

# Multispecies Futures

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Christina Fredengren's keynote has identified a fundamental gap in archaeological studies of human-animal relationships – that is, inter- and intra-species power differentials and their illumination of 'how situated worlds are made together with animals, but also how such making favours the thriving of certain beings at the expense of others' (Fredengren 2021:12). This is a long-overdue direction for human-animal studies, and it is laudable that Fredengren has raised the call to address this important issue. While Fredengren rightly points out limitations in the use of many of our previous heuristics such as entanglement and taxonomic approaches, I want to embody her recommendation that we take an affirmative approach by trying to revive the power of these heuristics, to build upon them and attend to questions of power that have been left unexplored. My goal in this commentary is to revisit some of her key points, and discuss how we might approach power in multi-species communities.

The lens of entanglement has been quite productive in human-animal studies, and the call to 'look at who carries the heaviest burden in time- and site-specific entanglements, and thus what is tended to and what is excluded from benevolence and care' (Fredengren 2021:17) has the potential to be extremely productive. My mind is drawn to impactful work in zoo-archaeology at multiple scales, from the life-history approach (Binois et al. 2013; Haruda et al. 2020; Losey et al. 2011; Tourigney et al. 2015) to the aggregate studies of animal trauma or pathologies (Van Neer et al. 2015) that show points of care as well as abuse. Often these studies are relatively idiosyncratic, as presentations of singular individuals who demonstrate some notable pathology or treatment, but they are nonetheless illuminat-

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ing for their nuanced assessment of lived experience. Consider the power of broader approaches in this same vein, in particular when combined with other lines of evidence from history, art, mortuary practices, and so forth. Studies of single species have the power to illuminate attitudes towards animals as individuals and as species, but multi-species comparisons would also be valuable to illuminate those that thrived at the expense of others. Campbell (2014) is an exemplar of this multi-species relational approach that accounts for unique life courses in his study of Shang animality, humanity, and divinity. He demonstrates that social hierarchies and the distribution of power are less about the classification of different species, but instead relate to distinct pathways or life courses that cross-cut our current species concepts.

I do want to problematize a binary that Fredengren presented – that of anthropocentric (bad) versus multispecies (good) approaches to human-animal relationships. My question is, do we want a ‘non-anthropocentric multi-species archaeology’ (Fredengren 2021:13)? Here I must acknowledge my biases and that I am an anthropologically-trained archaeologist. While I believe the avoidance of anthropocentrism and embrace of a ‘true’ multi-species archaeology is a good thought experiment, I cannot help but wonder, what comes from it? I align with Brian Boyd when he says:

The multi-species move to decenter the human, while laudable, can tend to erase our own situatedness both as human scholars and as the dominant force of change on the planet. This approach leaves little space to address the difficult issue of human responsibility in a future political imaginary where decisions will have to be made about the results and consequences of actions by ‘nonbeneficial’ nonhuman species. (Boyd 2017:303)

I heartily approve working to identify the varied forms and instances of non-human agency, and to recognize the relationships that humans, animals, environments, and myriad others are entangled in to create multi-species communities. But nonetheless I wonder, can the archaeological project ever be non-anthropocentric? And what does it gain if it is? My concern is that it elides our positionality as human scholars (or more-than-human, but still mostly human, scholars) and risks framing our own attitudes, assumptions, and interpretations of past animal experiences as if they come from the animal. And we can never know the animal, their impressions of this relationship, their experience of it, their thoughts or concerns or values in these past communities. For me, the archaeological project remains anthropocentric, but that does not invalidate the richness and nuance brought by analyses of humans within multi-species communities, which bring into focus the fundamental issues of how peoples in the past constructed their experience as sentient beings among a diverse array of other sentient beings.

I would also like to reclaim the value of categories in archaeological thinking. They can serve as a useful heuristic that allow us to identify similarities and differences between modern and ancient categories, and to trace the links and examine the webs of relationships between categories. Yes, categories can certainly be oversimplified and used as a crutch, but this is true of most models. When used as tools for thinking rather than constructed as absolutes, categories can be quite useful. Even in a simple sense, categories can open up our analyses through the identification of exactly where our modern categories do not align with past perspectives when we are attentive to discontinuities and poorness of fit. I would argue that past hybrids, border-creatures, and monsters that ‘slip out of taxonomic folds’ (Fredengren 2021:19) demonstrate that categorization is in fact meaningful. One of the reasons that hybrids and monsters are so powerful is that they are transgressive, demonstrate the permeability of bodies, and can reinforce the categories that they play with, even as they threaten them.

Killability is another powerful concept brought by Fredengren to address power differentials in multispecies communities. I would simply expand on this concept and contextualize it within the broader spectrum of multi-species relationships. While it is true that ‘a major relationship between humans and animals is acted out in violence and killing practices’ (Fredengren 2021:22), I worry that the deaths of animals is an disciplinary preoccupation due to its archaeological visibility. Though in many cases more difficult to see, we should also attend to those animals allowed to live as well as those considered worthy of care: the companion animals, working animals, or animals observed and held in awe to name just a few. There are also affiliative relationships with animals that may end in death – sacrifice of companion animals, animals cared for from birth but nonetheless killed and consumed – as well as exploitative or abusive relationships that do not end with humans killing the animals. These all have different power valences at the scale of interpersonal relationships as well as in the hierarchies of value that organize conceptions of humanity and animality in different cultures. These differing relationships should be contextualized to determine how these relationships illuminate ‘what is tended to and what is excluded from benevolence and care’ (Fredengren 2021:17).

Fredengren’s proposal is admirable, it will move our field forward to address a pressing area of study that is too often overlooked and will help us better understand the structures of power and value that organized life in past multispecies communities. With this call to action, we can turn our attention to addressing how these power differentials are created, enforced, and justified in past societies, as well as how these structures changed over time. From a more hopeful perspective, a better understanding of alternative configurations of power in past societies may provide inspiration for

alternative, more ethical distributions of power in our own multispecies communities.

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