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Pests and People in Stef Smith's *Human Animals*

Throughout the history of western theatre, animals onstage have invariably been read in relation to human concerns. The reviews of Stef Smith's *Human Animals* (2016) at the Royal Court followed in this tradition, interpreting the play's central animal players as symbolic stand-ins for humans. By examining the particularity of the non-human animals at the centre of *Human Animals'* urban eco-crisis, this article aims to rectify previous anthropocentric readings and acknowledge the agency and autonomy of the play's non-human animals, namely pigeons and foxes. Building on Una Chaudhuri's 'Theatre of Species', this article demonstrates *Human Animals'* deep engagement with animal alterity, subverting conventional socio-zoological classifications of 'pest' animals and popular preconceptions of pigeons and foxes in British culture. While Smith's play uses the dystopian mode to dramatize a small-scale, localized eco-crisis, this article highlights how its focus on urban animal encounters and zoonotic disease holds broader implications for re-imagining inter-species relations and planetary health. An award-winning playwright, Isla Cowan is also a PhD student at the University of Glasgow. Her current research investigates ideas of ecological consciousness in contemporary Scottish theatre and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (SGSAH).

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UNA CHAUDHURI, in *The Stage Lives of Animals*, details the reactions of theatre critics to the 2007 production of Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* at the Royal Court in London. Chaudhuri notes that 'the one feature' ignored in all critical discussions of the play was 'the figure of an animal' – the rhinoceros.[1] This omission reveals theatre's tendency to metaphorize the more-than-human, and the tradition of critical theatre discourse to seek out only the symbolic significance of animal others. Chaudhuri attributes these anthropocentric symbolic interpretations to an anxiety that results from 'Western theatre's repression of animality' and to consequent attempts to 'fill its spaces with animal effigies, symbols, masks, and meanings'.[2] By making the animal others onstage always stand-ins for something human – always 'allegories for human preoccupations' – these practices render the individual agency and autonomy of non-human animals irrelevant and risk extending this thinking beyond the theatre with potentially disastrous consequences for animal relations on a global scale.[3]

Almost ten years later, the Royal Court staged Stef Smith's *Human Animals* (2016), which dramatized an urban eco-crisis caused by sick 'pest' animals. In the play, the 'pest' animals not only encroach increasingly on the city's private, human spaces, but are also reported to be attacking humans and spreading disease. Rather than investigate the cause of the animals' sickness and new aggressive behaviours, the authorities retaliate with a mass extermination, and it becomes gradually clear that their methods for controlling the crisis purposefully exploit civilians' fear of infestation and infection in order to pursue further, unnecessary destruction to local wildlife. However, the critical reception of *Human Animals*, like that of *Rhinoceros*, disregarded the animals at the centre of the play. Michael Billington's review for the *Guardian*, for example, denied the significance of the play's non-human animals, stating that Smith's 'fascination lies in the effect [the infestation] has on humans'.[4] Emma Smith, writing for *Exeunt* magazine, concluded: 'Of course, it's not really about the animals. It's about the

humans.'[5] Other critics were eager to humanize the play's interest in pigeons and foxes, interpreting the treatment of the city's 'pest' animals as merely allegorical. Writing for the *Independent*, Paul Taylor regarded the play as 'a metaphor for ethnic cleansing and the hysteria whipped up against minorities'.[6] Such reviews actually replicate the exact sort of anthropocentric thinking the play seeks to expose and challenge.

Like Chaudhuri, I am critical of anthropocentric readings that refuse to acknowledge the importance of non-human animals *as* non-human animals. Rather than read *Human Animals* as allegory, then, I am interested in exploring the species specificity of its central animal players and how Smith uses the dramatic potential of the dystopian mode to explicitly address speciesism.[7] In *Animals and Society*, Margo DeMello highlights the importance of 'getting to the core of our representations of animals and understanding what it means when we invest animals with meanings'.[8] Smith's *Human Animals* does exactly this, investigating the negative preconceptions of pigeons and foxes that a London audience inevitably bring with them to the theatre. While Smith emphasizes the adaptability of the play for different locations – noting in the play's preface that references to specific places in the UK 'should be changed to similar references that suit the location where the performance is happening' – the foregrounding of pigeons and foxes feels particular to London.[9]

Smith's dramatization of prejudices against these specific 'pest' animals recalls the hostility displayed in then Mayor Ken Livingstone's 2003 by-law prohibiting the feeding of pigeons in Trafalgar Square, as well as his successor Boris Johnson's condemnation of foxes as urban 'menaces' in 2013 after one attacked a small child in the borough of Bromley.[10] Although there are plenty of people who openly and unapologetically like pigeons and foxes, the general atmosphere of animosity that surrounds these animals in cities, and especially in London, is undeniable. Acknowledging this localized cultural subjectivity, I examine how *Human Animals* engages with contemporary socio-zoological classifications of 'pest' animals and the literary and cultural connotations of pigeons and foxes for a British audience, alongside a more general exploration of the Cartesian human/animal divide. By demonstrating how Smith's play 'engag[es] deeply with animal alterity' and thus participates in what Chaudhuri calls the 'Theatre of Species', I argue that *Human Animals* opens up ways of re-imagining animal others and rethinking complex inter-species relationships on a local level, whilst also commenting on more global concerns of planetary health.[11]

Human as Animal

Like Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, the title of Smith's play immediately indicates her interest in animals and in troubling the traditional Cartesian binary between humans and animals. To begin, *Human Animals* can be interpreted as two nouns or an adjective and a noun, leaving the potential relationship between the human and animal parts ambiguous. It also calls to mind scholarly discussions within Human Animal Studies and beyond that utilize the term 'human animal' in an attempt to dismantle human exceptionalism. Although the success of this term is debatable – arguably discussing human animals and *non*-human animals simply replicates the same human/animal binary – it is nonetheless significant for the emphasis it places on presenting the human *as an animal* and as one species in a wider context of living things: I am a human animal as opposed to a non-human animal, as opposed to a cat animal, or pigeon animal, or fox, or lion. The play's title, therefore, seems to equalize humans and other animals, positioning them on the same level and in the same animal world.

Yet the title also engages negative western preconceptions of animality that inherit an archaic association between 'animal behaviour' and an uncontrollable wildness or an inability to think, echoing René Descartes' animal-as-machine. In this sense, the playbill suggests that the human characters will behave 'like animals'. While this may appear to 'equalize' humans and non-humans (perhaps suggesting that human behaviour *is*

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animal behaviour), it reinforces the problematic popular notion of animals as less-than humans, of animality as a state of being or behaviour that is opposed to 'civilized' humanity.

By invoking both the academic sense of the term 'human animal' and its resonances in the popular imagination – in one sense closing the gap between humans and non-humans and in the other extending it – Smith's title creates a dynamic tension of animal attitudes and relations. Smith goes on to interweave these contradictory forces throughout the play, complicating what it means to be both human *and* animal, to be *Human Animals.* There is no Deleuzo-Guattarian 'becoming-animal' in this play but, rather, a gradual deconstruction of human exceptionalism and the socio-zoological distinctions between different animals such as 'pets' and 'pests'. Timothy Morton outlines the kinship of deconstruction and ecology, noting that 'there is no Nature, only people, some of whom are human beings'.[12] Smith's play arguably embraces this sentiment. The play acknowledges the personhood and individuality of each animal and dramatizes a deconstruction of human/non-human hierarchies, boldly questioning the violence humans inflict upon other living beings.

First, it is important to examine the plot and structure of *Human Animals* in order to establish its complex engagement with inter-species relations. With a cast of six, the play's action oscillates between various urban locations, such as a garden, a pub, a park, and inside several houses – settings that remain unspecified in the text, but are suggested through dialogic implication. This variation builds a sense of the ecology of the district and the different lives affected by the animal eco-crisis. In the opening scenes, the audience is introduced to Lisa and Jamie, a couple in their thirties, who find a dead pigeon in their living room; friends and neighbours John and Nancy, in their fifties, who argue over the pigeon infestation in John's garden; Nancy's twenty-something daughter, Alex, who returns home from travelling abroad; and Si, Lisa's boss at a chemical distribution company, who encounters John in a pub and proceeds to meet him there regularly as the crisis develops.

The way in which the play is pieced together gradually through a series of short duologues and dramatic snapshots resembles the format of television soap opera and resists a traditional, singular narrative arc. This collaging effect allows the play to maintain a sense of tension and mystery as the collective story of the eco-crisis unfolds. Details about the animal disease and the reported attacks on humans remain ambiguous throughout, complicated by the play's emphasis on 'rumour' and 'hysteria', and a lack of consistent information about the crisis: within the space of a few scenes, Si goes from declaring that the disease is 'not airborne' to asking Lisa pointedly: 'Could you cover your mouth please. They said it's airborne now.'[13]

While a cast of six is arguably not large enough to create a realistic representation of the socio-environmental issues at play here, it provides an effective allegorical representation and brings the play's focus on its non-human agents to the fore. Smith's characters are by no means two-dimensional, but they do have clear archetypal roles, from Jamie and Lisa, the quarrelling couple who must choose between principles and love, to Si, the play's villain, who callously embraces the eco-crisis for capitalist gain. These characters are, to an extent, used merely as vehicles to express and explore what is happening to the city's non-human animals; each duologue exchange has an animal issue at its core. Smith, therefore, flips the traditional meaning-making of theatre, depicting the human characters as general and symbolic, and the non-human animals, by contrast, as specific and intrinsic to the action. Indeed, unlike her previous play *Swallow* (2015), in which a pelican was directly tied to one of the characters, the characters in *Human Animals* could be removed or altered and the animals and their actions would remain exactly the same. As Smith herself asserts, 'There would still be pigeons.'[14]

(Sick) Animals on the Stage

The centrality of pigeons and foxes in *Human Animals* is indicated by the play's opening scene in which Smith not only spotlights the play's non-human players, but also ensures

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the audience take them seriously as autonomous animals in and of themselves. *Human Animals* begins with a dead pigeon centre-stage. The pigeon is lying in the middle of Jamie and Lisa's living room, having apparently smashed through the window. Jamie has covered the dead bird with a tea towel, unsettled by the way it was 'looking at [him]' with 'beady little eyes'.[15] This is the only onstage representation of a non-human animal throughout the play but, even still, the bird remains completely covered by the towel and therefore unseen. It is this *invisibility* of the pigeon, seen as a lump under a cloth, that sustains the audience's suspension of disbelief and allows them to buy into the reality of the pigeon *as a pigeon.*

Lourdes Orozco describes the 'presence' of 'animals onstage' as a 'challenge to risk-avoidance and responsibility', noting the way in which live animals – who exist outside theatre's dramatic currency – bring 'the real' to performance.[16] However, it is clear that the 'real' of which Orozco talks is a more reflexive, metatheatrical 'real' than what is at work in *Human Animals.* Orozco's 'real' distracts from the particularity of the animal in favour of issues of representation and participation. Smith's play, by contrast, is not interested in this question, but in staging an ethical debate about specific animals and the meanings humans invest in them. Paradoxically, then, it is by remaining largely offstage and unseen that the non-human animals of *Human Animals* retain their reality.

While putting live animals on the stage would be ethically dubious (and ironic for a play interested in animal welfare), it is arguable that any other *visible* onstage representation would be either evidently fake and thus comic or fall into the trap of sentimental, anthropomorphic representation such as that found in such musicals and children's shows as the Disney classics *The Lion King* and *The Jungle Book.* The only way to portray a non-human animal convincingly in realist theatre is by its absence. While the pigeon's death is not necessarily a prime example of animal agency in the play, it nevertheless allows the pigeon to be both onstage and absent, exposed and unseen, at the same time. It is important that Smith includes this one onstage representation of a non-human animal at the very beginning of the play as it prepares the audience for later offstage representations: the onstage pigeon acts as a visible (*invisible*) anchor point for all future references to pigeons, making them seem less abstract and anonymous, and more clearly imaginable as an autonomous offstage force.

The prominence of the dead pigeon at the beginning of the play effectively foreshadows the blood and chaos to come – a sort of omen typical of birds – and introduces the ideological gulf between Jamie and Lisa in their opposing attitudes towards non-human animals: Lisa's first reaction is to complain about the blood on her carpet, while boyfriend Jamie wonders whether the bird has left chicks behind somewhere. Yet, most importantly, this opening immediately establishes the importance of the pigeon, literally placed centre-stage and central to the unfolding drama. The non-human animals are not the metaphor or the backdrop here, as many critics have claimed, but the central drivers of the play, acquiring more presence through their physical absence as the play's ecological crisis develops.

Although the plot of *Human Animals* is motivated by a concern for animal welfare, the play also draws on the dystopian tradition, staging a prolonged atmosphere of threat and anxiety. At the start, John's garden is overrun with pigeons and rotting fox carcasses surround the bushes and bins, suggesting something of a biblical plague. As Alex returns home, her mother Nancy tells her not to go near the shrubs: environmental control have been round to kill the foxes and insisted people 'shouldn't go near their bodies', implying ideas of toxicity and contagion.[17] There is an ominous quality to this 'pest' infestation, due not only to the encroaching presence of the pigeons and foxes in their multitudes – forming large collectives that threaten humanist individualism – but also to the mysterious disease that seems to be affecting their behaviour. While pigeons, and later 'big white doves', are seen 'crashing into the glass' of Lisa's living-room window – somewhat reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's

The Birds (1963) – Alex reports news of a child who 'might have rabies or something like it' after being bitten by a fox, evoking the mutant creature narratives of eco-horror and zombie apocalypse genres.[18] Indeed, in a later scene, it is affirmed that 'they're worried people can get it'.[19]

The emphasis on cross-species contagion also recalls contemporary anxieties over 'Bird Flu' (avian influenza) and 'Mad Cow Disease' (bovine spongiform encephalopathy), and anticipates more recent concerns regarding coronavirus – another zoonotic disease originating from animal cruelty.[20] This perhaps suggests that the sickness suffered by pigeons and foxes in *Human Animals* originates in their previous marginalization and mistreatment by humans in the city. Like the 'speculative fiction' of Margaret Atwood, Smith's play resists unrealistic science fiction or fantasy and is, instead, rooted in plausible reality. As Carol Ann Howells observes, in the former's work the narrative is formed 'on the basis of historical and contemporary evidence'.[21] By implicating the logic of historic epidemics and the generic patterns of popular genres such as eco-horror, *Human Animals* similarly draws on the audience's collective cultural knowledge and subverts their expectations, presenting them not with a graphic, disturbing animal-disaster play, but with a dystopian drama that uses heightened realism to gradually transform fear and revulsion into sympathy for persecuted 'pest' animals.

This is achieved most clearly through the character of Jamie, who becomes the voice of animal rights activism in the play. When Jamie buries a dead fox in the garden early on in the play, Lisa is outraged. Jamie explains that 'maybe a fox and his kids lived there, hundreds of years ago and then we came along and fucked it up for him'.[22] Although Jamie's desire to bury the fox enacts his own humanist desire for ritual or ceremony, his acknowledgement of the fox's equal entitlement to space and respect is significant. The emphasis on human intervention here – how humans 'fucked it up' for the fox – also hints towards the role played by humans in the emergence of zoonotic disease. Jamie becomes more proactive in his defence of non-human animals as the play progresses: while he reveals in this early scene that he has taken in an injured pigeon and is nursing her back to health, he goes on to rescue more animals, defying the district hysteria and damaging 'pest' prejudices.

The play's eco-crisis escalates when the human characters discover that the authorities have 'closed the roads' and the district has been cut off from the rest of the city to prevent further contamination.[23] This lockdown is followed by increasing control measures such as curfews and 'rolling blackouts', allowing the authorities to implement a mass extermination of non-human animals – not just pigeons and foxes, but also zoo animals and household pets that are now also believed to carry the disease.[24] Where 'environmental control' started the play with a somewhat modest approach, culling the pigeon population in John's garden, they now take a more holistic and aggressive one, burning parks, gassing animals, and tearing down buildings for the sake of 'the greater good'.[25]

While the exact cause and manifestation of the animals' sickness is never fully revealed, there is a sense that the crisis has been manipulated by the government and big business in order to justify destruction to wildlife and increase building and trade. As Alex tells Nancy: 'You know they've wanted that park gone for years. It's valuable land. Land where they can build shopping malls and flats.'[26] Taking advantage of the crisis to sell a chemical product that supposedly kills the virus, Si declares: 'We've done three-hundred-and-twenty-four per cent more business than usual.'[27] However, Si is evasive when questioned on its effectiveness, telling John: 'All I know is that it makes people feel safe.'[28] Si acts as a foil to Jamie and his newfound animal activism, characterized as contrastingly cold and self-serving. Despite being somewhat redeemed by his love for his daughter, Si's overwhelming disregard for animal suffering cannot be ignored. While other characters' speciesism is more subtle, and portrayed largely as a product of socio-cultural conditioning, his is overt and, in many ways, actively cruel. Indeed, Si announces joyously that he will be 'investing in some incinerators

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soon' as it will be 'good for business'.[29] According to Si, his actions are justified because 'no one likes foxes anyway'.[30]

In the play's dramatic climax, the urban district is in chaos: there are protests in the park, the authorities destroy homes and habitats without cause, and a lion that has 'escaped from the zoo' is roaming the streets.[31] Jamie, who is secretly 'building a new world' for animals in his garden, is eventually found out. Environmental control arrive 'with guns and with gas' and tear 'holes in the roof and through the plaster', proceeding to beat Jamie when they discover he has already let the animals go free.[32] Meanwhile, Alex returns injured from a protest where, to her mother's dismay, she joined 'people chaining themselves to [the] iron fences' of the park to stop the authorities from burning it and, with it, the habitats of healthy animals. Alex, defeated, tells John: 'They're burning everything. This isn't about saving anything. It's about destroying everything that's in the way.'[33]

Yet, despite the feeling of irrevocable disaster here, *Human Animals* does not end in apocalypse, Armageddon or what Chaudhuri calls the 'ecocidal free-for-all' of Caryl Churchill's play *Far Away* (2000).[34] Rather, *Human Animals* ends in an unnerving return to a 'new type of normal'.[35] In the last few scenes, the threat of the disease miraculously vanishes and the roads start to open up again. Here, Smith emphasizes the sense of corruption around the crisis, hinting at the ulterior motives of the authorities' control measures: Si remarks that it is 'funny' that the disease vanished straight 'after they burnt the last park'.[36] As restrictions are lifted, the characters wait for 'everyone to calm down' and for things to 'move on' while the bodies of pigeons, pets, foxes, and 'the body of a baby' are cleared from the streets.[37] Nancy's pet cat, Marmalade, who has been missing for the duration of the play, finally returns home to die, having been 'hit, or beaten' amidst the chaos.[38] While references to the missing cat are used throughout to highlight the distinction between how humans treat 'pets' and 'pests', this ending reinforces their essential similarity, as both 'pets' and 'pests' have suffered due to human actions.

The 'ecocidal' ending of Churchill's *Far Away* is mentioned here as it has been praised for its ecological turn. *Far Away*, in its last act, presents animals and the elements as equal to human beings by implicating them in a global, inter-species conflict. However, Churchill's play does this by presenting a dangerous anthropomorphism that projects such human morality and behaviour as war tactics and rape onto other species. Harper tells Todd: 'Mallards are not a good waterbird. They commit rape, and they're on the side of the elephants and the Koreans. But crocodiles are always in the wrong.'[39] While giving prominence to more-than-human forces, this sort of absurdism denies the autonomy and specificity of the animal other.

Human Animals, by contrast, does not try to level the playing field between humans and other animals by ascribing them false, humanized agency, but acknowledges their autonomous reality. While the foxes and pigeons threaten and attack humans, this stays within the bounds of realism, based on their species' standard behaviour. Indeed, the play shares more affinities with Churchill's play *Escaped Alone*, which was also produced at the Royal Court in 2016. Set in a fenced garden, the play features four septuagenarian women discussing the terrors of modern life: technology, entertainment, money, phobias, and depression.

While the main action parallels the dystopian unease of *Human Animals*, with the lingering threat of unseen, offstage forces, the dialogue is punctuated by prophetic monologues that describe a much grander, more *apocalyptic* vision. This disturbing vision is shaped by twisted technology ('Smartphones were distributed by charities when rice ran out, so the dying could watch cooking') and features several animal acts that, although compelling, are purely fantastical: 'Rats were eaten by those who still had digestive systems'; 'Pets rained from the sky'; 'Some shot flaming swans, some shot their children.'[40] One monologue even features the urban fox, describing how 'in northern Canada . . . the city was left to sick foxes, who soon abandoned it for a lack of dustbins'.[41]

The juxtaposition of the women's garden chit-chat and the descriptions of a terrifying apocalyptic vision suggests that people are sitting around drinking tea while the world falls apart. The play effectively questions the passivity of humankind and, similarly to *Far Away*, uses an absurdist apocalypse to invent and interrogate the world's potentially catastrophic future. However, this is a future that feels very general, contradictory, and unclear. While the nightmarish Baudrillardian simulacra of *Escaped Alone* and the cosmic warfare of *Far Away* both seem 'far away' – surreal and symbolic – the epidemic control-turned-chaos of *Human Animals* remains a much closer, more tangible threat. Smith's play acts as a more urgent and effective ecological warning, suggesting what could happen *in reality* if harmful speciesism continues to go unchecked: 'Look out the window, this is what we will lose . . . It's beautiful and we'll lose it. It will all die under our watch.'[42]

There is, however, a note of hope, or post-humanist promise, at the end of *Human Animals*, which is both disturbing and beautiful. With his animal Eden gone, Jamie sneaks out every night to see the few foxes that remain in the district undetected. Previously bitten by a fox in the confusion of the raid, Jamie offers his wound for the foxes to lick and feed on. While it is unclear whether the foxes have developed the taste for human flesh as a result of the ambiguous animal disease or due to the lack of other food sources in the city, Jamie's sacrifice is in keeping with the heightened realism of the play. He describes in earnest how the foxes 'get hungry at night' and that letting them feed on him hurts 'no more or less than anything else'. In the play's final scene, Lisa joins him, and they 'roll up' their sleeves to offer themselves as fox food in a quasi-suicidal act.[43] This sacrifice not only fulfils Jamie's playful remarks at the start of the play – that he wishes to be a fox in his 'next life' – but also suggests the ultimate insignificance of humanity: being food for the foxes is the most worthy thing they can do.[44] Indeed, Jamie tells Lisa: 'You deserve this.'[45] Ultimately, the ending of *Human Animals* highlights the importance of *non-human* animals, as Jamie and Lisa make a post-humanist sacrifice for the sake of ecology and animal welfare because, as Jamie says, 'it's their world too'.[46]

Choric Dialogue and the 'Blink' Scenes

Before investigating the particular cultural meanings of pigeons and foxes, and their role in *Human Animals*, it is important to interrogate how Smith challenges the distinction between human animals and non-human animals more generally in the play. While the play cannot provide an actual non-human perspective – it is written by a human, performed by humans, presented to a human audience – the way in which Smith suggests something of the 'other' through an inventive use of form brings the collective, inter-species trauma of the eco-crisis to the fore. The play's short, intersecting duologues are complemented by stylized choric sections that are not character-driven but are made up of disconnected phrases spoken by multiple members of the cast. The preface to the play notes: 'In the sections where there are lines that are in *italics*, they may be given to any cast member. They can also be spoken simultaneously by multiple performers.'[47]

Smith refers to these lyrical choric sections as 'blink' scenes, as they try to capture the blink of an eye, the snapshot of a moment in time.[48] These sections combine descriptions of animal acts with various overlapping thoughts and questions, such as '*Blood dries darker than you think*', '*Are those my only options?*', and '*Are you going to kiss me back?*', echoing, at times, exchanges from the dialogic scenes.[49] With their spoken-word-style poetry, these sections, as Aleks Sierz notes, 'give the play an epic scope and poetic feel'.[50] More importantly, however, they introduce ideas of disconnection, disruption, and difference, the text resembling that of Sarah Kane's experimental *4:48 Psychosis* (2000). The way in which Smith staggers the phrases out across the page seems to be a typographical representation of the spatial distribution of lines, as well as providing a sense of rhythm and interruption. Smith's *mise-en-page* therefore suggests that these lines, or phrases, come from various perspectives and should, perhaps, be

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voiced from different areas of the stage in performance. This would, in effect, create a disorienting experience resembling the chaos and panic of the urban animal crisis itself: the audience does not know where to look, who to listen to. The 'blink' scenes become gradually more disconnected and strange throughout, sometimes focusing on single words repeated over and over – '*Scratching*', '*Scurrying*', '*Screaming*' – and using interruption to create rhythm and pace – '*And slugs / And snails / And these teeth like / I lie in bed at night and hear the foxes fucking*'.[51] Towards the end of the play, these segments effectively build tension through the cumulative effect of lists and unfinished thoughts: '*The trees are / The birds are / The streets are / The rivers / The oceans / The icebergs / Something about icebergs / It's too hot*'.[52]

In the Royal Court production, directed by Hamish Pirie, these sections were accompanied by gesture and movement. For the longer of these, the actors gathered together in the centre of the stage, forming a sort of collective or pack, facing out to the audience. On a specific line, they put a hand up beside their faces, as if pressing it against a pane of glass. Later, they raised one finger, as if to point at something. In shorter 'blink' moments, the actors remained in their positions from the previous scene and spoke out to the audience from where they were standing, using the same recurring hand gestures. With the stage divided into three zones – allowing several scenes to happen simultaneously throughout the play – the 'blink' sections both interrupted and unified the play's action, cutting across the naturalistic dialogue and connecting the different urban locations in the same 'blink' of an eye. In this sense, the stylized interruptions functioned like narration, building a picture of the wider atmosphere of threat and anxiety across the district. Yet they also contextualized the human character exchanges within a wider context of living things: the human drama of the crisis is interlaced with the 'scurrying' and 'scratching' of other animals.

While Pirie's production of *Human Animals* used physicality to explore ideas of collectivity and disruption, the text itself indicates a further challenge to human individualism in the theatre. The fact that the lines of the 'blink' sections remain unassigned in the play-text suggests an absence of identity. As the cast members deliver these lines, they must come out of character: it is not their character speaking the words but something else speaking through them; and their identity in the play is momentarily suspended. This erodes the significance of the individual human character and challenges what Chaudhuri describes as 'Western theatre's traditional characterology, according to which viable dramatic identity is forged in a long, lonely, and above all, verbal journey'.[53] This is not the humanist utterings of characters in a sitting room, but words, phrases and noises that make human voices the vehicles for something more, something *more-than-human.* The way in which the more poetic, disconnected use of language in the 'blink' scenes jars with the naturalistic dialogue of the rest of the play also demonstrates different ways of communicating, perhaps even hinting at the non-logocentric meaning-making of non-human animals. Dissolving human identities and exceptionalisms, these 'blink' scenes seem to express a sense of inter-species collectivity: without resorting to aping 'the animal', these sections manage to achieve something almost post-human, acknowledging and engaging an 'animal alterity'.[54]

It is not only the plot and form of *Human Animals* that trouble the human/non-human dichotomy, but also the play's intelligent use of language throughout. The way in which the human characters talk about non-human animals is particularly telling of the conventional socio-zoological distinctions that have governed animal relations in recent history. Jacques Derrida criticizes the way in which humans often group all other living beings under the general singular term 'the animal', both imposing a hierarchy in which humans remain separate from other animals, and denying the individuality of different animal species, denying the 'heterogeneous multiplicity of the living'.[55] As Derrida famously exclaims, 'the animal, what a word!'[56] In *Human Animals*, Jamie is ultimately guilty of using this blasphemous 'word':

JAMIE: I rescued the pigeon before all this.
LISA: How do you know it's not infected?
JAMIE: Infected with what?
LISA: They're worried people can get it.
JAMIE: Get what!
LISA: Whatever it is that's making the birds and the foxes and the rats crazy.
JAMIE: Oh, heaven forbid the animals are acting like animals. I'm more scared of humans than foxes. That's the truth.[57]

By lumping all non-human animal species together under one category, Jamie denies species specificity and degrades all other animals to sub-human. When Jamie claims that the 'crazy' behaviour of urban 'pests' is simply animals 'acting like animals', he repeats the damaging popular association between 'animals' and 'wild' behaviour. So, while Jamie attempts to *defend* the animals and the behaviour he sees as 'natural' to them, his words actually portray his potentially *dangerous* anthropocentric views on non-human animals. This is significant as it problematizes Jamie's role as an advocate for animals, and points to the deeply engrained anthropocentrism that exists even in those who believe themselves to be animal activists. While the politics of the play are clear, the characters' internal contradictions and flaws make the drama not only more convincing but more compelling, putting forth important questions about human relations with other animals rather than simply providing a didactic commentary.

It is through the voices of the other, less environmentally motivated characters that Smith most obviously blurs the Cartesian human/animal dichotomy. In the latter half of the play, John compares Alex to a bird, describing how her 'feathers had been ruffled' during the protest.[58] Nancy similarly describes her daughter as 'very . . . adaptable', with the pause indicated by the ellipsis emphasizing the comparison made between Alex and an animal adjusting to a new environment.[59] While this is slightly heavy-handed, it forces the audience to consider how they use animal-based metaphors and rethink their place within a wider society of living things, achieving both a figurative and literal reworking of 'the animal'. These remarks build to a climax later in the play as John makes aggressive sexual advances towards Si. When Si describes John's behaviour as 'animal', John protests that what he wants to do is 'strictly human'.[60] This retaliation is complex, as he clearly intends to deny the accusation of animality and, instead, attribute his desire to inflict pain on Si – a desire to 'hit' and 'beat' and 'cause big welts on [Si's] back' – to a specific humanness: it is not animal but maliciously human.[61]

However, John's line can also be interpreted as implying that human behaviour *is* animal behaviour: John is simply highlighting that what Si considers 'animal' is also ultimately 'human' – they are one and the same. While both of these interpretations are problematic in different ways, the doubleness in John's retort effectively deconstructs the human/animal divide, simultaneously re-establishing his animality *and* asserting his distinctive humanness. This both maintains and collapses the distance between human animals and non-human animals, creating a complex tension in which the boundaries are destabilized. The point of the play is not to dissolve differences, which give individual animals their autonomy (including human beings), but to dissolve dualisms: to remove oppositional binaries and recontextualize the human within the larger category of 'animals', and to interrogate the speciesist distinctions between 'pets' and 'pests', between the 'wild' and the 'tame'.

The Cultural Significance of Pigeons and Foxes

Smith's choice to foreground pigeons and foxes in *Human Animals* is, in some ways, surprising, as the idea of an urban 'pest infestation' usually suggests the presence of termites, cockroaches, or ants. As Chaudhuri notes, it is 'rodents and insects' that 'usually play that role'.[62] While pigeons and foxes seem somewhat particular to London, their casting is, in part, a tactical decision. It is very difficult to evoke sympathy for insects or rodents, possibly due to their small size, which positions them outside the scope of 'valid' animal suffering, as based on the

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human scale.[63] Or, in the case of insects, it could be due to their 'strange' appearance, which feels far removed from the bodily and facial make-up of humans.

Chaudhuri considers the importance of animal 'faces' in eliciting sympathy. In her analysis of animal rights group PETA's poster campaign, which featured the bloody head of a cow and the slogan 'Did your food have a face?', Chaudhuri notes that 'seeking to give our food a face, PETA is cleverly deploying the protocols of identity politics, the politics of visibility and representation'.[64] Discussing the feminist ethics of care, Richard Iveson similarly notes how an emphasis on communication and dialogue with non-human animals instils an 'anthropocentric hierarchy' that privileges the animals that most resemble humans, animals that can be given a language, or animals that, like PETA's cow head, can be given a face.[65] Evidently, insects, with multiple limbs, antennae, and strange faceless bodies, do not come high up on this list except for when they are overwhelmingly anthropomorphized, as in Franz Kafka's surrealist *Metamorphosis* or the Disney Pixar animation *A Bug's Life*. Indeed, they are more often blown up to terrifying proportions and cast as the villains of eco-horror's 'big bug' movies.[66]

While Iveson and Chaudhuri might criticize the association between 'faces', or 'humanness', and an animal's validity or importance, it is evident that this remains a dominant mode of thinking in western, Anglo-American culture today. People are much more inclined to squash a bug without remorse than kill a dog without hesitation, arguably because the dog appears *more human*. Indeed, the tendency to exclude 'creepy-crawlies' from the animal world was indicated in the Royal Court's programme for *Human Animals*, which separated and contained insects in parenthesis: 'No animals (or insects) were harmed in this production'. So, even though the London audience may come to *Human Animals* with preconceived notions of pigeons and foxes as nuisance animals that rummage in their bins and defecate on pavements, this prejudice is still easier to engage and challenge than attempting to evoke sympathy for insects, which remain faceless and far-removed from the human experience.

This does not mean that Smith disregards the welfare of insects within the animal community, but that she understands how to work her audience and find the best dramatic application of an urban 'pest' infestation for the theatre. Just as she implicates popular horror and apocalypse narratives, Smith shines a light on animals that are just 'human' enough to elicit sympathy but also despised enough by a London audience to make the play a worthwhile challenge to speciesism. Moreover, it can be said that the references to bees at the beginning and end of *Human Animals* ('I can't remember the last time I saw a bee'), and the prominence of 'slugs' and 'snails' in the play's choric sections, indicate Smith's interest ultimately to extend animal welfare concerns beyond pigeons and foxes to all living things.[67]

Dramatizing an infestation of pigeons and foxes is also significant in terms of how the play engages with wider socio-zoological associations. It is important here to interrogate 'the spatial distribution of non-human animals', which DeMello notes as key in forming popular understandings of different species.[68] Found on streets, in parks, in alleyways and railway stations, pigeons and foxes colonize communal, outdoor spaces in large numbers. Insects and, especially, 'pests' such as bedbugs, cockroaches, and ants have a more intrusive quality as they infiltrate the home. While these non-human players would make for a more anxiety-inducing infestation narrative, they also risk alienating large parts of the audience as their presence is considered a sign of poor hygiene that is culturally linked to poverty.[69] The spatial distribution of indoor 'pests' is therefore economic as well as ecological.

By opting for outdoor 'pests' that widely and indiscriminately have an impact on the urban population at large, Smith's play directly addresses and challenges the speciesism of theatre's middle-class audience; they cannot disregard *Human Animals*' 'pests' due to disgust and socio-economic stigma but, instead, are forced to confront their own

prejudices. This is not a poverty drama that the audience can observe at a distance, but an animal problem in which they are personally and politically implicated.

Yet the particularity of pigeons and of foxes, along with their wider cultural associations, must be considered *individually* in order to fully grasp *Human Animals*' deep engagement with animal others. To begin with, foxes have a long literary tradition that dates back at least to the twelfth century and a series of Old French poems about the trickster figure, Reynard the Fox. Although these stories have variations, whether Reynard is a villain or a Samaritan, he is invariably crafty. The anthropomorphic idea of the fox as sly and deceitful has continued throughout the history of western culture. From Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) to Roald Dahl's *The Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970), the figure of the fox becomes a stand-in for wildness and cunning. In *Human Animals*, Jamie associates himself with foxes because of the same cultural resonances, self-identifying as similarly 'resourceful'.[70]

There is something about the fox, too, that has been interpreted as intrinsically untameable. In *The Fox and the Child*, a 2007 film directed by Luc Jacquet, in which a young girl forms a false bond with a wild fox, the girl almost kills the animal due to an anthropomorphic fantasy in which she imagines keeping the fox as a pet. Jamie's fond attachment to foxes (and pigeons) in *Human Animals* risks the same sort of dangerous misjudgement. Indeed, Lisa hints at this when she comments, 'in a parallel universe somewhere we would be having a baby', suggesting that Jamie's fatherly affection for the animals humanizes and infantilizes them in alarming ways.[71]

However, while *Human Animals* may draw on the historic, cultural baggage of the fox, it does so only to show its shortcomings. The narratives discussed above all feature country foxes, and it is evident that the modern 'urban' foxes of *Human Animals* are imbued with a very different meaning for humans, particularly in London. As Smith remarks, 'Londoners have such a specific relationship to foxes, because they're fucking everywhere.'[72] Although foxes did not colonize towns and cities until the 1940s, there is still to date a surprising lack of literature featuring the urban fox.[73] This is possibly due to the sense of threat associated with them: it is difficult to present an urban fox in a children's film, for example, when they are notorious for mauling young children.[74]

While in reality fox attacks on children are rare, it does not negate the commonly held perception of them as dangerous and disease-ridden. In 2015, *The Keith Lemon Sketch Show* satirized concerns over the danger of urban foxes by presenting a gangster urban fox character played by a human dressed in a fox 'onesie' suit. This fox character threw rubbish across people's gardens, vandalized property, and fought with pets. The animosity felt towards urban foxes was also exemplified by responses to the 2016 John Lewis Christmas advertisement, which featured foxes jumping on an outdoor trampoline that had been prepared for Christmas morning. As Andrew Ellson wrote in *The Times*, 'what the retailer had not accounted for is that, no matter how cute and mange-free you make your computer-animated foxes, most city dwellers consider the animals dangerous pests'.[75] The mass fox extermination in *Human Animals* exposes the danger of these anthropocentric, speciesest attitudes when taken to their extreme. In contrast to Keith Lemon's anthropomorphic gangster and John Lewis's 'cute' trampolinists, Smith's play refuses to anthropomorphize or trivialize the animal's behaviour, placing the urban fox in both a serious and sympathetic light. *Human Animals* undoes both the anthropomorphic literary connotations of foxes and contemporary prejudices against the urban fox in an attempt to re-imagine human–fox relations in the city.

The inclusion of pigeons in the play prevents *Human Animals* from becoming a reductive 'fox revolt' story. The dynamic of foxes and pigeons together, as the central non-human players, transforms the drama into a larger consideration of human animals and non-human animals sharing the city environment. Although the pigeon does not have the same literary tradition as the fox, pigeons hold an important place in history as messenger birds. The use of 'pigeon post' stretches back thousands of years to various ancient

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civilizations. In the British popular imagination, the legacy of the carrier pigeon is most commonly associated with its role in wartime communications. Derived from the rock dove, pigeons' homing abilities allowed them to carry messages over long distances during both World Wars. This history has been well documented both in factual accounts and in art and fiction: the iconic American cartoon series *Dastardly and Muttley* (1969), for example, follows the villainous Dastardly and his dog as they repeatedly attempt to intercept a First World War carrier pigeon, accompanied by the catchy theme-tune 'Stop the Pigeon!'. *Valiant* (2005), a more recent, Disney animation, set in 1944, similarly features a carrier pigeon as wartime hero. Its eponymous anthropomorphic protagonist is a woodland pigeon who travels to London to enlist in military service. Yet, even in this childen's movie, the urban pigeon that Valiant encounters in London's Trafalgar Square is depicted as a greedy, unhygienic trickster: the aptly named Bugsy – a verminous gangster – first appears surrounded by flies and in the midst of conning some scraps of food from two magpies.

Despite their heroic history, then, it seems impossible to separate a contemporary, western understanding of pigeons from their reputation as urban parasites. Not only do pigeons foul the smart, slick, urban grid, but they also live off human waste, acting as an unwanted reminder of human impurity. Woody Allen draws attention to this in *Stardust Memories* (1980), as his character, Sandy Bates, refers to pigeons as 'rats with wings' to emphasize their uncleanliness.[76] While there are some people who enjoy feeding pigeons in public spaces, these birds, like rats, are generally associated with disorder, dirt, and disease. Indeed, in the opening of *Human Animals*, Smith highlights the extensive excrement left by pigeons: John's garden has been invaded by seventy-nine pigeons that are 'shitting on [his] new decking'.[77] While John is evidently annoyed at the mess, he also admits that he finds the infestation 'a little frightening'.[78] Pigeons are not often thought of as physically threatening, but there is something people fear about the way they tend to flock and swoop, gaining power and violence in their multiplicity and mess. As Colin Jerolmack notes in *The Global Pigeon* (2013), these birds threaten the 'sense of civility, order, cleanliness, and safety in public space'.[79] While seagulls and crows are perhaps more aggressive as scavenger birds, it is pigeons that are the most visible, gathering in much larger groups in open city squares, and are, therefore, the most threatening. This is also what makes them most apt to serve as a dramatic offstage force in *Human Animals.*

DeMello asserts that, 'for many people, the real relationships that humans once had with animals have been largely supplanted by symbolic representations'.[80] However, it is clear that the relationship between city dwellers and 'pests' in Smith's play is not symbolic; it is tangible and ugly. It is precisely because the presence of pigeons and foxes in urban areas breaches the symbolic, romantic ideals of 'nature' that these animals are considered 'pests'. While encountering a pigeon or a fox in a forest or meadow might spark a sense of awe or curiosity, their presence in the city enacts an intrusion on what is considered a strictly human space. These animals do not seem to belong in the concrete, 'man-made' urban environment, and this endows them with a sinister, unnerving quality. Pigeons, in particular, carry a sense of something 'unnatural' because they are, as DeMello argues, 'not truly wild but not domesticated either'.[81] Combining the 'wild' and 'domestic', this description points to a post-human nature–culture continuum, evoking ideas of deconstruction and Donna Haraway's composite *naturecultures.*[82]

Building on Haraway, Rosi Braidotti argues that humans must rethink the relationship they share with animals, that they 'need to rethink dogs, cats and other sofa-based companions . . . As nature-culture compounds, these animals qualify as cyborgs, that is to say creatures of mixity or vectors of post-human relationality.'[83] Yet this is also true of pigeons, foxes, and other so-called 'pest' animals. Like pets, they are 'nature-culture compounds', due to the conceptual threshold they embody: 'wild' animals living in the domestic, urban sphere; 'natural' creatures in

a 'non-natural' environment (though cities should also be regarded as 'natural habitats'). Urban 'pests' are in-between species that similarly act as 'vectors of post-human relationality'. While they do not share *intimate* spaces with humans, as pets do, 'pest' animals live in constant proximity to human beings, and this puts these species into direct dialogue.

Urban 'pests' live not *with* but *alongside* humans, participating in various encounters in which they shape, and are shaped by, interspecies interactions. Pigeons pick at human litter on the streets, foxes rummage in bins, and humans who drop sandwiches or spill yogurts on the pavement just leave it there, thinking a bird will get it later, or a fox or dog will lick it up. Humans do not choose to live with these animals – with pigeons, foxes, or rats – as they do with pets, but humans are clearly adapted to their presence in a similar way. Like Haraway and her dog, Cayenne, humans and other urban animals are intertwined in 'co-constitutive relationships' in which 'the relating is never done once and for all'.[84]

An encounter with a nuisance animal is thus not an encounter with 'nature' in its idealized, 'symbolic' representation; it is not something that transcends human society. It is an encounter with an animal that has specifically adapted to respond to humans and to urban environments – environments that have, in turn, adapted to respond to them. There is something about the stage that is suitable for representing the plight of pigeons and foxes as nature-culture hybrids. As a collective art form and social experience, theatre is, after all, perhaps uniquely suited to exploring hybridity and complex, collective encounters. If so, while it is arguable that the theatre is an exclusively *humanist* space of communal experience, by evoking sympathy and even empathy for persecuted animals, Smith's play allows the audience to imagine a collectivity of 'people' that goes beyond the human. *Human Animals* challenges and transforms the anthropocentric focus of theatre, as old sentimentalized ideas of 'nature' and 'animals' are dismantled in favour of a more democratic dramatization of an urban eco-crisis.

Further, Smith does not elicit sympathy for 'animals' in the general singular, but specifically for pigeons and foxes, undoing their literary connotations and negative cultural associations. The audience are therefore encouraged to reconsider their 'pest' prejudices, and may be awakened to a much broader re-imagining of their intertwined relationships with other animals; they may be awakened to, as Chaudhuri says, 'interspecies awareness'.[85]

Staging Planetary Health

While the eco-crisis in *Human Animals* is intensely local, it clearly has important implications for ideas of planetary health, dramatizing the increasing likelihood of zoonotic disease outbreaks across the globe. In addressing ecological issues, the play's small-scale crisis is arguably more dramaturgically effective than other environmental plays such as Mike Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London* (2010) or Steve Waters's *The Contingency Plan* (2009), both of which attempt to stage total global environmental destruction. This usually results in a disjunction of dramatic content and form, whereby the ecological issue is reduced to a one-room drama or family feud in order to fit it onto the stage.

Using a localized eco-crisis, by contrast, Smith successfully engages the global problem of zoonotic epidemic/pandemic risk without diminishing or trivializing it. The play's local eco-crisis is a fractal of the global problem; not only does it encapsulate the global within the local, but it feels far more present and immediate than any abstract planetary disaster. The ending of *Human Animals* highlights the proximity of the play's predicament to the present, creating an urgent warning call to re-evaluate human relations with non-human animals. The play's 'blink'-style coda describes a woman committing suicide in the middle of the street in the midst of some future city chaos where animals come to feed on her body, describing how she is '*hanging right there in the middle of Sloane Square*'.[86] In the 2016 production, this direct reference to Sloane Square, the location of the Royal Court in

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London, firmly located *Human Animals*' eco-crisis in the real world of its spectators, in the exact place where the audience were sitting and watching the play at that moment. In this metatheatrical turn, Smith ends *Human Animals* by emphasizing that the dystopian world of the play – the chaos and cruelty – is not too distant from the contemporary experience of the London audience.

Revisiting *Human Animals* in 2021, this feels truer now than ever before. It is difficult not to draw parallels between the play's focus on zoonotic disease and district lockdown, and the current implications of the coronavirus pandemic. In some ways, the play no longer seems like a dystopian drama with an ethical animal debate at its core but, rather, like a pointed political commentary. Indeed, I find myself wondering how the meaning of this play will mutate as the coronavirus crisis and other pandemic zoonotic diseases evolve. Would critics now be more willing to recognize the importance of the play's offstage non-human animals *as non-human animals*? What new cultural connotations and popular knowledge would the London audience, or an audience elsewhere in the world, bring to the play, and how would they consequently interpret it? Perhaps, in some ways, this is the ultimate 'Theatre of Species': a play that not only recognizes animal others and otherness, but co-evolves with the world in motion, adapting to new performance environments and responding to theatrical, political and ecological entanglements in flux, on both a local and global scale.

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