can be harmed in the name of universal well-being.

This calculation of permissible harm authorised in the name of species protection speaks to the diverse and often overlapping ways in which humans impinge upon the lives of various ‘others’. It also highlights how humans often act for and on behalf of the more-than-human in ways that are conducive to humanist intent and benefit. The exceptionalism that underpins conservation as science was also evident in a disturbing encounter that followed my finding of that spent bullet.

The Study of the ‘Exotic’

We had returned to the lodge, the bullet hanging heavily in my pocket. Its presence was burdensome; its weight far exceeded its physical mass or form. Its symbolic load quietly took its toll, hidden out of sight but not out of mind. Yet for those in my company, the bullet had quickly become a long-distant memory. They were no longer held by the innocence of childhood curiosity; oblivion seemed to be the more

accepted route out. It appeared that there were, quite simply, new sights to be seen.

Some of these sights were quickly revealed. Informed of my desire to become a wildlife veterinarian, the park owner's wife took a keen interest in my sheer fascination with, love for and knowledge of African animals far and wide. In what to this day has felt like a reward for these inclinations, and perhaps a mothering attempt of encouragement to pursue such a career, she took me on a personal tour of the world that exists behind closed doors. She took me into the private office of the rangers.

Walking into the room I was struck by what had previously only been figments of my imagination. There in front of me were countless specimens. Some were scattered across a desk, others housed in jars that were stacked along shelves. There were preserved embryos, skulls, and other assembled skeletons, all of animals that had been collected by the rangers. I remember my mouth dropping. The countless scientific guides on the behaviours and habitats of African animals that I had spent so many hours studying quickly flashed before me. I felt like I was behind the scenes of their writing. It was all unbearably exciting.

As I explored the room in bewilderment, the park owner quizzed me. Putting my knowledge to the test, she challenged me to work out what species each specimen belonged to and for the numerous embryos, how far along gestation they were. This only fuelled my inquisitiveness. My answers demanded answers on her behalf. I longed to learn more, to see more...

It was the weight of the bullet that brought me back into the moment.

I remember that night pondering the juxtaposing objects I had encountered that day: the bullet that had appeared so out of place, and the specimens that were so evidently in place. Though shown to me as a tantalising prize, my fascination with those specimens quickly began to subside as I deliberated their connection to

that object that my naivety did not immediately understand, to that object that had hung so heavily in my pocket all afternoon. I began questioning not only how those specimens were acquired, but the reasons for which they were kept. I remember feeling baffled, unsure as to how I should feel. It is only now that I realise that this sense of confusion was because I was complicit in the forms of exceptionalism which those disorienting objects represent.

The specimens were kept on display, stowed as prized possessions but not in the same masculinist manner as the trophy hunter's taxidermy collection. They had a sense of medicalised prestige about them, particularly in the way that they were hidden, only accessible to those in the 'know'. They depicted forms of hierarchy in the way that separations were drawn not only between the species that were preserved, but in terms of who had access to them. They conveyed ideas of dominance and expertise amongst humans—ideas that I had not only become privy to, but ideas that I formerly idolised. These specimens culminated as a visceral demonstration of the elitist dominance normalised within conservation logic: the killing of animals was justified for science; their bodies were consumed for the production of knowledge. Their unveiling had now served for the purposes of my entertainment. My encounter with these (un)lively 'others' demonstrated that the exceptionalist relation held between human and more-than-human is formalised not only by the validating work of colonial-capitalist logic, but by scientific discourse. It was the power afforded to conservation as a science that enabled it to operate as a legitimiser of control and harm.

Like the bullet, the specimens were emblematic of the tensions held between care and domination. The killing of animals to curate these scientific artefacts was justified by the care that these rangers had for the preservation of the animal populations in their park. It is an example of biopolitical mechanisms of managing life; a scientific engineering of the life considered worthy of being saved. It is the power that is attributed to this discourse that warrants the infliction of harm upon animals for the presumed purpose of 'doing good' (Srinivasan, 2014). In this

instance, the killing of a mother and her embryo was justified for the purposes of studying the creature, along with the health of the greater population which their individual bodies represent. Similar impositions of dominance and harm upon individual animals through the use of tracking markers are validated by the knowledge gained of their habitats and movements, which can then be used in the hope of preserving the species at large. These biopolitical measures are yet another demonstration of human's presumed mastery over nature.

Scientific discourse operates as a mediator of life and death, yet conservation reveals that such discourse can also be used for extractive purposes. Protected areas were not only colonial playgrounds; they were also sites of scientific discovery. Imperialist conquest rested upon not only the primitive accumulation of land, people, and resources, but it opened pathways for the discovery of previously 'unknown' species that were subsumed as scientific artefacts. Just as the rangers had their specimens on show, these artefacts were commonly taken back to Europe by colonial scientists and similarly put on display. However, these exotic 'others' were not just the more-than-human. Evidenced by the sheer growth of anthropological inquiry during the colonial period, both human and more-than-human bodies were consumed as the exotic other. The colonial-capitalist imagination made these bodies intelligible, yet it is supremacy afforded to the role of conservation as a science that rendered them able to be controlled. As evidenced in the case of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, or the former popularity in travelling circus shows of 'freaks' and menagerie, the other was rendered not only available for the gazing eye of the scientist, but they were also positioned as a form of entertainment. This made them available for both extraction and exploitation. Though both of these examples are now outdated, conservation continues to facilitate the consumption of the other in contemporary times.

Conservation: A labour of love or violent labour?

The conceptual tensions held in the social construction of nature as unspoiled, separate from humans and thereby able to be controlled as a source of profit, have had complex implications for how these presumptions have materialised. As evidenced in the examples offered above, exceptionalist contradictions pervade the idiosyncrasies of conservation logic. In the tendency of this field to romanticise a harmony with nature, or what Büscher and Fletcher (2020, p. 12) describe as a “continued infatuation with (images of) wilderness and ‘pristine’ natures”, mainstream conservation efforts conveniently sidestep any recognition of the influence of anthropogenic forces that have shaped the conditions under which conservation now operates. This disincentivises the motives for care upon which conservation is predicated, because it reinforces forms of epistemological and ontological separation.

Though the ontological hangover of Cartesian thought might tempt a view that fortress conservation parks are relics of a nature prior to human intervention, yet they are spaces underwritten by racial exclusion, inequality, and marginalisation (Neef, 2021). This was evident in the game reserve in which the bullet was found and specimens shown. The land and the safari lodge it housed was owned by colonial off-spring, yet it was run by those who bore the brunt of colonialism’s negative impacts. The ‘last frontier’ only existed in the protected areas that this luxury safari lodge gated off from the rest of its surroundings. In a socially constructed world of colonial opulence, the game reserve blinkered issues of poverty and oppression. Evidenced by the mundanity of the bullet, issues of race and violence were disavowed. Rather, they were built into the fabric of normalcy that overlays the day-to-day operations of the park. The bullet thereby represents the politicised dynamics of conservation spaces. As a symbol of a logic warranting the ownership and thereby control of land, people and animals, the bullet reinforces the need to understand conservation practices within “the historical context of the

wider political structure of colonial societies, and the extension of capitalism to the global periphery" (Adam & Hutton, 2007, p. 152).

As Biermann and Anderson (2017, p. 7) aptly articulate, "protected areas reinforce the notion that the biological needs of certain human populations are incompatible with the presumed needs of non-human nature and humanity writ large". Demonstrating the interrelation between conservation, biodiversity and human welfare, this ingrained presumption is illustrative of an exceptionalist tendency that promulgates a racial hubris of authority, power, and importance. As with the colonial divvying up of African soil based upon a cartography of parallel and perpendicular lines that took place irrespective of the historical grievances and settlements amongst existing tribes, the establishment of protected areas did not consider the lifeworlds of those already existing on those lands nor their means of subsistence (Kadykalo, Cooke & Young, 2021). Their knowledge was dismissed as 'primitive'. Yet as Adams and Hutton (2007) point out, displacement was not a ubiquitous measure nor experience. The likelihood of such subjectification was predetermined by one's (racial) identity. Where local resource users were habitually excluded from protected areas, (white) "tourists and scientists have conventionally been tolerated" (Adams & Hutton, 2007, p. 159). Though heralded under a broader banner of care, these dominating practices highlight how (certain) humans were not only able to influence which animal lives were deemed to be worth saving, but how the politicisation of conservation logic enabled those in positions of power to be able to determine which human lives were considered significant enough too. Protected areas thereby served as biopolitical justifications for the control of human and more-than-human bodies.

Similar themes are evident in the contemporary ecotourism industry which uses protected areas and the more-than-human others that inhabit these areas as a source of profit.¹³ Though framed under the caring veil of conservation science,

¹³ Importantly, even if the conservation parks are run by non-profit organisations, the impregnation of capitalist frameworks within global society means that these parks are still

where there are attempts to raise awareness of the threats posed on habitats and biodiversity and to educate sightseers of the work carried out by conservation practitioners to save animals, these incentives are haunted by their extractive operatives. Forms of exceptionalism are demonstrated in the conceptualisation of animals in terms of their monetary or use value. Conceived as resources available for extraction, or what Barua (2016, 2017) calls ‘lively commodities’, the value of the more-than-human other is determined not solely by their exchange value per se, but by their ‘encounter value’.¹⁴ Evidenced in the marketing campaigns of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF, 2022) or African Parks (2022) for instance, which typically depict animals with forward-facing eyes in an attempt to resemble an likeness with humankind, large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) rely upon the visceral connections conjured by moving and static images (‘digital trophies’) of endangered megafauna to entice curiosity and pull heartstrings, and more importantly, summon material wealth. These fetishised, ephemeral encounters glorify the consumption of the other, all whilst whitewashing the red blood upon which the industry is built.

The ecotourism industry can subsequently be conceived as a colonial playground merely repackaged. Protected areas in the Global South have increasingly become subsumed by non-state actors primarily from the Global North, including the WWF, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Africa Parks. In what some have termed ‘The Big Green Lie’ (Corry, 2020; Survival International, 2021), these actors embody the position of the colonial ‘big other’.¹⁵ The ecotourism

required to generate forms of income in order to remain operational. Animals are subsequently caught up within this income generation process.

¹⁴ The glorification of ‘lively commodities’ does not depend upon liveliness as such. They are consumed even when those ‘commodities’ are not alive. Evidenced in the trophy hunter’s collection with which this thesis began, the accumulation of ‘dead artefacts’ pivots on the previous liveliness that those objects represent. Death does not necessarily reduce their ‘encounter value’—perhaps, rather, it crystallises it. It fabricates a form of liveliness that accentuates the presumed hierarchy existing within the liveliness of both the human and more-than-human. Death, in other words, reifies exceptionalism.

¹⁵ These NGOs have been heavily critiqued in both public discourse (Mukpo, 2020; Sène, 2022; wa Mbaria, 2022) and scholarly literature (Büscher, 2013; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Domínguez & Luoma, 2020; Hoffman, 2022) for their denial of their entanglement within the

industry is thereby complicit in the “reproduc[ti]on of] existing economic inequalities within local communities and wider society” (Adams & Hutton, 2007, p. 161). These issues are exacerbated by the military action often employed to reinforce the enclosure of protected areas. The recent allegations of human rights abuses carried out by WWF park rangers (Mukpo, 2020; Sène, 2022), for example, speaks to the intertwined relationship of conservation, governance and corruption that is often overlooked to meet the needs of the viewer. As put in an anonymous editorial piece in *Nature* (“Save the people”, 2005, p. 855), “a true believer in any cause can ignore uncomfortable facts that conflict with its goals”. Where there is belief in the caring incentives of conservation, disavowal can override knowledge of the subsequent acts of exploitation (Dolar, 1991). This is true of conservation practitioners, but also of their inability to speak out against contradictions that challenge their ability to be providers of care—as the anonymity of the editorial piece testifies.

Recognition of the conceptual limitations informing the premise upon which conservation operates is a task with which its practitioners in the social and natural sciences are well familiar (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Bhola et al, 2021; Büscher, 2013; Büscher & Fletcher, 2019, 2020; Hoffman, 2022; Jones, 2006). Whilst mainstream conservation is “fundamentally capitalist and steeped in nature-people dichotomies” (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020, p. 12), new troupes of thought that traverse the multivalent field of conservation are now touted to wrestle with these persistent challenges. ‘New conservationists’, for instance, are cognisant of the inimical ramifications that often accompany a dualist ontology championing the conviction of an ‘untouched’ nature (Miller, Soulé & Terborgh, 2014). Their proposed strategies, however, tacitly reproduce capitalist tenors in their celebration of consumerist, ‘green’ or ‘ecologically modern’ solutions (Dempsey, 2021). In the subtle contradictions held between their push for strategies that go beyond nature-society dualisms yet simultaneously dabble in profit-making ventures, new conservationists are diffident about the exceptionalism that plagues conservation efforts and that is

capitalist processes that shape the context of their work, such as through their commonplace reliance upon public-private partnerships to fund their operations.

now a common basis of critique. 'Neoprotectionists', on the other hand, re-invoke the nature-society divide by believing separation is necessary for nature to revive itself. With its widely popular approach of rewilding (Lorimer et al., 2015; Nogués-Bravo et al., 2015), neoprotectionists problematise the impact of human life upon the more-than-human other and the way discourse on the Anthropocene promulgates an exacerbation of human control (Foreman, 2004). They thereby reinstate the "calling for a return to protected area expansion and enforcement" (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020, p. 10). Putting 'Nature back in charge' may counter anthropocentric tendencies, yet it reifies the problematic distinction held between nature and society.

Acknowledging these near-impossible tensions, other directly politicised responses bring these contradictions to the fore. Notably, the political economy perspective of convivial conservation (Büscher & Fletcher, 2019, 2020) shows promising insight (e.g., Krauss, 2021; Massarella et al., 2022). A 'convivial' approach attempts to go beyond nature-society dualisms whilst also positioning itself in a beyond-capitalist framework. Reminiscent of Haraway's (2008) reading of companionship, it does so through the concept of 'living with', where place-making, connectivity and more-than-human mobilities are described as mechanisms for the privileging of sites of co-produced potentiality (Hodgetts, 2017). Yet as Massarella and colleagues (2022, p. 65) warn, these theoretical developments will face the same downfalls as their mainstream counterparts unless explicit attention is given to addressing the "injustices [that are] perpetuated historically or currently in the name of western-based conservation science". To not do so risks convivial conservation simply becoming "another top-down initiative that sidelines voices from the Global South" (p. 66). These reservations speak to the deep-seated epistemic injustices that are not only woven into the fabric of conservation's governing logic, but are commonly disavowed through the ongoing influence of colonial and capitalist imperatives.

Though posed as viable solutions to the widely accepted challenges of mainstream approaches, contemporary conservation tactics often find themselves falling into the same impasse. Irrespective of their ethical intentions, the ‘caring’ practices of conservation remain bound to a dominating underbelly. Contemporary conservation practices are discursively progressive when compared to their colonial counterparts, yet their manifestations often produce a continuation of the longstanding denial of our animality in ways that reproduce the exceptionalism of Cartesian thought. Just as early colonial explorers denied a form of ‘humanness’ to those Indigenous peoples they encountered during their conquest, contemporary conservation approaches similarly find themselves slipping into the same exclusionary tendencies. Violent practices of exclusion remain central to approaches that operate within the ‘The Big Green Lie’ (Corry, 2020; Survival International, 2021). The popularity of REDD+ frameworks that use conservation areas as currency in the trading of fictitious carbon credits, for instance, have profound implications for those people who are dependent upon that land for their survival (Cabello & Gilbertson, 2012). Framed as a local approach aimed to preserve the environment and its wildlife, the management of nature in fundamentally capitalist terms re-invokes the political tensions born of conservation and the injustices instilled upon both the human and more-than-human other.

The exceptionalist impossibility of conservation can therefore be characterised by its violence. In what is an uncomfortable realisation, both the success and blood of conservation come to depend on a pervasive atmosphere of fear that surrounds daily life (Trogisch, 2021). This is because the erasure is not a simple once-off procedure that removes people from their lands. Conservation involves a constant practice of maintaining these spaces, making them and remaking them through both discursive justifications and with armed forces on the ground—as my troubling encounter with the bullet testifies. Protecting the perimeter of protected areas is carried out in the name of the inhabiting wildlife, yet in reality, these enactments are protecting the sources of income for global conglomerates.

The violent labour that characterises conservation is similarly evident in the romanticisation of rewilding. Forms of exceptionalist violence seep through by virtue of the fact that these spaces first must be demarcated as separate from others. The construction of these spaces rests upon an expelling of that which is considered other. These spaces require continual management to ensure that the 'wild' that eventuates is conducive to the imaginations of those who oversee such initiatives. Continued work is therefore carried out to ensure that the beings who are not wanted are not there. All in the name of care for certain native species, the extensive work carried out by the New Zealand Department of Conservation to eradicate 'pests' from conservation land is evidence of the continual labour involved in maintaining socially fabricated ideas of 'the wild'. This is not to mention the harmful use of poisons, pesticides and traps that occur alongside such 'caring' processes. These examples highlight that the exceptionalist impossibilities of conservation rest upon inherently violent processes that are dependent upon our ability to deny ourselves as part of nature. It is not only a denial of our animality that occurs, but the forms of continuous conservation labour that such practices engender.

Concluding Remarks

The stories shared within this chapter, along with the theoretical and conceptual exploration of their situatedness within our colonial-capitalist history, work to reveal the complex ways in which conservation operates upon a dubious tightrope. With its underlying incentives framed through discourses of care, conservation cannot ignore the pit of domination it often finds itself falling into. In its continual appropriation of land, people and animals, along with the faith placed in scientific knowledge as a veil of disavowal, conservation reproduces exceptionalist paradigms that mediate life and death. This is particularly the case when these logics are not only institutionalised, but also capitalised upon.

Conservation is an impossibility because it relies upon exceptionalist processes. It depends upon a continuous stream of violent labour to construct a

nature deemed worthy of saving. This is achieved through violent processes of misremembering and erasing that which is already there. These foundations reinforce the exceptionalist logic that we, as humans, are somehow immune to consequence. It is a logic that supports the presumption of a perceived right, and in some instances, responsibility, to nurture more-than-human others in ways that best serve the intentions of those in charge. This ‘care’ is often at the expense of those considered to be the ‘human other’—those thought to be somehow less than human and thereby not worthy of similar affordances. These processes of control are the “political machinations that require the simultaneous exploitation and/or erasure of animal and Indigenous bodies” (Belcourt, 2015, p. 1). Animals, indigeneity, colonialism, and capitalism are thereby all imbricated within the construction and ongoing management of designated conservation areas. This making and unmaking of nature is what the logic of conservation relies upon, but it is also that which it disavows. Like that of ethics, conservation disavows that we are nature’s exception.

Yet, as this object-disoriented autoethnographic account has shown, there are limits to the success of attempts to whitewash the blood engendered through the construction of conservation borders and boundaries. Confrontation with the objects that represent this dark underbelly, like that of the bullet or the collection of specimens, is not only what gives rise to states of disorientation. It is also what enables a reckoning with the exceptionalism that informs the construction of these spaces. The practices of re-signification achieved through this methodology, that is, of a writing that moves through states of dislocation to grapple with the inner contradictions that these disorienting objects represent, enables me not only to make sense of my experiences. It also ruptures commonplace reasoning through recognition of the violence upon which these processes depend, and shifts how we think about conservation and the types of questions that are subsequently asked of it.

In what I can only hope to be seeds of pondering, this chapter has raised questions about the far-reaching implications of the institutionalisation of exceptionalist logic upon both human and more-than-human bodies. It has illustrated that these are the sites where the impasse between care and domination culminates. The subjectification of more-than-human bodies to incentives that meet humanist desires is where this conversation continues. This thesis now moves to explore the relations of care and domination at work within the personal practices of subsistence.

Chapter Six

LIVELINESS UNMASKED: THE DISCOMFORT OF FLESH

Introduction

The multiplicity of relations between human and more-than-human others means that we hold, enact, and are subject to differing positions of power. Situational contexts shape the unfolding of these relations. The anecdotes shared in the previous chapter were experiences born of social privilege. The safari trips that constituted much of my primary school holidays were afforded to me on account of my racial and class positioning within South Africa. My collective white history, with its troublesome colonial baggage and inhospitable institutionalisation of apartheid, had bestowed upon me a position of affluence by way of intergenerational social mobility. As uncomfortable as this recognition is, the stories shared were from the perspective of a child. Within those moments of privilege, my agency was marginalised as somehow not ‘fully human’. I was belittled as the ‘unknowing, naive subject’. This chapter shares an account from a similar perspective of marginality. Aged seventeen and considered a ‘pathological anorexic’, I had become a subject stripped of agency.

I knew something was going on. Suspense suspiciously permeated the atmosphere. “Why is there only one pot on the stove? Where is my dinner? Why is no one responding to me?”, I remember thinking.

At that stage of my eating disorder, dinner was typically the biggest fiasco. According to the anorexic laws that ceaselessly moved to conquer my mind and body, meals had to be crafted carefully. They had to be composed with ingredients from my list of 'safe' foods—a list that was constantly dwindling. Each item had to be cut in a particular manner, cooked in an even more particular way, and presented in a rigid format on a particular plate. Each component could not touch. When the inevitable time came to engage with the meal, further illogical rules applied. I had to move around the plate clockwise, eating one tiny bite at a time and chewing for exactly one minute at each interval. I had to... I had to... I had to...

A strict adherence to these rules that continued to grow by the day was the only way I could eat. I am not sure what I thought would happen if I dared to break them: all I knew was that I could not. It was a constant battle between the anorexic logic by which I was debilitated, the acts of care by those around me, and the expertise offered by well-meaning medical professionals. Food was the enemy, but it was also the medicine.

My meal did not follow these uncompromising demands that particular night. Rather, what was served was a form of intervention. In an attempt to recover the daughter they once knew, my parents followed strict orders from eating disorder specialists. We were all to sit at the dining table, siblings included, and eat a 'normal' meal together like any 'normal' family. This plan, however, had a cunning twist: a long-time friend was invited over. Based on the assumption that I would not want to expose the extent of my illness, she was used as a lure to try to make me eat. The support her presence offered was not enough to sedate anorexia's venomous thoughts, however. With each chair of the six-seater dining table filled, the atmosphere turned hostile. The intervention failed, for I had been deceived.

I adamantly could not, and would not, eat the meal presented in front of me. It was lively flesh, slaughtered, packaged, cut, and cooked; a transformation from living to dead, from animal to food.

“I’m not eating meat!”, I cried.

“Okay, but can you please eat some of the rice?”, my mother tried reasoning.

“No! I can’t!”

A state of hysteria was starting to build. My siblings sat in silence. My friend was gobsmacked. She had not realised how bad it had become.

“You can Nicole. You need to eat,” my father chimed.

“No! It’s contaminated!”

How could I know how those pieces of chicken had to come to make their way onto my plate? How did those chickens live? Die? Get plucked, diced, and divvied up onto plastic trays; shrink-wrapped, labelled, and put onto the shelves of conglomerate supermarket refrigerators? Who or what had touched, or had been touched by that severed life form in the process of transforming the chick to the checkout?

The fleshy chicken juices, the plumpness of its breast form, and the life that ran through the movement of those bodily fluids had all become one with a premade jar of bought curry sauce. It was butter chicken—an anglicised and commercialised butchery of traditional Indian cuisine and culture, an insignia of neocolonialism. It seemed all too wrong, too artificial, too toxic. Perhaps, rather, it was because it was all too oxymoronic....

How could I save my own dwindling life form with that of a dead one?

My objection to the flesh presented in front of me was an objection to the domination that underpinned the caring intentions of that meal. It was an objection to the self-fulfilling hubris that places human life above that of others—to the speciesism that renders certain life forms to be objects of consumption; insentient

and thus dispensable. All in the name of sustaining my own life, the care that went into the production and serving of the butter chicken shadowed the fact that death had been repackaged as edible matter. This was not something I could ignore. The conclusion of its fate as a domesticated species stripped the chicken of its liveliness; becoming food, it had met the destiny pre-written by human exceptionalism. Faced with the violence encapsulated within this meal, of the life that was no longer, I was confronted with the discomfort of my own liveliness. At that moment, I was strangely closer to the chicken on my plate than what would have been acknowledged. In the caring attempt to force my consumption of a more-than-human other, my subject position was cast as other. Medicalised discourse stripped me of my agency. I was considered incapacitated and unable to make sound decisions. Concerns for my physical liveliness were thus placed not only before but also above my liveliness as an individual, one with desires, wants and values. Like the contradictory forms of care that went into the farming, slaughtering and then cooking of the chicken, the care that went into the attempt to resolve my disordered eating was enacted through conditions of domination.

What was presented to me in the form of a meal on a plate was thus a carnist representation of human exceptionalism and of the tendencies towards disavowal that are associated with our eating practices. These tendencies work to separate humans from the objects of their consumption; attempts that sever forms of commonality and connection. In this instance, liveliness sat at the dinner table as an unwelcome guest. It was an uncomfortable presence that could be felt, yet not immediately seen. The fleshiness of the animal served became the source of my disorientation, my protest and my abjection. The liveliness of the chicken was denied, but so too was my own, along with all those lively others who were imbricated in the transformation of animal to meat.

Through the disavowal of our shared animality with that which we consume, we disavow our fleshiness: that we too are food. The violence of these tendencies will be the focus of this discussion. Specific emphasis will be placed on the

mechanisms of disavowal that are embedded within the physical and social construction of meat. Attention will also be given to the role of patriarchy in shaping not only these practices, but the relations between human and more-than-human, and of the self and the other more generally. This chapter will thus work to reveal the exceptionalist limit points of the care involved in putting food on plates and into stomachs.

Bodies, Oppressed

Due to the complexity of the issues associated with food, what and how we eat is the subject of much scholarly inquiry (e.g., Clark, 2019; Schlosser, 2001) and popular discourse (e.g., Anderson & Keegan, 2017; Efron, et al., 2020; Underhill, 2022). Many medical and governmental reports, for instance, hone in on the connection between diet and non-communicable diseases (Gerritsen & Wall, 2017; World Health Organisation, 2020). Attention has also been given to the environmental consequences of food choices. Links have been drawn to the inefficiency of food production, notably the exorbitant water, land and grain resources required to farm animals for food (Jones, Wham & Burlingame, 2019). This is particularly evident in the beef and dairy industries which contribute substantially to waterway pollution, deforestation, soil erosion and increased greenhouse gas emissions (Potts, 2017; Joy, et al., 2022). Animal welfare, along with the welfare of those who work in these industries, further complicates the question of what it means to eat (Potts, Armstrong & Brown, 2013). These issues are not disconnected. They are intricately linked through processes that structure the relations existing between the human and more-than-human. In doing so, bodies are continually held in contemplation.

All in the name of care for the health of the human population, more than 27 million domesticated animals are slaughtered annually in New Zealand alone (Ministry of Primary Industries, 2022a). Unlike 'wild' animals who are hunted and killed for the novelty factor, or for the exercised portrayal of masculinist conquest,

domesticated species like the chicken, cow, sheep, and pig are bred specifically for purposes of humanist consumption. Their bodies are exploited for a growing 'meat culture' that has been fuelled by developments in agricultural science and the technology enabling mass production which has occurred *en masse* since the Second World War. Human meddling via genetic engineering and selective breeding has thus confounded nature; modern-day domesticated species have been developed to grow bigger faster, all whilst being fed less. Forms of care underpin these scientific advancements—their intent to increase the global food supply—yet these practices cannot be divorced from the harm they impose upon animal bodies. As Potts (2017, p. 1) notes, domesticated species are "incarcerated their entire lives in cramped cages, pens or sheds and [are] subjected to extreme physical, mental, social and emotional stress". The patriotic pride that surrounds farming culture supplants caring narratives that thereby obscure the horror of the conditions that animals are forced to endure before their premature and violent death.

Within these troublesome relations associated with food, chickens have been most affected (Mundy, 2021). Chickens are typically confined in overcrowded sheds, where constant light prohibits sleep and encourages continuous eating via automated dispensing machines (Potts, 2017). Unable to perform natural behaviours, they endure profound emotional and physical distress. Chickens are exposed to "stunning, bleeding, dismantling, and packaging" as their bodies are turned into edible parts (Dennis & Witchard, 2015, p. 152). This lucrative industry is facilitated by commonplace conceptions that consider chickens to be unintelligible, uncharismatic, and insentient. Evidenced in the (butter) chicken that was presented before me, the routine acceptance of this cruelty is justified upon the exceptionalist grounds that situate the sustaining of human life above the liveliness of those consumed. This is to such an extent that Potts (2017) argues that chickens are "so objectified and over-determined as 'food' that they are likely to be viewed as meat rather than living beings *when still alive*" (p. 12, emphasis in original).

The contradictory forms of care that lead to the oppression of animal bodies, alongside the oppression of my own body, can be understood as a consequence of the structuring effects of patriarchy. Though primarily referenced in terms of the inexorable force that patriarchy exerts upon women, ecofeminists have long recognised the broader impact of the predominance of patriarchy upon our relations with the more-than-human and with nature more generally (Alaimo, 2010; Gaard, 1993; Mies & Shiva, 2014). In patriarchal societies, feminised bodies, human and more-than-human, are considered to be objects of desire. Animal bodies are created into consumable objects in a predatory tenor redolent of the sexualised fragmentation of women: we eat 'breasts', 'thighs', and 'legs'. It is also 'feminised protein' (Adams, 2010) that makes its way to the table: the fleshy meat of female animals, along with the products of their reproductive processes; their milk, eggs, and offspring. As "female bodies both serve and are served as the food" (Gaard, 2012, p. 18), the commonplace conceptualisation of meat eating as a form of virility rescripts patriarchal logic at each moment an animal is eaten. Accordingly, Kirjner (2015, p. 141) argues that "sexism and speciesism are not different constructs... [but] different aspects of the same oppression".

Under these patriarchal conditions, the question of how we might contend with the violence done upon both human and more-than-human bodies typically returns to the idea of the 'ethical subject'—one who acts in a 'caring manner'. At the collective level, ethical practices of care materialise in the form of regenerative farming, governmental legislation and the proliferation of environmentally-friendly products and businesses. At the individual level, there is often a reiteration of the significance of consumer purchasing power as a form of democratic engagement. This is evidenced in the variety of plant-based diets that are growing in popularity. Though these solutions hold merit, the complexity of the issues born of the global food chain and the structuring effect of patriarchy means these solutions have also been heavily critiqued (e.g., Hällmark, 2022; Gibbs & Cappuccio, 2022).

The present discussion does not delve deeper into these contentious, albeit much-needed debates. Nor does it intend to engage in a philosophical examination of the morality of such responses, or of meat eating itself. To participate in moral judgement would counteract the argument that this thesis seeks to develop. The proclamation of an ethical subject position would merely re-enact the forms of human exceptionalism I intend to critique. Instead, as alluded to in the opening gambit, this chapter moves to strike at what lies at the heart of these conversations: *liveliness*, its imbrication in our eating practices along with its disavowal.

Dismembered Liveliness: The Violence of the Absent Referent

We are explicitly confronted with our animality every time we eat. Irrespective of whether this is recognised, when we feed our animal self we are intimately connected to other beings. Our survival depends upon the same intrinsic premise: we share the need of fulfilling the bodily requirements of physical consumption, for not doing so risks vulnerability—it risks our liveliness. This connection is seldom recognised, let alone celebrated. Rather, connection often only exists at the point at which the other is consumed. As Carol Adams observes (2010, p. 114), “animals are separated from most people’s everyday experience, except in their final fate as food”. This is true in the way that pieces of chicken appeared on the dining table without an engagement with the chicken itself. Its liveliness ceased to exist at the moment at which it was rendered food—a source of my own liveliness. What counts as food, and how beings can become food, reveals insight into not only our animality but how eating constitutes both a personal and institutionalised act of human exceptionalism. As Diamond (1978, p. 470) evocatively reminds us, “we learn what a human being is—among other ways—sitting at the table where we eat them [animals]. We are around the table and they are on it”.

When the more-than-human other is rendered edible matter, when it is slaughtered and consumed, human exceptionalism is at work. These acts reinforce a presumed sense of superiority that is afforded to human life (Coffrin, 2008;

Warren, 1990, 2000). It could be argued, as has Fiddes (1991, p. 277), that the essential value of flesh turned meat "derives directly from its capacity to represent to us most tangibly our power over the rest of the natural world". The idea that a consumable form of meat is contained within the fleshy body of the whole animal holds a socially fabricated distance between human life and that of other life. Animal flesh is hierarchically layered as somehow less than, somehow other than human flesh in culturally accepted practices of "violence upon the body of the animal to produce the fleshy commodification of its parts" (Dennis & Witchard, 2015, p. 151).

In consuming an animal, we disavow its liveliness. We ignore that it is the liveliness of animals that is the basis upon which they are made ready to consume. Chicken wings, thighs, drumsticks and breasts cannot exist without the liveliness of the chicken itself. It is only through the liveliness of the animal that the use value of its dead form can be conceived. Consumption thereby distances us from not only the liveliness we share with the species we devour, but the violence involved in the transformation of animals into commodities. This exceptionalist commodification of animal liveliness exists in many spheres, including, but not limited to: "in scientific research, and specifically in the feminised beauty and cleaning products industries; in dairy, egg, and animal food production ["factory farming"]; in "pet" keeping and breeding, zoos, rodeos, hunting, fur and clothing" (Gaard, 2012, p. 15). Each of these manifestations often results in or necessitates death. Put simply, "if animals are alive, they cannot be meat" (Adams, 2010, p. 66). As the end product of this violence (meat) is readily available, the death involved in the rendering of animal liveliness as consumable is made invisible by its banality within the Western culture. This normalisation of death is captured by Adams (2010, p. 93):

From the leather in our shoes, the soap we use to cleanse our face, the down in the comforter, the meat we eat, and the dairy products we rely on, our world as we now know it is structured around a dependence on the death of the other animals. For many this is neither disturbing nor surprising. The death of the other animals is an accepted part of life.

Adams' sentiments speak to what has been termed the 'absent referent'. Evidenced in the routine turning of a blind eye to animal oppression, the absent referent is the distancing that is formalised through the misremembering, or rather dismembering, of the liveliness of the other. Adams describes the absent referent as that which "separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product" (p. 13). It is the constitutive gap that exists between 'meat' and animal. It is thus "an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes" (p. 13). As with the liveliness of the chicken that was disavowed when presented in its cooked butter chicken form, the absent referent refers to the way meat is typically detached from its original lively form. Animal liveliness continues to exist in meat, yet it remains "a public secret" (Reinert, 2007, np). The absent referent thereby gives name to the detachment of consumable objects (meat, hide, and so on) from their original referent (the animal). In this disconnection, these objects become free-floating. It is the pervasiveness of these forms of 'forgetting' permitted by the absent referent that resists efforts to acknowledge the liveliness of the animal that once was (and to some degree, that still is). Omitting any recognition of the commonalities that lie between us and those whom we consume, the absent referent reconfigures relations in a way that creates a sense of justification for our tendencies to not only view the other as consumable, but of the exceptionalist disavowal that governs such distancing in the first place.

Liveliness is rendered absent through the cyclical processes of objectification, fragmentation and consumption. Akin to Hegelian dialectics, the operative of the absent referent rests upon the contradictions to which it is bound. As Adams outlines, "objectification permits an oppressor to view another being as an object" (p. 73). The exceptionalism common within Western culture views the liveliness of animals as somehow less than the liveliness of human beings, subsequently rendering them vulnerable to object-like treatment. Objectification is thereby a violating enactment of power. It strips animals of their agency as they are converted "from living breathing beings into dead objects" (p. 73). This process

severs the resulting object from its original form or ontological meaning—the chicken becomes a cooked body part; it becomes calories. It simply becomes a fragment of what was. Objectification thus involves fragmentation. In this negation, that which has been rendered an object is subjected to brutal dismemberment—both physically and discursively. Animals are cut up and relabelled. Appearing in a form that is now quite the contrary, fragmentation repackages life to conceal the liveliness of the animal that once was. As Kirjner (2015, p. 144) notes, "fragmentation makes violence palatable because the victim disappears". The literal consumption of dead animals, those fragments of a life form, is what Adams describes as the "fulfilment of oppression, the annihilation of will" (p. 73). Once consumed, the fragmented object is solidified as simply that. It reiterates the exceptionalism that informed such objectification and fragmentation in the first instance. This reinforces not only the normalcy of death, but the violence of the mechanical and discursive tools used to formalise a sense of distance between us and that which we consume.

Though these processes seek to create a sense of separation, it is the absence of the absent referent that remains visibly present. This marks the point at which the negation is negated. Whether acknowledged or simply pushed to the side, the unspeakable liveliness of those we consume remains concrete. The liveliness of the absent referent continues to exist even in its fragmented form. Like the violence of the continuous labour involved in the ongoing construction of conservation spaces, the exceptionalist disavowal encompassed within the absent referent depends upon inherently violent systems and practices. The cyclical processes of objectification, fragmentation and consumption involve continuous labour to distance us from the imponderable and to negate any form of confrontation with the uncomfortable reality of the sources of our food. This misremembering, or rather dismembering, is achieved through not only the physically violent practices of domestication that farm animals to become meat, but

also through discursive practices that distance edible objects from their original animal form.

An Industry of Exceptionalism: The Horrors of Domestication

Predicated on markers of difference, of "hoofs and horns, feathers and fur" (Dennis & Witchard, 2015, p. 152), the transformation of animal to meat is crystallised through the violence of slaughter. Though butchering is, as Adams (2010) frankly puts it, "the quintessential enabling act for meat eating" (p. 66), it is the continuous labour involved in the concealment of feshes' liveliness that is most problematic. As animals move from farm to factory, paddock to abattoir, packaging house to supermarket shelves, or oven to plate, effort is required to hide the original life form from the resulting commodity. The routine seasoning and cooking of meat to disguise its fleshiness is an extension of this violence. One does not need to partake in the act of slaughter to be complicit in the violence of exceptionalism.

The exceptionalist disavowal of liveliness has become more commonplace as the butchering process has undergone significant historical shifts to conceal the fleshy origins of meat. Slaughter was once a highly visible presence, an artisanal craft often taking place in the centre of markets and trading spaces (Dennis & Witchard, 2015). It was a visceral, embodied experience that required a confrontation with liveliness. The butcher and onlookers bore witness to the animal's life, and respect was shown via the swiftness of its slaughter. In years bygone, the lack of refrigeration and other modern preserving techniques necessitated the prompt distribution and consumption of meat. Liveliness was thus acknowledged through "the warmth and bloodiness of animal products... [which were] considered indicative of fresh and authentic animality" (Dennis & Witchard, 2015, p. 153-154). These traces of life represented the 'material flows of energy'; a vitality that through digestion would extend human liveliness. The perishability of animal parts also meant that their living whole form needed to be in close vicinity. Meat eating was thus a human-animal "encounter fundamentally rooted in proximity

and presence rather than distancing and mediation" (Nimmo, 2011, p. 61). Under these circumstances, the absent referent, the life that was and continues to be, was not absent at all. There was a desirable and if not celebrated closeness to the animals consumed.

The advent of the modern scientific era brought surges in the accessibility and popularity of meat. It generated a social reform that 'democratised meat' (Knapp, 1997) and linked its fleshiness to the masculinist ideals of strength and virility (Adams, 2004a, 2010). Though the regular consumption of meat remained within the purview of those who wielded social or economic power, it was those within the lower classes who typically oversaw meat production. As the demand for meat increased, production shifted from the public domain and into the outskirts: abattoirs were moved away from towns and thereby beyond the remit of one's consciousness. They were cloistered so that consumers could remain ignorant of the violence, horror and pain that transpired in those settings. This facilitated distancing. The commodification of animal life by industrial processes magnified the "number of animals killed per hour, increasing meat production in order to fulfil growing demand" (Kirjner, 2015, p. 139). Animal slaughter became controlled and mechanised; "large-scale and anonymous" (Vialles, 1994, p. 22). Within the industrialised West, meat is now something contrary to what it once was. As Reinert (2007, np.) notes, it must be "certifiably safe, hygienic, traceable, ethically acceptable and of a standardised cut". Essentially, it must be "de-animalized" (Vialles, 1994). Though meat is frequently "divorced from its animal corporeality" (Dennis & Witchard, 2015, p. 156), this negation did not eliminate liveliness; it merely further rendered it absent. As Nimmo (2011, p. 66) concurs, "whilst it could be crossed out", the liveliness that exists within meat and associated animal products can "by no means be erased, and while it could be held in abeyance it could not be made to disappear".

Though Aotearoa New Zealand's Animal Welfare Act recognises animal sentience by requiring that all animals be stunned before slaughter to minimise

experiences of pain (Ministry of Primary Industries, 2022b), the predominance of industrialised slaughter practices within secular cultures works to render death invisible. The exercising of exceptionalist dominance is sanitised within these settings in the way that care is afforded to animals up until the moment of death in an oxymoronic gesture of animal welfare. This has the effect of reinstating separation through the biopolitics of death. Halal killing, on the other hand, offers a different form of care. Following Islamic law, Halal meat production necessitates animal slaughter to be executed via knife in a swift, single motion by a Muslim man (Meat Industry Association, 2022). This form of killing brings attention to the act of the kill itself. In this moment of intimate encounter, the sheer confrontation with death and its lively counterpart means that the absent referent is more visible, as reciprocity is recognised in this ritualised exchange along with culpability.

Unlike conservation where the caring intentions afforded to the more-than-human other are clear in the incentives which steer its program, the normalcy of the dominating violence associated with meat eating pervades contemporary life. It is the abstraction and fragmentation built into the butchering and cooking processes that separates consumers from the liveliness of the animals they consume, and from the absent referent that enables animals to be meat. These processes deny sentience to species that are bred, farmed and slaughtered for consumption. In doing so, they deny any form of acknowledgement of the liveliness that unites us with those very same animals. It is these strategies of distancing and denial employed within these industries that further exacerbates the disavowal of liveliness, and of our exceptionalism.

Discursivity and the Masking of Animal Exploitation

As with the way the exploitation of 'wild' animals is analogous to the violence experienced by Indigenous peoples under the hand of ongoing (neo)colonial oppression within the cordoned spaces of conservation, how we engage with

animals who become meat is grounded on a denial of similarities. As Diamond (1978, p. 465) explains:

We are blind to the fact that what we do to them deprives them of their rights; we do not want to see this because we profit from it, and so we make use of what are really morally irrelevant differences... to justify the difference in treatment.

In using descriptive language to emphasise points of observable difference (like horns, hoofs, fur, and feathers) and perceived difference (that pigs are 'dirty', chickens are 'stupid', and so on), Diamond argues that we "create the concept of the difference, knowing perfectly well the overwhelmingly obvious similarities" (p. 470). These suggestions demonstrate how language reinforces the cultural meanings ascribed to animals and our relations with otherness more generally.

The severing of animal bodies occurs alongside, and is inherently reliant upon, the role played by discourse. Historically and culturally located signifiers do the work of wrestling with the impossibility of the absent referent. The cyclical processes of objectification, fragmentation and consumption rely upon language for consumable objects to be constructed. It does this by giving names to only part of the whole: we eat pork, not pig; veal, not anaemic calves; foie gras, not the liver of fattened ducks achieved through intensified gavage feeding. As Adams (2010, p. 66) testifies, "animals are made absent through language that renames dead bodies before consumers participate in eating them". In this reframing, the absent referent appears yet is immediately disavowed for any notion of a 'whole animal' is quickly reconstituted as a fragmented part: pork shoulder, pork belly, pork chop. Only through the recognition of animals on account of their consumptive form, do notions like steak and mince mark the violence they silence. Ideas of cuisine and gastronomy further separate us from the image of dead, butchered animals. This discourse mystifies the fleshiness of meat. Language thereby operates as a dominating mechanism enabling fragmentation. Negating any form of confrontation,

it distances us from the imponderable. More simply, language makes death palatable.

Meat is a social construct that has historically worked to justify meat-eating as a nutritional or evolutionary given. The ‘carnistic’ ideas that make meat seem “normal, natural, and necessary” reflect the ‘invisible belief system’ that scripts meat consumption as a dominant narrative of health, or simply, a ‘universal truth of mainstream life’ (Joy, 2010, p. 96; see also Plumwood’s (1993) ‘Master Model’). Adams would concur, arguing that the fact that we “refer to meat eating rather than to corpse eating is a central example of how our language transmits the dominant culture’s approval of this activity” (p. 93). This exceptionalism, moreover, flows into common discourse writ large—evidenced, for instance, when human victimisation is described in terms of animal sacrifice (e.g., guinea pig, scapegoat), when violence is embroiled within common metaphors (e.g., beating a dead horse, two birds one stone), or when animals are represented in humanist terms (e.g., hungry bear, sly fox). By virtue of their orthodox status, the violence that is entrenched within these presumptions is rendered invisible (Gaard, 2016). Violence is the disavowed given.

Animals are routinely subjected to brutal dismemberment, yet the unfolding of their lives is frequently influenced by the cultural politics of space (Cresswell, 2004). Considering animals as ‘in place’ or as ‘out of place’ shapes not only their discursive signifiers (we engage with a ‘cow’ when it is in the paddock, yet ‘beef’ when it is on a plate), but also whether they are considered food in the first place. Cultural differences emerge, for instance, in the differing degrees of acceptance or abhorrence of the eating of insects, bats, cats and dogs. In instances of sheer revulsion, discourse can do the smoothing work of rendering liveliness absent. Snails, for example, a creature that in most cases would be ‘out of place’ if presented on a plate, are reframed as ‘in place’ when cooked in garlic and butter and called escargot. These examples speak to the continuous forms of discursive labour that are required to demarcate boundaries between ourselves and otherness.

After all, "language has always aided us in sidestepping sticky problems of conceptualisation by obfuscating the situation" (Adams, 2010, p. 96).

The overlapping structure of patriarchal violence has further theoretical and pragmatic implications. As Gaard (2012, p. 16) notes, the discursive "association of women and animals reinforces their subordinate status" as experiences of oppression tend to be conceived in terms of each other. This comparison often plays out in the way that "we distance ourselves from whatever is different by equating it with something we have already objectified" (Adams, 2010, p. 69). This is evidenced in the expression 'I felt like a piece of meat', often used to describe women's experiences of violation. Phrases such as this sexualise animals, whilst also animalising women. By being complicit in the oppression of animals through the minimisation of their distinct experiences, these descriptors show how language unintentionally reproduces violence (Adams, 2010). Zupančič (2019) would concur, suggesting that attempts to describe animal oppression in terms of our own experience disavows all that they are and all that we are not.

In the routine dismembering that functions to keep meat separate from its animal form, remembering the liveliness of flesh and our connection to those animals commonly eaten is thus a political act. One way this is achieved is through the explicit naming of meat for what it is: 'partly cremated animals', 'slaughtered corpses', and so forth. This disorienting language draws attention to the violence these objects encapsulate and that which is frequently disavowed on account of its reality being too confronting. Adams (2010) similarly suggests that the dissonance that this discourse produces "is not due to their being false, but to their being *too* accurate" (p. 99, emphasis in original). Discursivity could thereby be said to institutionalise animal oppression, but it is also a mechanism of how we might generate movement—as this object-disoriented autoethnography demonstrates.

The (im)Possibilities of Care

When it comes to our eating practices, attempts to confront liveliness are often fraught with contradictions. The patronising influence of patriarchy extends into the commonplace practices of care that are afforded to both human and more-than-human bodies. It is often through these practices that human exceptionalism is both reproduced and disavowed. In the case of animals bred for consumption, in Aotearoa New Zealand the Animal Welfare Act of 1999 sets out a ‘duty of care’ to prevent animal ill-treatment and neglect (Ministry of Primary Industries, 2022b). This legislation regulates human-animal relations by establishing base-level requirements needed to be met by those responsible for animal lives. This helps ensure that animals’ physical, behavioural, and overall health needs are met, but this care is only afforded up until the moment of slaughter. The moral undertones of this legal framework imply that providing a ‘good life’ for animals justifies their slaughter and subsequent consumption. Animal welfare thus becomes an oxymoronic gesture, as the operative of care is performative. Though this caring legislation minimises harm to animals, it is in service of our moral conscience. In other words, it is another enactment of human exceptionalism itself.

These contradictions were similarly evident in the dynamics of care that were afforded to me whilst anorexic. In Aotearoa New Zealand, gaining access to mental health services is a battle in and of itself, with long wait lists, underfunded facilities, and overworked staff. Hierarchies consequently present themselves. Medicalised categorisations of the body and psychological symptoms mediate who is considered ‘sick enough’. Like others with eating disorders, my body became subjected to patriarchal forms of management. A diagnosis of anorexia nervosa requires a body mass index below 18.5. This is a medicalised reduction of the body to a numerical figure that is ironically the same reduction that triggers disordered eating in the first place. In this quantification of the body, I was objectified. Labelled anorexic, my identity became fragmented. As a patient in the hospital system, I was

consumed. Like the domestication of the chicken that sees it not as a bird but poultry, flesh that can be roasted, grilled or fried, my institutionalisation within the medical system stripped me of any sense of agency. Like the chicken, the care I was afforded was evaluated by a masculinist sense of control and calculability. Unable to live outside of those predetermined parameters, my liveliness as an individual was disavowed.

Not long after the account described in the opening of this chapter, I was hospitalised in an adolescent mental health inpatient facility. Vehemently nil by mouth, my life was supported by a nasogastric feeding tube. A calorific meal replacement was ceaselessly pumped into my body, day and night, bag by bag. It was within this medicalised context that my less-than-human state was most evident. Like the preordained destiny of chicken, my time within the ward was predetermined according to the biopolitical logics controlling the operation of the hospital and the patriarchal forces exerted by well-meaning professionals who were signposted as the enforcers of care.

Manifestations of care within this crisis facility were regulated by patriarchal forms of control. This was most evident at the large dining table situated in the commons area. All patients were required to sit at the table during mealtimes—no exceptions. I was made to sit at that table even though I had no food in front of me, not even a plate. The table itself is thereby representative of the impasse between care and domination. Like the father figure governing the family dining table, this table was regulated by the supremacy afforded to medical discourse. As a disciplining site of care, my compulsory presence at both tables was imposed in an attempt to normalise food. ‘Care’ thus stripped me of my ability to exercise any form of agentic capacity over my body. I became an object owned by the head of the nuclear family to which I was born, and to the medical institution in which I found myself. Like the chicken, my body became theirs to control, theirs to care for.

Mediated by dynamics of unspoken power, with regulating rules, norms and mores, the table exists within these stories as a politicised site of encounter. It was used to encourage spontaneous engagement with the key source of our liveliness (food), but it ironically disavowed liveliness at the same time (the chicken and myself). The table thus held the discomfort of conflicting relations: those existing between authority and independence; between human and more-than-human bodies; between the body that consumes and the body that is consumed; between the self and the other; and between liveliness more generally. It was thereby a site of care, but also that of domination. Irrespective of what we choose to consume, the fact that we come to the table because of our necessity to eat means that it is also a site that speaks the limit points of our animal form. Though the table could be considered an object that acknowledges our intimate connection to our animality, it is more symbolic of the commonplace tendencies of disavowal. After all, we can view what it means to be human via what or who is presented on the table (Diamond, 1978).

Concluding Thoughts: Us as Edible...?

In both of the dining table encounters shared, there was an assumption that I would be able to work through my state of abjection and arrive at an altogether different place. That is, I would be able to overlook the liveliness of the food/animal presented to me and partake in its consumption. This was evidenced in the hope placed by hospital officials that if I were to sit at the table whilst others were eating, then my relationship with food would not only be normalised, but I would be 'healed'. This was similarly the case with the tensions rife at the family dinner table: if I just ate the chicken, then the stressors caused by my lack of eating would be immediately resolved. In both instances, recovery was posed as an achievable end state—all I had to do was embrace the normalcy of disavowal. Problematically, this solution suggests the possibility of a 'fully formed whole', a 'complete' subject who

could be immune to life's contingencies. Is this not an expression of human exceptionalism at its finest?

The accepted sanity of this solution reflects the mundaneness of contradictions within contemporary Western society. It is redolent of the liveliness that is disavowed when we breed, genetically modify, artificially inseminate, grow in ineffable conditions, drug, abuse, control, and slaughter animals. It is no different to the normalcy of turning a blind eye to the magnitude of violence heralded by the exceptionalist belief that human life can only be sustained via the death of another. It is remindful of the influence of patriarchal ideas that equate meat-eating with virility. It is, after all, illustrative of the forms of care that are at once enactments of domination.

In the process of re-signification, of employing an object-disoriented autoethnography to write through the dislocating moments shared and the contradictions they work to reveal, this chapter opens possibilities for relations between human and more-than-human others that *work with* exceptionalism. An alternative proposition to the (im)possibility of recovery, in the truest new materialist sense, one might argue, is to conceive recovery as a continual process that is always unfolding, always becoming. This standpoint acknowledges that recovery requires an ongoing negotiation, for the risk of relapse remains a possibility. This brings about a task of *living with* an acknowledgement of one's own extimate other (Zupančič, 2017). Unlike the recommendations offered by those caring professionals, this can only occur from a place that is not in complete disavowal. A recovery of this kind requires an acceptance of our vulnerabilities and inconsistencies, of our inability to form as a coherent whole, of our animality. It involves letting go, a decentring, and an openness to not being fully in control. More simply, it is an acceptance of our liveliness.

Though various tendencies work to disavow the animality that we share with those we consume, we are not immune to the inescapability of our mortality. Within

Western society, conceptions of death are often polemic, if not polarising. On the one hand, there is the prospect of an eternal self-existing in the form of a disembodied spirit. On the other, there is the prospect of a complete material ending where a subject's narrative ceases entirely. Within this battlefield of liveliness exists a concurrent possibility: subsisting with, if not becoming, the more-than-human other. The exceptionalism that sees humans as apart from nature often materialises in "a deep-seated dread of becoming food for other forms of life" (Plumwood, 2008, p. 324). Though Indigenous approaches to death are commonly conceived in terms of reciprocity, a circulation of life that is a gift of material unity with one's ancestors and ecological others, the thought that we might become food is often avoided. These ideas are only entertained in the supernatural world of horror with flesh-eating zombies or blood-sucking vampires. "Exceptionalised as both species and [as] individuals", there is an abjection to such a monstrous thought because "human exceptionalism positions us as the eaters of others who are never themselves eaten" (Plumwood, 2008, p. 324).

Irrespective of our attempts to disavow such a certitude, we too are bloody flesh. Through death, we hold the potential of nurturing more-than-human life and nourishing the earth and otherness more generally. One only needs to think of near-death encounters with more-than-human others to be reminded of this (Plumwood, 2000). Confronting the discomfort of flesh, of our 'foodiness' and our liveliness is how we might script futures beyond the all-encompassing strictures of exceptionalist logic. This is what this object-disoriented autoethnographic writing has worked to reveal.

Chapter Seven

CONCLUSION

Introduction

In the process of concluding this thesis, I reflected on the origins of my proclivities. Like many children of the late 1990s and early 2000s', I was captivated by Nickelodeon's *The Wild Thornberrys* (Klasky, et al., 1998-2004)—a cartoon series following a family of wildlife documentary filmmakers as they travelled the globe. It was the lead character, 12-year-old Eliza, from whom I drew the most inspiration. Her allure is easily understood. Following an enchanting encounter with a shaman, Eliza was able to communicate with other species. Each episode served as a message of reflection, sharing insight into the experiences animals were forced to endure as they lived at the whim of human consequence. Yet through the act of listening to those animals, communicating with them, and understanding the bounds with which their existence was held, Eliza took action. The significance of the underlying message of this cartoon rests upon her action. Without disclosing her secret power, Eliza acted as a mediator by speaking on behalf of animals to bring about solutions, garner change, and develop harmonious multispecies relations.

I remember longing for Eliza's abilities. I dreamt of being able to converse with animals, to hear their stories and to more deeply understand their lifeworlds. In some ways, Eliza's story represented what felt like a vocational calling. I too wanted to bring about substantive change. This was represented in my childhood desire to become not just a veterinarian, but a wildlife veterinarian. These interests, not to mention my geographical positioning, led to my regular engagement with materials that would help facilitate that journey. I did not just read children's novels; I read

scientific books and field guides breaking down the multispecies landscape in which I was embedded. I learnt plant names, where they were grown and who they fed. I learnt the scientific names of the animals I adored, their habitat, migration patterns and vulnerability. The impact of this fictional character thereby extended beyond her tales of adventure. The multispecies relations depicted in the series shaped my childhood, but also the person I have become today.

It is now ironic that I find myself a student of Sociology. My career aspirations reoriented once I moved to Aotearoa New Zealand as a ten-year-old. Becoming a wildlife veterinarian no longer seemed a possibility; more truthfully, Aotearoa's lack of large mammals meant the career lost its allure. I instead embarked upon an undergraduate Arts degree with a double major in Sociology and Psychology. Yet my strong concerns for the environment and other species, along with the conditions under which these connections are held, were feelings that continued into adulthood. It is why I continued to pursue Sociology in postgraduate studies; it is a discipline best placed to address the issues associated with multispecies relations. This Master's thesis therefore enabled my story to come full circle.

Sociological frameworks have enabled me to carry out those childhood aspirations, albeit in ways I did not imagine. Sociological thought work requires wrestling with the profound entanglement of sociopolitical and environmental problems. This thesis engages with scholarship that takes seriously these multifaceted concerns by unravelling the intimate and undeniable relations that we hold with the more-than-human world. This is because a sincere engagement with these issues can generate the forms of substantive change that the Thornberrys series implicitly and explicitly spoke to. This is why research of the kind conveyed in this thesis is so necessary.

This thesis has used a sociological imagination to unpack the underlying significance of Eliza's tales. It has reflected on how we, as humans, fit within the

broader multispecies landscape. It has contemplated not only how we relate to other species, but for what conditions and purposes change might materialise. If we are to follow Eliza's lead and work on addressing the issues caused by our exploitative existence, then what incentives might underpin this engagement? How might we care in a way that is not dominating? These thoughts demonstrate that it is not just the stories of animals that we need to listen to, but it is also our own. This is because equipped with a sociological gaze, this discussion has revealed not only the significance of our collective (human) story but the impenetrable contradictions that riddle our existence. This is the prickly tale of human exceptionalism.

The Impossibilities of Human Exceptionalism

Human exceptionalism culminates in the coalescing sociopolitical and environmental crises in which we now find ourselves. As the immanence of climate change looms, the destructive habits connected to capitalist production and Western ways of living are continuing to destroy habitats, pollute waterways, cull forests, and kill animals. Though climate deniers and others living in denial might disagree, the state of these conditions is clear—ubiquitous even. They are the very conditions that *The Wild Thornberrys* critiqued over twenty years ago. If it is accepted that the future of the planet rests upon collective human action, then it is the question of what we might do with this realisation that continues to linger. It becomes not only a question of *why* we might care for the more-than-human other, but *how* we might care in a way that does not tacitly reinforce exceptionalist forms of dominance.

Practices of care often elicit forms of exceptionalism by disavowing the dominance that those practices encapsulate. The care offered by conservation practitioners, for instance, often reinstates a disavowal of exceptionalism through the presumption that nature can be 'saved' via the simple construction of borders. This has the unintended effect of suggesting that humans are not only the sole provider of care but that there are 'right' ways to care. Despite their well-meaning

objectives, the subtext at work within these accounts imparts certain humans with a degree of supremacy that strips the (human and more-than-human) other of their agentic capacity. Counterarguments invoke similar contradictions, such as the suggestion that ‘mother nature’ can remedy exceptionalism via natural disasters or zoonotic diseases—that is, nature confronting humans with situations that jeopardise our perceived exceptionalist status. These ideas reproduce politicised binaries, particularly the age-old Cartesian dualism that opposes culture as distinct from nature. These contradictions culminate in the ways we theoretically and pragmatically engage with these issues. Accordingly, exceptionalism often appears in the potential solutions that are conjured.

For instance, if we are to premise climate action on the restitution of colonial land grabbing and its erasure of Indigeneity, and if efforts were made to go beyond capitalist value as the primary way we understand and relate within the world, then this would take us some way in addressing the dire consequences of our collective past. Yet our entanglement with exceptionalism is profound. These efforts would remain bound within the discursive trap that sees discourse unable to be separated from the effects of power. This risks the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and lifeworlds, meaning the solutions posed could merely result in a re-articulation of colonialist conquest. This also risks the insinuation of a particular kind of ethical subject, one that could be similarly appropriated and exploited for the projection of particular interests—concerns raised by Guattari (2000) over twenty years ago. Is there a possibility for a particular caring subject to exist outside of the risk of fascism or of its subsumption within capital itself? Moreover, can care exist outside exceptionalist forms of domination?

Questions of care are plagued by an uncomfortable realisation that care for the more-than-human other is often in service of ourselves and our human existence. Irrespective of our best intentions, we cannot remove ourselves from the dominance that exists as an extimate other to care. The ease with which we so

easily slip into tendencies that disavow exceptionalism demonstrates the crux of the problematic position in which we find ourselves. The hope placed in the wholesale idea of ‘caring for nature’ is not enough to overcome the exceptionalism that not only manifests in the array of environmental and sociopolitical issues now being faced, but is also the force that keeps those issues in momentum. To some extent, it is exceptionalism itself that has become the more-than-human other. As we are confronted with the consequences of our collective past: we are also confronted with the realisation that the ‘world is already without us’ (Sarte, 2004; Toscano, 2016).

Writing through the Impasse between Care and Domination

So what might we do with human exceptionalism? If we accept the impasse between care and domination as a state of impossibility, then the question becomes not how we might *move through* human exceptionalism, but how we might *work within* it. Zupančič's object-disoriented ontologies is one way we might do that. Her psychoanalytic ideas suggest the need to confront the things that are often easier to ignore. Disavowal, Zupančič would proclaim, is not an option. We need to ‘take our place’ within the contradiction we seek to understand and let ourselves be thrown by what we cannot explain. In the process of enduring the dislocation born from those uncomfortable situations, we might be able to script our experiences anew.

Human exceptionalism requires us to write our limit points into our work. Rather than scholarship simply beginning from a point of interest, where researchers effectively write themselves out of their research by carrying out what could be considered extractive methods, that is, gathering ideas and data from and about others, a methodology that critically engages with human exceptionalism necessitates a state of vulnerability. This involves bringing the instability of the researcher's individual and collective subject positioning to the forefront of their inquiry. This needs to be done in a way that is not simply gestural. Opening

ourselves into topics of concern through methodologies that begin with autoethnographic reflections on encounters with objects that lead to a state of disorientation is one way that this might be achieved. Writing of this kind—what I call an *object-disoriented autoethnography*—focuses on points of structural negativity as the basis of intellectual questioning. This places explicit attention on the impasses we experience when things are unable to come together, and where we are subsequently confronted by an uncomfortable state of disjuncture. Engaging with these moments of dislocation as the anchoring point of inquiry is thereby a means of working *with* human exceptionalism. This is because it generates forms of thought work that do not begin from, nor therefore remain within, a state of complete disavowal.

This is what the thesis has done. With the use of object-disoriented autoethnography, this thesis brought to the fore experiences within my life that reveal the impasse between care and domination. These moments were explicitly chosen because they reflect the disorienting conditions of human exceptionalism that we find ourselves not only stuck within but at risk of reproducing. Engaging with objects that appeared to be out of place, yet which were intrinsic to the settings in which those objects occurred, I was able to write through the impasse between care and domination. This was demonstrated through the following anecdotes: when I walked into a room overflowing with the prized possessions of a trophy hunter; the Catch-22 situation I found myself in when attempting to script this discussion according to the university's ethical standards; my finding of a spent bullet in a conservation park that also held a collection animal specimens; and through the 'caring' insistence of hospital officials that demanded my consumption of death to sustain my own life.

In each of these instances, my disorientation emerged not only because of the forms of domination operating within those presumed acts of care but because they represented a disavowal of our exceptionalism. In each episode, there was a

turning away from the contradictions in which those experiences were located and by which they were governed. This was evidenced in the tensions that emerged in my attempt to meet the idealised (Western) ethical format for the management of research-related harm. Disavowal was similarly apparent in the conceptualisation of conservation as an industry that can save nature, where the bedrock of violent erasure and extractive profit-generation schemes that it rests upon is dismissed on account of the supremacy afforded to scientific discourse. Practices of disavowal also coexist alongside individualised ethical responses in the mundane, that is, when considering what or who becomes food: we disavow our animality through a common disregard of the liveliness of those we breed specifically for consumption.

An engagement with these uncomfortable moments of tension have revealed the conditions upon which human exceptionalism operates: underpinning these examples was a quiet reinforcement of the normalcy of disavowal. This is how human exceptionalism is reified. This thesis thereby worked to do something different: it explicitly called out these *normalising tendencies that produce not only the (re)conditions of disavowal, but that typify human exceptionalism itself*. Rather than sideline the impasse between care and domination and its relation to exceptionalism, this thesis has specifically confronted the limit points of our human form. It has contended with these exceptionalist tendencies of disavowal.

This move has been achieved by ‘taking my place’ within the contradictions I sought to understand. As Zupančič attests, insight into the situations we find ourselves is only possible by letting ourselves be thrown by the incomprehensibility of those situations—by the ‘thing’ that perturbs us, yet also the ‘thing’ on which we cannot quite put our finger. In being thrown into this state of disjuncture, there rests the possibility of being able to re-script our experiences anew and in the act of doing so, identify the contradictions at work within those states of impasse. This is what object-disoriented autoethnography enables.

Confronting Exceptionalist Tendencies of Disavowal

In writing through the conditions that offered meaning as to why my encounters with those disorienting objects felt so jarring, I was able to grapple with the strictures giving rise to their incoherence. In each of the fields of social encounter described within this thesis—the normative idea of ethics, the exploitive operatives of conservation, and the paradoxical (dis)engagement with liveliness—it became evident that the manifestations of care on display within those situations were at once forms of domination because of the violence contained within those acts of care. A normalcy of disavowal is not a given; it requires work. The contradictory forms of care that materialised in each of those settings required continuous forms of violent labour to disavow the dominance that was intrinsic to those acts of care.

In the case of ethics, a formidable amount of labour is involved in the forced scripting of a researcher and their inquiry to meet the predetermined universalist standards as ordained by university ethics committees. Though issued as an enactment of care for the other, an attempt to avoid the imposition of harm, these standards promulgate an idealised subject position. Not only does this risk the reduction of meaningful engagement to tokenistic box-ticking exercises that privilege particular political positions all whilst disregarding the instability of our human form, but these standards promote the presumption of a veracious and knowable subject—a presumption that is disavowed every time an ethics application is completed and then assessed.

Conservation, on the other hand, is an example of an enactment of ethics on the ground in its attempt to control engagements with the more-than-human other. Justified according to scientific knowledge and its biopolitical processes that warrant the harm of an individual for the health of the greater population, conservation exemplifies exceptionalism in its supposition that we must ‘save’ nature. Disavowing that we are part of nature, an extimate other, conservation relies

upon continuous forms of violent labour in the continual making and unmaking of nature. This is demonstrated in the ongoing construction and policing of protected area boundaries, the forced removal and subsequent erasure of Indigenous populations, and the politics involved in the ranking of species deemed worthy of saving.

Yet, it is the practices commonplace within our fleshy subsistence that the violence of disavowal is most confronting. Meat culture has arguably become the backbone of contemporary New Zealand society. Sustaining our human fleshiness is typically achieved via the bloody flesh of another. The violence of this relationship does not end in the physical act of slaughter. Ongoing work is required to distance us from our animality and from the liveliness we share with those we consume—that we too are food-in-waiting. Not only do we remove the potential of visceral objections to death by sequestering abattoirs into out-of-view places, but we discursively deny the life that was before it becomes food: recognition of the cow ceases the moment it becomes beef steaks.

Constant work is involved in the act of ignoring human exceptionalism. Yet when we do this, we also disavow our animality—that we are nature's exception. This is where we become complicit in the reproduction of the dominating conditions upon which human exceptionalism operates. This is also where care meets its limit points. Contending with these uncomfortable tensions to rescript the problematic in which we find ourselves located thus has the potential to enable further generative insight conducive to substantive change. This is true of the work of this thesis, and I would imagine Zupančič would agree. In the recognition of the violent labour that processes of disavowal are dependent upon in the deployment of ethics, the operative of conservation, and the disregard of our animality, this object-disoriented autoethnography has identified three movements where future productive thought work might yet head.

Rather than forming substantive conclusions, this thesis thereby raises further questions. Specifically, what might it mean to deploy object-disoriented autoethnographic writing? Where can we use this writing, for whom and with what? The areas that these thoughts leave open to explore are thereby plentiful—not only for the limited scope of a Master’s thesis, but for the sheer magnitude of the potential consequences that follow. Further research that employs object-disoriented autoethnography as a distinct writing strategy could include a perceptive examination into the fields where human exceptionalism is operative, including specific conservation approaches (e.g. Buscher and Fletcher’s ‘convivial conservation’) or the lived relations of humans with the numerous more-than-other. In each instance, there should be an examination of how the impasse between care and domination is negotiated. In other words, beyond that of sheer disavowal, to what other ends might labour be put?

Towards New Beginnings

In using object-disoriented autoethnography to confront our tendencies of disavowal, we can contend with the ways human exceptionalism influences our lives. The anchoring of inquiry within the points of structural negativity that already occur within concrete situations offers a means of traversing the normalised tendencies of disavowal that reify human exceptionalism. This approach can open new possibilities, but this is dependent upon our ability to wrestle with the all-too-alluring option of taking the easy route out: to disavow our contradictions. Though I have identified the points of structural negativity in which I found myself caught when scripting my experiences with disorienting objects, there is one contradiction that remains unaccounted for: this thesis.

I am conscious that my work sits within historical fashions (‘isms’) that privilege certain voices and discourse over others. I am aware that the scholarship I have drawn upon also comes with its own ‘ontological baggage’. Drawing upon

Zupančič's theoretical provocations to work through the inconsistencies in our discourses and practices of care, and thereby illuminating its impasse with domination, is in some ways an ironic place to anchor this discussion. On the one hand, the miscellany that Zupančič strings together is one of mathematical precision; its intricacies and depth of discoveries are meticulously worked through. Her work represents a philosophical abstraction; one that reflects the representationalism of Barad's post-representationalist argument. It is a disjuncture. One can only begin to comprehend these workings from a place of intellectual understanding, equipped with an armoury of pre-established theoretical and philosophical foundations from which one can catapult their reading.¹⁶ On the other hand, as Kunkle (2018, p. 4) explains, "the breakthroughs that are presented in this work come through as such because of the care that Zupančič takes in leading us through the labyrinthine metaphysical questions". Zupančič's disoriented ontologies could thereby be considered a demonstration of the impasse between care and domination in and of itself. It requires an element of exceptionalism to engage with it.

This is also true for this thesis. Exceptionalism is evident in the form that this discussion takes. It is, after all, a Master's thesis. As a product of higher education, this thesis is bound by the same problematic it critiques. Like Zupančič, my ability to engage with the question of exceptionalism is dependent upon my points of privilege. I am cognizant of the personal gains that will come with the awarding of a Master's degree. I am also aware that my research brings unique challenges and ambiguities due to its form; I am both the object and subject of this study, the insider and the observer. In my attempt to contemplate alternative forms of relations with the more-than-human other, I too am complicit in the tensions that exist between practices of care that are at once forms of domination, and I do not intend to ignore this fact. Indeed, I too, "am a mess of contradictions" (Gay, 2014, p. 314).

¹⁶ Or, in my case, by the virtue of time and unmatched supervisory guidance.

Yet acknowledging our inconsistencies is how we can grapple with the exceptionalism that commonly occurs within our work—not doing so would reproduce the exceptionalism that this thesis has worked so hard to acknowledge and critique. Recognising the limitations of our research demonstrates a vulnerable opening to our own impasses. This is an explicit way of not falling into the traps of disavowal. Though inherently risky, in these ‘productive exposures’ of our structural negativity, the limit points of exceptionalism can be worked through and new capacities revealed (Zizzo et al., 2021). The various examples offered within this thesis are a testament to this. I took my place within the contradictions to which I am bound, but also those I represent. It was in the process of writing through those experiences of disjuncture that I was able to gain insight into the violent labour that the impasse between care and domination relies upon. In other words, deploying a form of exceptionalism in the rescripting of my contradictions, I was able to confront the way human exceptionalism is not only produced but continually reproduced through forms of disavowal.

Undoubtedly, this thesis is a disorienting object. It is an object that has continually left me thrown, and I imagine it may do the same to those who engage with it. With its expansive subject matter that I have woven together in unexpected ways and with the ongoing revelations that I found myself experiencing when writing through those points that did not initially make sense, this thesis is confronting not only because of the contradictions it reveals but because of the possibilities it opens. The unravelling of the complexity of our global sociopolitical, economic, and natural environments means that we are now in a state where truth claims are hard to come by. Attempts often similarly fail to ground us. As the broader academic project finds itself easily slipping into a reinstatement of historical dualisms in the recurring idea that language floats free from the situations under discussion, this thesis opened itself to the question of our indeterminacy. Demonstrating the generative potential that can be found in an object-disoriented autoethnography, what this thesis demonstrates is thus not only a theoretical examination of how we

might come to understand the conditions of our current predicament, but it has offered a methodological proposition for how we might move *with* our exceptionalism.

This begins with confronting our tendencies of disavowal by recognising our own contradictions.

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