

The mice plague and the assemblage of beastly landscapes in regional and rural Australia

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Abstract

Beginning in the spring of 2020, a mouse and rat plague spread across the rural grain belt in New South Wales, Australia. Lasting for almost 10 months, the plague was described by the local media as a ‘horror’ which ‘terrorised’ farmers and ‘ravaged’ farms. Focusing predominantly on news media reporting of the plague, this article shows how the mice and rats were constructed as abject matter out of place. This construction reveals how the interspecies dynamics of managing pests render rural landscapes vulnerable and unsettle colonial imaginaries regarding the management of the Australian environment. The plague signals a disturbance of the ‘natural’ order of things where the landscape is ‘normally’ anthropocentrically managed for monocultural farming. Drawing on Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert’s identification of ‘beastly spaces’, this article explores the plague as facilitating a beastly landscape that radically de-centres human control and investment in the environment.

KEYWORDS

beastly spaces, environment, First Nations, pests, rural, settler colonial ecologies

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Beginning in the spring of 2020, a mouse and rat plague spread across the rural grain belt in New South Wales, Australia. Lasting for almost 10 months, the plague was described by the local media as a 'horror' (Nilsson, 2021) which 'terrorised' farmers (see Evershed & Zhou, 2021) and 'ravaged' farms (Condon et al., 2021). This escalation in the number of mice and rats caused disruption to farming and living conditions in regional and rural New South Wales. Focusing predominantly on news media reporting of the plague, this article shows how the mice and rats were constructed as abject (Kristeva, 1982) matter out of place (Douglas, 1966). This construction reveals how the interspecies dynamics of managing pests render rural landscapes vulnerable and unsettle colonial imaginaries regarding the management of the Australian environment. The representation of mice and rats as a 'plague' signals a disturbance of the 'natural' order of things where the landscape is 'normally' anthropocentrically managed for monocultural farming. And yet it is the latter which has exacerbated climate change and drought conditions, which meant the unusually moist and fecund 2020 spring created the perfect conditions for mouse and rat breeding. Drawing on Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert's identification of 'animal spaces' and 'beastly spaces' (2000), the article considers the plague from an animal-perspective and how other forms of matter as 'more-than-human' might challenge and indeed, exceed human forms of control and representation of non-humans. Turning away from the dominant animal spaces representation of the mice and rats in the media, this article explores the plague as facilitating a beastly landscape that radically de-centres human control and investment in the environment.

The first part of the article provides an outline of the method of analysis and relevant literature. I then analyse the news media reporting of the plague and attend to the affective experiences of vulnerability and care occasioned by the interspecies assemblages of the plague. Here I apply Philo and Wilbert's notion of animal spaces to the media representations and argue that animal space representations are a disavowal of animals' role in destabilising anthropocentrism and engendering beastly spaces. I then delve further into the contextualisation of the settler colonial imaginaries of rural landscapes and how discourses of 'invasion' attempt to invert the role of settlers in occupying and harming First Nations Country. I conclude by considering First Nations approaches to animal management and invasive species and the need to unsettle colonial arrogations of vulnerability with respect to managing rural landscapes. The research and policy implications of this conclusion are outlined at the end.

INVASION: THE MICE AND RAT PLAGUE

News media reported that the mice and rat plague started in the spring of 2020 (BBC News, 2021). The plague was reported on in local, national (Kaur Sachdeva, 2021; news.com.au, 2021) and international media (BBC News, 2021; Bhalla, 2021). The spread of the plague across inland New South Wales facilitated expansive news reporting. The plague moved south across regional and rural areas, such as Tottenham, Walgett, Gulargambone (Wheeler, 2021a) to Dubbo (Wheeler, 2021b) and Cowra (Piovesan, 2021) as well as surrounding areas. These areas are located in the heart of the 'grain belt' of inland New South Wales where key pastoral industries are situated. Aside from geographical locations, the mice and rats took up residence within a range of public and private spaces, such as hospitals (Wheeler, 2021a), homes (news.com.au, 2021), farms (Thorne & Thackray, 2021), prisons, supermarkets (BBC News, 2021) and inside cars (news.com.au, 2021). The plague took form as a 'carpet of mice' (Wakatama & Johnson, 2021) that 'showed up out of nowhere' (Nilsson, 2021) and was 'unprecedented' (Thackray, 2021). Reports indicated the plague continued into August of 2021 (Thackray, 2021). In the following sections, I focus largely on

print media and the state of New South Wales – because there's only so much horror I can take. The plague did spread to other south-eastern states, including Queensland, Victoria and South Australia (Nilsson, 2021).

I am a non-Indigenous resident of Dubbo and began collecting news stories about the plague towards the end of 2020. This article is based on secondary published material; primarily, this material consists of formal news searches and included local, national and international sources from November 2020 to 2021. The plague took place earlier than media reporting on it. When the media caught up, there was a concentration of reporting at the beginning of 2021. The news stories were analysed through discourse and social semiotics. These approaches were used to understand the social practices and representations that attend to the interspecies dynamics of environmental crises and animal killing. The discourse and social semiotics approach focused on the words used to mediate experiences of the plague and their relationship to the images and videos in the stories. All elements of the news stories were considered – headline, copy, imagery, location and date published. Repeated themes and words were extracted through an iterative and qualitative analysis. This approach enabled me to identify key themes relating to swarming, numbers and invasion. The results illustrate how animal and environmental crises are constructed and legitimised. Animals are made killable through discourse (Gibbs, 2021, p. 372) and the textual and semiotic representations of animals are indicative of 'how we enlist animals to make sense of the world' (p. 374). For Steve Hinchliffe, 'representation and difference count as much as touching' (2015, p. 31) in the understanding of contagion crises. In the specific context of this article, the 'species swarming' (Mougenot & Roussel, 2005, p. 118) of mice and rats in agrorural spaces evokes the vulnerability of human and other actors enrolled in agricultural productivity.

The geographical spread and place invasion of the plague were experienced and understood through media reporting, which was a central component in both the informative and affective responses to the plague. Hibba Mazhary argues that typically animal killings are subject to geographical distancing in spatial, practical and visual terms (2021) in order to disavow the productive role of animal killings in sustaining human liveability. More broadly this distancing informs the lack of attention to the specificities of rural farming and animal husbandry even though it forms the basis of food economies. Although it is not uncommon for news media to focus on droughts and the economic plight of farmers, the news reporting of the plague is unusual in the direct coverage of animal killing and the inclusion of visual content of animal deaths. The mice and rat plague's communicability was an expansive and visible crisis with particular sets of histories and social practices of rurality included and excluded in communication about the plague's origins and management. In analysing the communicability of pest invasions and rural spaces, three themes of extant literature are relevant: settler colonial ecologies, the distinction between native and foreign species and the role of animals in disrupting and making visible the constitution of rural spaces as assemblages.

The news salience of the mice and rat plague is derived from its ostensible unexpectedness. However, historically, the over-abundance of introduced and feral species has been a consistent feature of settler colonial ecologies (see Dalton, 2021). Along with the violence Indigenous peoples experienced as part of land dispossession through invasion and settlement, the environment and ecology of the lands now known as Australia underwent a rapid and destructive transformation. English settlers 'corrected' the existing ecology to match what they knew in England and Europe. This involved introducing a number of flora and fauna species, such as rabbits, cats and mice, which still to this day pose a problem for environmental sustainability and the preservation of native species (see Robley et al., 2004). Among others, First Nations scholar Tony Birch has discussed the connections between settler colonisation and environmental degradation (2017), and

Bruce Pascoe (2014) has outlined the specific connections between monocultural farming and the creation of unsustainable landscapes. It should be noted here that I could not find evidence in news searches and databases of First Nations being asked to comment on the mice and rat plague. Settler colonisation is premised on maintaining the structural permanence of settlers and involves an inversion of autochthony where Indigenous peoples are replaced by migrant-settlers (Wolfe, 2006). J. M. Bacon identifies settler colonialism as ‘the primary force shaping eco-social relations’ (2019, p. 60) in countries such as Australia. The mice and rat plague is an example of the ‘everyday practices and settler-colonial cultural norms’ (p. 66) that structure settler permanence. This ‘permanence’ though is contingent and subject to interruption by non-human actors and particularly pests who are ‘tenacious, adaptive, and disruptive, often escaping regulatory practices’ (Ginn et al., 2014, p. 120).

The mice and rat plague illustrates the vulnerability of agricultural control and stability in the Australian climate. The plague can be contextualised within settler colonial imaginaries of the Australian outback as uncanny and agentic (Scott & Biron, 2010). As a corollary, attempts to reiterate order and control over unruly environmental phenomena are achieved through designations of ‘native’ from ‘foreign’ flora and fauna to denote appropriate interspecies dynamics and how humans should relate to them. As a number of scholars have shown, the native/foreign distinction ‘does not reflect the biological features of a species, but only its place of origin and migration history’ (Antonsich, 2020, p. 303). How species move through ‘wild’ to ‘domestic’ typologies is based on ‘socio-natural accommodations’ (Buller, 2008, p. 1583) where ‘agricultural expansion’ is often a key factor in new species relationships and conflicts (p. 1585). Marco Antonsich posits that the native/foreign distinction represents the ‘the nationalisation of nature’ whereby ‘national thinking intervenes as an organizing principle in determining ecological inclusion/exclusion’ (2020, p. 303). The nationalisation of nature then obscures ‘the socio economic configuration of disease and health’ (Hinchliffe, 2015, p. 28). Rendered a biological control problem, ‘human/nonhuman animal interdependence and shared pathogens is succeeded by human mastery’ (p. 29).

An understanding of species’ invasion as socio-economic and informed by national-historic discourse reveals the contingency of rural spaces. Research has highlighted the fragmented and processual construction of regional and rural areas (Glass et al., 2019, p. 1653) where ‘rural places are relational and networked, reflecting forms of rurality that are constantly in process’ (Carter & Hollinsworth, 2009, p. 414). Such approaches are particularly apposite for analysing the assemblages both revealed and enabled in efforts to contain pest plagues. Invasive species and their management illustrate the global (Hinchliffe, 2015, p. 30), interdependent (Mougenot & Roussel, 2005, p. 117) and relational forces of human and non-human actors in rural spaces (Skogen & Krangle, 2003, p. 311). In the case studied here, mice and rats are not so much wild as unwanted, their audacity (Buller, 2008, p. 1586) is that they persist in human spaces and therefore ‘actively deconstruct human exceptionalism’ (p. 1595).

Animal species, which exceed human control and spatial ordering, disrupt dominant ontological and epistemological norms, and this impacts their exclusion from ‘common sites of human activity’ (Philo, 1998, p. 52). ‘[A]nimals are spaced and ordered by people’ (Lorimer & Srinivasan, 2013, p. 333), and this forms a core epistemology in western knowledge paradigms as far back as the Enlightenment where animals were constructed ‘as insentient objects and instrumental resources’ (p. 335). These epistemologies were also a constitutive feature of the development of race and the classification of humans into supposed hierarchies of development based on their biological distance and difference from animals (see Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Pugliese, 2020). Racial classification and its ties to blood, nation and purity informed the historical emergence of flora and fauna native/foreign classifications (Antonsich, 2020, p. 306). Animals matter for humans

in relation to anthropocentric conceptions of space. Ginn et al. note that ‘awkward creatures’ render ‘togetherness ... difficult’ (2014, p. 114) as their killing cannot be readily accommodated within animal ethics norms or human sympathy. Using Philo and Wilbert’s identification of ‘animal spaces’ and ‘beastly spaces’ (2000), I analyse the mice and rat plague in terms of the attempts to anthropocentrically order the awkward togetherness engendered by the mice and rats and what it means for interspecies dynamics of care and killing to consider agrorural spaces from a beastly perspective.

The article is concerned with how mice and rats communicate the vulnerability of agrorural spaces. This focus builds on the three themes identified in the literature by: contributing to scholarship on settler colonial ecologies in terms of the place of agriculture in Australian history; how the distinction between native and foreign species continues to find purchase in public and policy responses to animal and environmental crises and the consequent need to situate discourses of invasion within settler colonial ecologies; and how the security of agriculture to food economies reveals the assemblages of rural spaces through the control and disruption of interspecies dynamics.

COMMUNICATING INVASION

The mice and rat plague had high news communicability due to the expanding nature of the plague generating new stories and the capacity to portray graphic animal killing and pest invasion of a range of spaces. The numbers of mice and rats were highlighted in several stories. For instance, “‘Easily 500 plus” mice caught in one night’ (Wheeler, 2021b) and ‘We actually are catching between 400–500 every night, sometimes 600, it’s pretty bad’ (Kaur Sachdeva, 2021). One news report stated: ‘Thousands of mice have been captured in a giant homemade water trap on NSW farm’ (in Dubbo). There is an accompanying video and according to the farmer in the video, 7000 mice were caught in one night (Noble, 2021). The numerical potency of the plague illustrates what Gibbs describes as the collective versus individual positioning of animals where the former can rationalise mass animal killings (2021, p. 372).

The collective positioning of the mice and rat as invasive pests legitimated the graphic imagery of animal killing. Images and embedded video of the plague were newsworthy in their own right. For instance, ‘A stomach-churning photo has highlighted the impact of a mouse plague gripping regional NSW’ (news.com.au, 2021), ‘The footage will make your skin crawl’ (Nilsson, 2021), and ‘NSW mouse plague takes disgusting turn after mum-of-four finds crushed rat in son’s gumboot’ (Turner-Cohen, 2021b). An ethics of care for readers was exercised in warnings that accompanied some of these stories. For instance, ‘WARNING: The following story contains photos of dead mice which may disturb some readers’ (Thorne & Thackray, 2021) and, ‘WARNING: GRAPHIC CONTENT – Farmers are struggling as the biggest plague of mice in decades continues to sweep across Australia’s New South Wales’ (Reuters, 2021).

News stories emphasised the sensory effect of living with this graphic plague. Smell was a frequent theme of these kinds of stories, for example the ‘dead smell [of mice was] ten times worse’ (Reuters, 2021). Another resident complained, ‘We’re sick of living in houses that smell like mice ... and the outside of the house stinks worse than the inside of the house because they’re just all dead under the house everywhere’ (Thorne & Thackray, 2021). The mortuary work of disposing of mouse carcasses was outlined in the following article: ‘Edward Berrier from Merriwa said he had to dig mouse burial pits after his bins overflowed with carcasses’ (Wakatama & Johnson, 2021). The plague then facilitated graphic and explicit imagery and discourse of animal killings

and brought attention to the relationship between these killings and the maintenance of a rural habitus.

There were several news reports about the mice cannibalising each other once external food sources were exhausted (ABC News, 2021), which was expressed as a hopeful outcome (Nilsson, 2021). Having nauseatingly read through several dozen articles, there was surprisingly little repetition in the images and videos shown. The spread and scale also fed into this element of the news salience where residents in new locations experiencing the plague were solicited for images and videos. The health risk for human contact (Wheeler, 2021a) was also communicated via media channels and news sources. As a resident warned, ‘never underestimate a mouse ... They tend to dribble urine as they move along, potentially on your pillow’ (Central Western Daily, 2021). The unexpected rain and wet weather in March of 2021 was hoped to produce flooding to eliminate the mice. This did occur but resulted in a proliferation of images of drowned mice in backyards and properties (Chapman, 2021; Thorne & Thackray, 2021), renewing the cycle of heightened sensitivity to living with the mice.

CONTROLLING PESTS AS INTERSPECIES CARE

If the graphic images of dead mice and rats were legitimatised by their collective designation as invasive species, methods of controlling and killing were likewise illustrative of the responsible care for interspecies balance. Pest agency informs management strategies (Mougenot & Roussel, 2005, p. 122). The sheer numbers of the mice and rats exhausted commercially available traps (Turner-Cohen, 2021a) and facilitated ingenuity in trapping with various home-made devices and hacks proliferating across media. Domestic solutions included buckets of water, jeans and peanut butter-coated bars (Piovesan, 2021; Turner-Cohen, 2021a). In another news story, a woman said her husband ‘uses sundried tomatoes that we dried out ages ago and peanut butter’ (Central Western Daily, 2021).

Other animal species were also part of the interspecies control assemblages. Pets such as cats (Central Western Daily, 2021) and dogs got in on the mice-catching action. A *7 News* story reported, ‘This dog hunted down 200 mice at his family’s home’ (Turner-Cohen, 2021a). Local birds were one population enjoying the plague and were reported as having a ‘feast’ (Wakatama & Johnson, 2021). Use of bucket traps and other homemade devices were used to avoid poisonous bait (Wheeler, 2021b) as it can impact pets and other unintended animal targets. More extensive mice elimination strategies were detailed, ‘During a previous mouse plague in 1984, a farmer was shown on the evening news using a flamethrower to wipe out mice eating his crops’ (Nilsson, 2021). Some residents found creative use for mice corpses. In an *ABC News* story, we are told, ‘Dr Coupé turns the dead mice caught in her shed into fertiliser for her gum tree’ (Thorne & Thackray, 2021). The story also includes a helpful image to illustrate this process.

The NSW state government attempted to use what the media called ‘napalm for mice’ but this was rejected by the state’s pesticide regulator (the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority) (Readfearn, 2021). It was reported that scientists were working on ‘Biocontrol gene technology’ to reduce breeding (Townsend, 2021). News stories also focused on the escalating expense of the plague for residents, farmers and the state government. Initial reports suggested the cost was hundreds and thousands of dollars in March 2021 (Central Western Daily, 2021), this changed to millions in June (Piovesan, 2021), and finally in August to billions (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2021). The translation of the mice and rat plague into economic terms simultaneously positions humans as the most important actor impacted by the plague and

as vulnerable due to food security processes being premised on species remaining balanced to our (human) needs.

The news salience of the numbers of mice and rats, their turning up in unexpected places, the means devoted to eliminating them as well as the affective response to their 'sickening' presence exemplifies what Mary Douglas describes in 'Matter out of place' (1966; see also Gibbs, 2021, p. 373). Mice and rats epitomise a kind of animal that even in small numbers are considered invasive and out of place. This is partly due to their capacity for mess and disease. But mice and rats also flourish in human spaces and therefore disrupt binaries associated with humans-culture/animals-nature. Hinchliffe (2000) notes that unwanted animals who appear to thrive and cohabit with humans and in urban environments, for instance pigeons, inspire particularly intense forms of human displeasure. This revulsion can be considered a form of abjection, borrowing from Julia Kristeva (1982), as it is humans' own actions and spatial ordering that produce these encounters and breeding spaces for vermin. Revulsion for these animals is then a displacement and projection of agency onto vermin for ruining human habitation in an environment of their (humans') control.

Because of the vulnerability of the Australian continent to human and other epidemics, biosecurity and quarantine measures are strictly regulated and enforced. The *Biosecurity Act* 2015 (NSW) and the *Game and Feral Animal Control Act* 2002 (NSW) regulate pest control in the state. The *Biosecurity Act* prioritises the impact of 'pests, diseases, contaminants and other biosecurity matter that are economically significant for primary production industries' (3.b[i]) ahead of environments (ii), human health (iii) and community and infrastructure activities (iv). This definitional priority illustrates how crucial farming is to the food security of Australians. Pests are defined as 'non-indigenous animal[s]' which refers to 'animal[s] not native to Australia before European settlement' (section 7). The legislation also proscribes the management of pests, for instance 'it is illegal for a person to keep, move or release a feral pig, wild rabbit, feral deer or European red fox' (NSW Government, Department of Primary Industries, n.d.). Under federal legislation such as the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* 1999 (Cth), feral animals are defined through their impact 'on native species by predation, competition for food and shelter, destroying habitat, and by spreading diseases' (Australian Government, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, n.d.). In his discussion of the influence of nationalisation on nature, Antonsich notes the 1788 founding of a penal colony ('European settlement') is a rather crude historical period used to distinguish native from invasive species; 'ecological changes ... caused by aboriginal [sic] populations, had been happening long before European colonisation' (2020, p. 305).

Returning to Philo and Wilbert's identification of two ways of approaching animal geographies, animal spaces and beastly spaces, I suggest that the news media reporting on the plague attempts to re-present mice and rats through an animal spaces logic. This is because elements of the news media reporting centre human discursive, ideological and semiotic constructions of animals in humans' experiences of home, work and rural spaces. Animal spaces also include biopolitical approaches to animal management (see Chrulew, 2017), where human health and wellbeing are prioritised above animal and other species. This can be evidenced in elements of the state government's approach to the plague and use of napalm for mice as well as the proposed biocontrol gene manipulations. An animal spaces logic can legitimate animal killing through bio-security measures and the accompanying pest and feral designations. David Trigger (2008) argues that because cane toads are positioned as 'highly alien', acts of violence against the animals, including wanton bludgeoning, are permissible and even normalised as humorous in Australian culture.

The second approach to understanding animal geographies outlined by Philo and Wilbert is beastly spaces (2000). This approach considers space and geography from an animal-perspective

by decentring the importance of humans from cohabited environments and focuses on the “more-than-human” dimensions of social and spatial practices’ (Lorimer & Srinivasan, 2013, p. 332). For the purposes of this analysis, a beastly spaces logic may inform how the traps, both poisonous and non-toxic, devised to kill mice and rats create assemblages with other matter, which impacts on their success or failure in capturing mice. As I mentioned above, there were genuine concerns from farmers and residents that the use of poison would have resulted in secondary kills for native as well as farm animal (ABC News, 2021) and so home-made devices were deployed according to this differential care for species. Pets, livestock, native animals and the environment itself also played roles in mediating and experiencing the plague. Interestingly, the only perspective I found in the news media that attempted to focus on the wellbeing and agency of the mice as disarticulated from their cohabitants came from the Australian PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) organisation. This was swiftly condemned by farmers, as one tweet noted, ‘PETA says the mice have just as much right to be there as humans, farmer mate said he’ll gather up a few thousand and drop them off at PETA’s headquarters’ (Graham, 2021). Such a response demonstrates the privileging of local knowledge of ‘the rural way of life’ (Skogen & Krange, 2003, p. 318) in exercises of animal killing.

THE BEASTLY LANDSCAPES OF REGIONAL AND RURAL AUSTRALIA

In this section, I want to push the notion of beastly landscapes further, beyond PETA’s rather facile and unhelpful assertion of mice rights, to consider how the environment and its actors position humans in relation to settler colonisation. I have been discussing so far how animal spaces construct animals’ utility to humans according to spatial orders. Animal species which disrupt this order and persist in their cohabitation with humans in ways that are unwanted turn animal spaces into beastly spaces and invoke abjection for humans. Where the animals-nature/humans-culture binary in urban spaces more readily constructs animals as matter out of place in urban settings, in the rural spaces discussed in this article, animals are typically constructed as matter in place due to associations between nature and rurality. The history of settler colonisation in Australia creates a further binary for animals in rural spaces, that of feral versus non-feral animals. The former refers to introduced and non-native flora and fauna that over-populate and overwhelm native ecologies.

Obscured within the focus on swarming, numbers and invasion, few media connected the plague to the prolonged drought experienced in the Central West region of New South Wales (Australian Government, Bureau of Meteorology, n.d.). This was punctuated by unexpected heavy rainfall towards the latter part of 2020. According to the CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, a government agency responsible for scientific research), the rainfall created the food and breeding conditions for the mice and rats (Nilsson, 2021). This rainfall was a double-edged sword for farmers in that it provided the potential for a yield to mitigate the lack of production brought about by the drought but the return of the mice then threatened the viability of those crops (news.com.au, 2021; Thorne & Thackray, 2021). As a result of this disruption, the state government released funding support for farmers, small businesses and households to manage mice and rat elimination (see Service NSW, 2022). This is important funding as food security relies on farming in the Central West. It is worth noting, per Eualeyai/Kamillaroi scholar Larissa Behrendt (2007), how monocultural farming is consistently supported and subsidised by governments despite its long-term un-sustainability, whereas rural First Nations communities have been closed and viewed as unviable (see Harrison, 2014).

The persistence and perseverance of monocultural farming take place against a cultural geographical imaginary where the rural and non-urban landscapes of Australia are constructed as particularly ferocious and daunting for settlers. This view of rural landscape has been described as uncanny in psychoanalytic terms (see Gelder & Jacobs, 1998), as something that cannot be conquered or understood by humans. A number of scholars have pointed to the settler colonial geographical imaginary where the periphery of colonial cities was something to be feared and where frontier violence occurred (see Warren, 2020). These ideas remove First Nations presence from cities by relocating Indigeneity to the bush and outback (see Fredericks, 2013). In their article on rurality and the Australian Gothic, John Scott and Dean Biron argue the outback is either depicted as a rural idyll or horrifying landscape (p. 308). Typically nature is represented as an antidote to the excesses of civilisation (p. 310), whereas nature in Australia has frustrated colonial intentions of land management. Also drawing on Kristeva, the authors posit: 'With rural horror what was normatively valued in the idyll becomes a source of the abject' (p. 310). Additionally, colonial myths attribute notions of 'wild' and 'wilderness' to Indigenous peoples (Bacon, 2019, p. 61) to rationalise ecological (and population) management. Feral animals exemplify and exacerbate rural horror by combining both the expansiveness of the landscape and its fecund powers of proliferation; as one news report put it, 'Intensive baiting programmes have so far had little success against the swarm' (Kaur Sachdeva, 2021).

Of course, from a First Nations perspective, it is settlers who have swarmed, multiplied and invaded the Country. This is illustrated in the children's book, *The Rabbits* (1998), written by John Marsden and illustrated by Shaun Tan. Here the settlers are represented as rabbits who multiply and overwhelm the existing ecologies. The *Biosecurity Act* glosses this ecological devastation as mere 'settlement', disconnected from colonisation. According to Trigger, northern First Nations considered early settler colonisation, 'wild time' (1992). Gunditjmarra and Bundjalung musician Archie Roach also illustrates these themes in the song and video to 'Alien Invasion' (2002). The settler projection of the uncanny onto an empty landscape is reversed with Roach and other Indigenous subjects floating in a blank space of water subject to an unseen but oppressive invasion from above.

Dominant settler colonial imaginaries conflated Indigenous peoples with the environment, supported by racial science. Under Protectionism, a set of laws operating from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, First Nations were segregated and subjected to quarantine and racial hygiene on the basis that they were viewed as a 'dying race' (see Beresford & Omaji, 2000). Recalling Patrick Wolfe's notion that settlers invert the native and foreign status of populations so that migrant settlers become autochthonous to a land by eliminating Indigenous peoples (2006), settler invaders likened their violence to a form of plant and animal husbandry: 'the best thing that could be done would be to shoot all the blacks and manure the ground with their carcasses' (Jalata, 2013; see also Bacon, 2019). The nationalisation of nature frames the policing of other populations through a military logic of invasion (Antonsich, 2020, p. 305) so that settlers become autochthonous defenders of Australia.

How do First Nations ontologies and epistemologies negotiate cohabitation within these violence logics? First Nations ways of managing land and plant associations prioritise sustainability and cultural practices so that no species is ever over-farmed (Bodkin, 2017; Pascoe, 2014; Rose, 2008). Automated fish and eel traps in New South Wales and Victoria were carefully designed for sustainability (see Ruddell & Randell-Moon, 2022). First Nations have incorporated non-native animals such as horses and camels into animal husbandry and land management. Speaking about plans to cull the wild brumby population in Kosciuszko National Park a few years ago, Ngarigu and Djiringanj Elders Ellen Mundy and David Dixon had this to say:

Even though horses were an introduced species, they [Elders] still learnt how to communicate with them. (McKnight, 2018)

But equally as important our old people were animal lovers. They would have had great respect for these powerful horse spirits. Our people have always been accepting of visitors to our lands and quite capable of adapting to change so that our visitors can also belong, and have their place. Learning their ways and gaining true understanding. A caring and sharing culture. The ultimate communicators. (Dixon, 2017)

Trigger argues that complex responses underlie First Nations' conservation and land management where 'the significance of cultural landscapes can be constituted through the presence of "nonindigenous" species within the broader context of autochthonous Australian nature' (p. 640). There is also evidence of adaptive responses to conservation in relation to particular introduced animal species depending on their cultural history to First Nations (Robinson et al., 2005) and many First Nations land management plans include two-way learning and adaptive management (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). Because First Nations ontologies and epistemologies account for non-human stakeholders in food economies and sustainability (see Kwaymullina & Kwaymullina, 2010), there is scope for encountering an interspecies dynamic that does not prioritise the human in scientific approaches to managing the environment. In pointing to these axiologies, I am not trying to romanticise First Nations approaches as favouring cohabitation. First Nations have consistently pointed to the destructive impact of non-Indigenous peoples and species to the environment of Australia (see Watson, 2018). Nor are non-Indigenous approaches to interspecies care devoid of animal considerations. In the news reports surveyed for this article, many residents and farmers expressed concerns about bait being used on farms due to livestock as well as the impact on domestic and native animals. Part of the news salience of innovative homemade traps was devising non-poisonous traps to minimise impacts on other species. Some of these were quite large and labour-intensive in order to capture several hundreds and thousands of mice.

I have suggested that in the news reporting of the mice and rat plague, this event was mediated through – an albeit complex – logic of animal spaces. This logic understands animals as requiring management and spatial ordering by humans. When this is disrupted and animals persist in unwanted cohabitation, animals become abject and matter out of place. Thinking the plague through a logic of beastly spaces explicates how it is human-centred actions and monocultural farming that has produced the conditions for this plague as well as other feral flora and faunas that have plagued First Nations Country. Settler colonial invaders and their/our racialised speciesism justified their/our practices of violent elimination through categorising and managing First Nations Country as animal spaces. First Nations resistance to this eliminatory logic could be considered aligning with beastly spaces and the need to include non-human actors as a feature of sustainable land management. For the purposes of this article, I highlight First Nations land management perspectives in order to disclose how a non-Indigenous consideration of beastly spaces must necessarily include an account of the environment and non-human actors that is unsettling.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided an analysis of how settler colonial rural landscapes construct and mediate dynamics of interspecies care through binaries of native and invasive species. These dynamics

and binaries are a constitutive part of the reproduction of rural landscapes. Focusing specifically on the mice and rat plague in New South Wales, news media reporting reiterated an animal spaces logic in the affective experiences of horror and vulnerability in cohabiting with mouse and rat populations. I connected this horror and vulnerability to a disordering of the anthropocentric hierarchies maintained through monocultural farming. Engaging with the plague through the lens of beastly places provides an opportunity to probe what is disavowed in the animal spaces reactions to the plague, namely that it is monocultural farming that has rendered interspecies dynamics – and their connections to humans – vulnerable. First Nations' careful custodianship of interspecies associations and relationships works to mitigate the kinds of climate and ecological crises demonstrated in the plague. When Country and non-human actors are respected for their agency and active role in interspecies assemblages, vulnerability is distributed as a responsibility within these assemblages rather than assumed and experienced as a defensive loss of humans' control in the environments they cohabit. Acknowledging monocultural farming as disruptive to interspecies care renders the mice and rat plague expected rather than unusual and would enable this disaster to be situated within an ongoing crisis of settler colonisation that differentially impacts us all.

There are two broader research and policy lessons prompted by this analysis of the mediation of pest crises in agrorural spaces founded through settler colonisation. The first is that settler colonial assumptions regarding the temporal and spatial distinction of native from foreign species may occlude First Nations' interspecies and socio-ecological practices from dominant bio-security management strategies. Indeed, First Nations were not mediated as significant members of the agrorural communities impacted by the plague. In a research context, Bacon has identified the need for non-Indigenous researchers to more explicitly include Indigenous sovereign perspectives in environmental sociology. 'I have met very few people who can easily name the traditional peoples of the land they live on' (2019, p. 61). Notions of wildness as disruptive (Buller, 2008, p. 1595) also need to be situated within settler colonial conceptions of Indigenous-ness as 'wild' and 'ungoverned', which rationalise ongoing eco-colonial practices of control.

The second lesson is that representation continues to play a key role in mediating ecological crises and therefore forms an important vector for environmental information and literacy as well as bio-security management. In particular, the framing of the plague through a biological rather than socioeconomic and socio-spatial lens meant that important contextualising information about the history of monocultural farming and its consequences was occluded from public debate. As noted by Charles Mather and Amy Marshall, the risk of disease imposed from animals has a global scale but their management is 'local and geographically specific' (2011, p. 300). Mediations of pest crises create opportunities for policy interventions into public understandings of interspecies care dynamics and could be used as the site for local participatory citizenship workshops on the ethics and challenges of cohabiting with others.

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