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Animals: The Ultimate Radical

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Animals: The Ultimate Radical

An Interview with Doug Slaymaker and Tony Stallins, *University of Kentucky*

Interviewers: Aylin Castro, Jed DeBruin, Kelly Ferguson, and Jacob Saindon, *University of Kentucky*

Doug Slaymaker is Professor of Japanese at the University of Kentucky, USA. His research focuses on literature and art of the twentieth century, with particular interest in the literature of post-3.11 Japan, and of animals and the environment. Other research projects examine Japanese writers and artists traveling to France. He is the translator of Kimura Yūsuke's Sacred Cesium Ground and Isa's Deluge and Furukawa Hideo's Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure [Columbia University Press]. He is currently working on a translation of Tawada Yoko's Yōgisha no yakō ressha.

Tony Stallins is a Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Kentucky with interests in animal and plant geographies and human-environment interactions. His current research examines the way in which the built environment as well as human and bird behaviors shape differences in the abundances of urban avifauna recorded in eBird and in wildlife rehabilitation records. Tony's current graduate students are examining the affective dimensions of plants in the outcomes of stream restoration; how emotional support animals challenge notions of home and health on college campuses, the way in which urban forest vegetation dynamics intersects with commemoration of racial struggles, and the suburban reproductive politics of the invasive Bradford pear tree.

Jed DeBruin (JD): *Great - I have the first question here, so I'll kick us off. A big component of this seminar is the fact that those that are teaching it get to bring in four scholars of their choosing to be part of the theme and there's a discussion of how do these four scholars work together? Why did you choose them of all the people that can discuss animals? Our question is, why did you choose the four scholars that you did to participate in this seminar?*

Tony Stallins (TS): We divided up the speakers amongst ourselves. We each got to pick someone that we knew of, so there wasn't any rule. I picked a microbial person. You could call her a microbial anthropologist because [...]. Well, they're technically animals, but then there are protists and all these other little things that are alive, and so that's why I picked Amber. How did you do it Doug?

Doug Slaymaker (DS): Since I knew Japanese literature and Christine Marran, who I've known for a long time, had just written a book about environmental politics, poetics in literature, and her case studies were Japanese literature. But what she has done is applicable for literature period and reading stuff. And so I was very excited to bring those two together. This is a really smart book.

JD: *Do you know how the other two were selected?*

TS: Cary Wolfe, I think Doug can kind of comment there. I don't want to say anyone was more prominent than the others, but he's pretty famous.

DS: Yeah, that's right, he is, I think. He has the highest name recognition of any of us, and I was really excited that he was going to be part of [...] any of the people we invited, at any rate. I was very excited that he was here because he has sort of established the field in many ways, raised some of the most important questions. The foundational questions.

TS: And he really pulls the rug out from under us humans as we go about making claims about the world and how, you know, we're imprisoned in our particular carcasses, to borrow a horror metaphor, maybe. I learned a lot more from the course, more than I ever imagined. I mean, I knew I'd pick up some new ideas, but some of the animal stuff really is radical because it's shifting the lens away from us and our storytelling and our ways of thinking. Animals are the ultimate radical. Give it up humans, sorry.

DS: It's been so long since we did this seminar, I'm sort of fuzzy on the details. I'm trying to remember who all came and everything, so yeah.

TS: Yeah, we lost my speaker [ed. note: the speaker was unable to visit the University of Kentucky for their talk] because the pandemic hit.

DS: Ok, that's why I don't have a more firm memory.

JD: *Continuing to jog your memories on this seminar: why did you end up choosing animals as the central theme for the seminar? What was the impetus or catalyst for this particular topic? Versus amongst several other potential topics?*

TS: Who was the initiator? It wasn't me; I was a hanger on.

DS: Yeah, well, I don't remember to tell you the truth. It was sort of some sort of convergence of it. People were thinking about animals, and we all came together. Was it Dierdra? Was it me? I don't remember exactly. Anyway, more to the point maybe then, it sort of came together organically.

JD: *I have a follow up to that. Tony and Doug, and the other two that were a part of this: did you all know each other before this seminar, or is this something that, because of the shared interests you all met through the seminar?*

DS: I know I didn't know Tony. This is one of the reasons I've always liked the social theory seminar. We are all in there together sort of doing stuff we don't quite know. I think it's a good place to do forays into new research areas and discover it with a diverse group of people, and we all tend to be on the same plane I think.

Aylin Castro (AC): *What methodological, departmental, or theoretical disagreements or convergences did you experience in co-teaching this general theme? Was there anything fun or productive that came from this?*

DS: Did we ever disagree about anything? So, convergences, the different disciplinary approaches, I think made ours very rich because we were as you can tell, all over the place and more.

TS: There weren't any disagreements. But you had to struggle a little bit to grasp sometimes how other people worked with animals and saw animals. I mean someone writing about seeing the world through an animal, has been thinking about that method of writing for so long. And I had to kind of take my kind of methodological world and tunnel into that. So that was very interesting. I really liked that destabilization of my way of thinking. Because animals are such a lens. So that was fun.

DS: Yeah, there was a lot of fun. That's what I was going to say. And making community in places that it's often hard to do in our disciplinary silos, and just the way the well, even the organizational spaces on campus. It's hard to find and connect with people. Then the outside people come in, and I mean it's important to have the opportunities to just go and eat good food and drink good things and have really productive conversations, cross fertilizing conversations, I think so fun, but yeah, very productive.

TS: Yeah, because there were these, I know I talked to you Doug. Somehow there would be some movie or some book that I hadn't been able to talk to anyone about and then all of a sudden you had this group of people.

AC: *Thank you for that. Our following question is: as it has been alluded to, your seminar got disrupted by COVID-19, so how are you thinking about animals now, since the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

DS: This is one of the things I was worried about this interview. I've kind of moved away [from the theme of animals] and it's not as central. The animal stuff is not set in the same central question that it was a couple of years ago. So how have I've been thinking about it now? Not nearly as much, which isn't very helpful, but it's still there.

I was in the midst of doing post the March 11 disasters in Japan [ed. note: 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami and the subsequent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster] and translating some fiction. Part of the project was how many animals were showing up in the fiction of that and the technical question of many Japanese novelists were trying to figure out. It was clear that there was a consensus. It was more than an anomaly, the number of novelists that were using animals as characters in a way to make sense of the world and what happened, and were thinking about it, or how to present or represent. So, I was in the middle of translating stuff at that point, and then I moved on to different projects since then, but the questions I think are still there.

It's very clear to me how non-human-centric things have become, in ways that it's not really a question anymore, almost. It is just a given that the animals, at least in the novels and fiction and things I'm thinking about. The animals and humans occupy the same space in all sorts of ways; the nonhuman animals and humans likewise have histories of trauma and memories across generations and playing with that idea and experimenting with that possibility and trying to decide how we could actually communicate that to one another in some form or another. So that still is very generative at the level of ideas and thinking and reading.

TS: Yeah, I guess a confirmation bias was part of COVID. It kind of confirmed what some British geographers and some other geographers were talking about. They kind of said all of our grand theorizing and political maneuvering [was] just pretty inconsequential when you take something like COVID. That it just kind of seeps through the boundaries and defies and will do what it wants to do. It's kind of revenge of the microbes and we're going to see it even more. We're going to see the revenge of the microbes through our political inequities. We have these continents without vaccines where the virus is still just replicating and finding another pathway to come as another variant. For me it was confirmation bias, it proved what I had already believed, and it was very scary.

DS: Thinking about now, and with the prompt of your question, I went into it, how many years ago that was, thinking very much about animals and humans, because that's who was showing up in the fiction. I'm really aware now that those questions are just a subset of the whole thing. It's about life right, and the environment, you know there's no reason not to include the plants and the rocks as well as living beings. The parameters of questions I think about or take as normative have really changed a lot. The questions are bigger.

TS: I've kind of moved away from the little bit of microbial kind of research I did. It was enough to live it. There was this flush of papers that came out [on COVID-19] I'm interested in seeing what happens next. I think there is a bit of COVID fatigue, a bit of "I just don't want to hear about it." I mean there was this flush of papers that came out.

Kelly Ferguson (KF): *I'll go ahead and ask our next question then. It merges with the last question a little bit, but how do you tie animal studies in with your own research? How did you come to study animals, and how have your research methods been influenced by the perspective of animal studies?*

DS: Thinking about what Tony just said, the reason I came into it is, like I said, it's in the fiction, trying to figure out the triple disasters in Japan. It was sort of one of those huge moments where everything changed. That's how it certainly felt at the time, like the world was never going to be the same. The novel I was reading last week is suddenly insignificant. I have got to figure out a way to respond to what's going on right now and then there's a time lag of course, in literature and fiction; it takes a couple years to process. Which is the same thing we're seeing with COVID-19, right? There's a number of great novels now that have come out that are clearly set in English, is what I'm thinking of, are set in COVID, so that's a little quicker response.

One of the things that's on my mind is what sorts of time, space waves and reactions from artists are there for these major world events and how long does it take to process? Because sometimes there is a point where, is it too soon? We're not in far enough [into COVID-19 to know]. But that is really what I am thinking about. How does one react? How much time does it take to come up with this stuff? Thinking about how animal studies influences me, it's that methodological question of how they get incorporated and what the timeline looks like.

TS: I'm intrigued in how things like the individuality of animals, even animal personality, can make a big difference in these scientific groupings that we use, and just how animals defy any easy kind of description, identification; just thinking something like species diversity. It seems like it would be easy, but you cannot put your finger on it. Life just kind of defies categorization, and I think that's my motivation. It's just that slipperiness, we're part of it as well. Sometimes we want to make it so concrete and explicit, but it is far harder to understand other organisms than we are really capable of doing, being one.

DS: From the literature side, it also opens up a whole new range of questions of things we sort of took for granted. I mean, this is to state the obvious, but even as I'm teaching classes this semester, thinking about, how long there weren't any women in novels. The assumption was that they can't write, and they don't belong there. Also thinking about going back and looking at things. How are animals and people in these works from years past that we overlooked, and how do we bring a new lens to that?

TS: At one time, animals were just microbes. They were just kind of these things in a Cartesian space that we moved around and tracked. Over the last few decades, they've become these entities that are making space and that are much more woven into everything. You know, like I see you because of the evolution of microbes and they had eyes and this evolutionary pattern of eyesight has emerged several times. There is this embeddedness in life that is now more apparent. They're ultimately productive of everything. You can put all your dollars on politics and in the human world, but ultimately at the foundation, it's the biological processes that are streaming around us that really are creating the show.

DS: You [gesturing towards Tony] mentioned personalities a minute ago. I think that's something we're able to see in ways that we didn't before, right? All cats are not the same, those of us who have animals in our house, they're all not the same, my chickens are not all the same. They're clearly very different.

[Pause in interview for the showing of our animals]

Jacob Saindon (JS): *I can take us onto the next question. We've talked a bit about animals and how multispecies relations has influenced your own work and your own thinking. My next question is thinking more about maybe trends that you've seen in scholarship or new disciplines related to animals. How have animals and multispecies studies affected or not affected the body of scholarship or discipline that you are primarily engaging with? And then, relatedly, what*

other bodies of scholarship or disciplines do you think could or should be more strongly affected by rethinking through animal studies and multi-species relations?

DS: Well, I don't have any particular articles or books to point to, but there's this interesting new way to think about how to write fiction in different languages. The different cultural assumptions about animals in those cultures is interesting to me. Japanese fiction, for example. No one is surprised that the animals start speaking. They've been doing that for hundreds of years, and so that's not a surprise even now, in the last 10 years, following the triple disasters, right?

And so, I've been sort of arguing that Japanese novelists have a much richer legacy of fictional oral tales, narratives, works of art. All sorts of things. There's more available to draw from that. I think that it seems that in the Anglo, in the English language fiction, at least, there's more groundwork that needs to be laid where no one's at all surprised by all of this stuff. So that's intriguing to me. At the same time, the novels I'm thinking about in Japanese are different. They're not the same as they were before. But there are lineages there in ways that they're not available. In at least in English and North American stuff.

I have a feeling that there's a lot that I don't know, but that's intriguing, a lever to crack open literatures from different places and different cultural backgrounds. I mean, comparative literature is problematic as far as I'm concerned, and that's not really where I'm going. But there are some really elucidating things that elucidate how we read and how we write and what we expect to find when we are immersed in these sorts of things. And so in my case, Japanese literature has always been rather parochial and small, and the way that animal studies has opened up. That's one reason I had Christine MARRAN come is because there seems to be more books, more studies, you know, let's put it the other way. It's also, this sort of, writing the past. If one wrote about something, you assumed that the case study was going to be Shakespeare or English literature, right? It's much easier now to say, as in Christine's case, there's some really provocative, sophisticated thinking about animal studies where the English language edition is tangential and the case studies are all Japanese, right? And so that's really interesting. And it's not just Japanese, this is true in Chinese literature increasingly, and I imagine some other languages as well. In some ways, it seems like it's broken on a whole new way to think across. To breakdown the distinctions between these national literatures in some ways too. I mean, what is culture? What is the language-based stuff? That's all problematic, but there is, I think room to think differently, or it's helped us to think differently. Right, if we move the human out of it, we also moved the human societies out of it, and that language is out of it, perhaps. It widens the range of field. That may be one way, some trends I see there.

TS: I've seen over the past few decades [the field of] animal geography open up. Animals opened up into geography in the 1990s. Very soon after there was the formation of that animal geography specialty group and it's been percolating into geography, a lot of corners of it, everything from the GIS [Geographic Information Science/Systems] Animal Mobility tracking quantifiers to social theorists. Probably the last place that animal geographies has actually gone is to biogeography, at least in my opinion. There's still this model of animals as this again, that

kind of things in a volume that we correlate with rainfall and temperature. There hasn't been this new biogeography. That's kind of been my dream or goal.

I remember when I joined the biogeography specialty group. If you get old enough, they eventually appoint you as the next chair. They say, "why don't you be chair next," and you do it and I was secretly trying to get animal geographies into biogeography and talking about different ways, but it is still a lot about forests. It's a lot about certain animals, although it is changing. I mean now we see more plants that are not traditional forest species, like avocados. I've seen a human biogeography of avocado cultivation and that was neat. But it's happening. I've seen calls from students, younger students saying, "Hey biogeographers, why don't you consider bringing in more animal geography?" It hasn't percolated into the areas that have traditionally studied animals, it's more, these other parts of geography.

JS: *That's interesting, animal studies being more present in human geographies.*

TS: Yeah, but there is this biogeography of animals that is human geography too. And ecologists have kind of grabbed a lot of stuff about animal personality and the capacity of animals to be more active in their biogeography. So, we're getting there.

JS: *Thank you for that. We have one last question. Thinking about ethics, which of course is always an underlying theme. Specifically, how are you both thinking about ethics, either through the course or as you were planning the course even? How should animal studies in post/non/more than human contexts reorient approaches to ethics, either both in terms of scholarship and also our everyday ethical practices?*

DS: As I think about this, one of the questions for the books that I was reading and translating, was trying to represent what horses might be thinking. There's this sort of an arrogant assumption. It is an interesting experiment but there is an ethical aspect. I don't think the authors thought much about it. Is there an arrogance in assuming we can somehow put human words to what's happening inside animal brains and nervous systems? The problem is there is no other way. Or is there? I don't know, I don't really see another way. There's no obvious other way for humans to communicate to other humans about what animals might be thinking, but at some level we're still speaking for them and making some assumptions, and that seems ethically fraught. I don't want them to stop. I want to read these novels because they're really interesting. But there is an assumption of sorts.

JS: *That's interesting to think about in terms of translation. You've brought up translation before and thinking about how that's a kind of a form of translation as well.*

DS: It is, yeah, except you're filling in blanks in ways that are different than translation. That's the thing; I know that if I were writing a novel and had human characters, and I wanted to portray someone or something, I could just go ask, "what is going on in your head?" When the characters are horses, I can't go ask. Then the assumptions are probably based on an entirely

different way of how the world is organized. I feel like there is an ethical question to be asked here, but I haven't quite figured out what it is.

JD: *Well, it looks like we're coming up at the time that we promised. Before we end, Tony or Doug, do you have any last words?*

DS: I don't think I have any of those.

TS: I just want to commend you folks for putting this together and for bringing in aspects of our seminar that kind of fell apart because of COVID.