

MULTICULTURALISM GOES IMPERIAL

Immigrants, Animals, and the Suppression of Moral Dialogue

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Abstract

As Latino and Asian immigrant populations in the United States continue to grow, controversies are cropping up over immigrant animal practices such as horse tripping in Mexican *charreadas* (rodeos) and the slaughter of animals in the live-animal markets of San Francisco's Chinatown. Immigrant advocates read these controversies through a multiculturalist interpretive framework that constructs animal advocates as agents of an ethnocentric and racist majority. In this article, I argue that this multiculturalist interpretation tends to "go imperial" by mischaracterizing the position(s) of animal advocates and invalidating and suppressing the other, potentially competitive, moral discourse at play: the discourse about cruelty toward animals. I explicate this suppressed discourse and then propose the development of a mutually challenging and potentially edifying moral dialogue in which majority and minority animal practices are simultaneously open to scrutiny and criticism. Clashes over customary practices can aggravate intergroup tensions, but they also have the potential to lead to meaningful moral dialogue between the majority and immigrant minorities.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Immigrants, Animals, Moral Discourse, *Charreada*, Chinatown

INTRODUCTION

In the Mexican *charreada*, practiced since the 1950s in numerous states across the United States by Mexican immigrants and their descendants, three of the nine *suertes* (contests) involve horse tripping. *Manganas a caballo*, for example, involves a *charro* (cowboy) on horseback chasing a galloping horse around a corral and then lassoing the horse's front legs as she runs, sending her crashing to the ground on her face or neck, or sometimes flipping her over. When *charros* practice for this event, they might trip the same horse over and over until she is too injured to run. The horses

Du Bois Review, 4:1 (2007) 233–249.

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DOI: 10.1017/S1742058X07070129

used suffer broken necks, legs and shoulders, lacerations, and sometimes death. They are usually rented for a day while on their way to slaughter, and if they survive the *charreada*, they are shipped to slaughter upon its conclusion. *Charros* train hard to hone their skills and take great pride in continuing this centuries-old Mexican tradition that grew out of the ranching practices of the *hacienda* system.

In San Francisco's Chinatown, live-animal markets offer chickens, turtles, frogs, fish, and other animals for purchase. Chickens are crammed into wire cages so tightly that they cannot move. Frogs and turtles are piled high in bins, crushing and suffocating those on the bottom. Fish flop in a few inches of dirty water, struggling to breathe. Upon purchase, the merchant either kills the animal on the spot or sends him home with the customer for dispatch there. Merchants use a variety of techniques on animals who are still alive and conscious, including chopping the heads off of fish, skinning frogs, ripping the shells off of turtles, dismembering and disemboweling turtles, and cutting turtles in half with a band saw. According to Chinese merchants, the production and consumption of fresh meat is a millennia-old tradition integral to Chinese cuisine and beneficial to human health.

During the past few decades, immigrant animal practices such as these have become flash points for intense social and political conflict. California, with its growing Mexican and Asian immigrant populations, has been the site of several such conflicts. In 1994, urged on by animal advocacy groups, California joined several other states in passing a law prohibiting horse tripping.¹ Mexican American groups split on the issue, with some offering their support for the legislation. Around the same time, animal advocates began pressing the city of San Francisco to take action against live-animal markets, which are located primarily but not exclusively in Chinatown. After extensive public hearings, the city's Commission on Animal Control and Welfare recommended a ban on the sale of certain live animals for food, citing concerns with inhumane treatment, disease, and a potentially adverse effect on tourism. However, the Board of Supervisors declined to act on the recommendation, which prompted a coalition of animal advocacy groups to initiate a lawsuit charging twelve Chinese live-animal vendors with violations of health codes and anticruelty laws. In addition, animal advocates began urging the California Fish and Game Commission to impose a statewide ban on the importation of live turtles and frogs, on the grounds that they are being released into the wild, where they harm indigenous wild turtle and frog populations. Chinese live-animal vendors and their supporters, including Chinese community leaders and some elected Asian American politicians, have successfully opposed such a ban.

Defenders of immigrant animal practices have reacted by evoking a multiculturalist interpretive framework that situates these interventions about animals in a long history of White aggression against powerless immigrants of color. In this view, the majority is guilty of judging immigrant minority cultures to be deficient and wrong (*ethnocentrism*), seeking to impose dominant cultural values on marginalized cultures (*cultural imperialism*), and enunciating an impassable racial difference between the "self" and the "other" in order to bolster ongoing efforts to exclude the latter from meaningful membership in this nation (*racism* and *nativism*). Animal advocates, it is said, operate with a "double standard," targeting foreign-born minorities while ignoring the majority's own cruel animal practices. In this multiculturalist morality tale, the Western leviathan is once again exercising oppressive power over the vulnerable bearers of other cultures. Animals are simply the occasion, or the pretext, for this aggression.

I submit that multiculturalism has "gone imperial"² in these conflicts, meaning that the multiculturalist interpretive framework asserted by defenders of immigrant animal practices, while pertinent, functions to crowd out and even suppress other,

potentially competitive, moral concerns. This is, of course, ironic, as multiculturalism arose in response to Western cultural imperialism. In any case, the multiculturalist morality tale's exclusive focus on the majority's historical tendency to aggress against immigrant minorities leads to a mischaracterization of the position(s) of these animal advocates—both their agendas and their relationship to the power structure—and the suppression of a second moral discourse involving the human exercise of power over nonhuman animals. After exploring the anticruelty discourse advanced by animal advocates in these particular controversies, I argue that we face a normative dilemma between respecting immigrants' cultural practices, on the one hand, and giving due consideration to the interests of the animals who are seriously harmed by these practices, on the other. One way to address this dilemma, I suggest, is to create a moral dialogue that opens *both* immigrant *and* majority animal practices up to scrutiny and challenge. This satisfies the concern about a “double standard” without sacrificing animals at the altar of multicultural correctness.

A word of caution about totalizing claims about group culture, beliefs, and the like. It is vitally important when looking at these controversies to try to specify exactly who is saying and doing what to whom. While indispensable, gross terms such as *majority*, *immigrant minority*, and *culture* can sometimes obscure more than they reveal. As Seyla Benhabib writes, cultures are not self-contained sets of beliefs and practices but, rather, “polyvocal, multilayered, decentered, and fractured systems of action and signification” (Benhabib 2002, pp. 25–26). Both the Mexican American and Chinese American communities in California are multivocal, complex, and heterogeneous by generation, nativity status, class, gender, and many other factors. When immigrant advocates claim to be speaking for “Mexican culture” or “Chinese culture,” then, these should be understood as political rather than factual statements. I use *immigrant animal practices* to emphasize both that the practices are to some extent transplanted across national borders to California, and that some of the practitioners are foreign-born and thus vulnerable to nativist agitation.³ However, this should not obscure the fact that the *charreada* and live-animal sales/consumption are also practiced by some U.S.-born Mexican and Chinese Americans. Finally, *multiculturalism* is not a single, unified ideology but rather a welter of different and sometimes contradictory tenets and practices. Some multiculturalisms focus on protecting and preserving minority cultures, while others aim to transform both majority and minority cultures in a progressive direction. When I identify the *multiculturalist* position in these animal controversies, I am suggesting neither that all multiculturalists would take this position (they would not), nor that all multiculturalisms would entail this position (they would not). Instead, I seek to show how immigrant advocates make use of available multiculturalist discourses out there in society, and to raise questions about the implications of this move.

I begin by looking at how defenders of immigrant animal practices have constructed multiculturalist responses to these controversies. Next, I look at how these multiculturalist responses mischaracterize and suppress the potentially competitive moral discourse about cruelty to animals. Then I take a closer look at the suppressed discourse about cruelty. Finally, I suggest the development of a two-way moral dialogue on these issues.

WHEN IN CHINATOWN . . . AND OTHER MULTICULTURALIST ASSERTIONS

One argument that officials from *charro* associations and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, among others, adduce is that the *charreada* and live-animal markets

deserve respect and protection because they are venerable traditions integral to their respective communities' ways of life and identities. The *charreada*, they explain, emerged from the centuries-old ranching culture of Mexico and was embraced by the Chicano Movement in the 1950s as a part of the reinvigoration of Mexican culture within U.S. boundaries. Full of pageantry, ritual, music, and food, the *charreada* is a cultural practice with deep historical roots. Similarly, spokespersons for Chinatown point out that the Chinese tradition of selling live animals goes back thousands of years. Their culinary tradition, they aver, is based on the notion that freshly killed meat is not only more flavorful but also more energizing, more nutritious, and more medicinal (with healing properties for those suffering from arthritis and other ailments). Procuring a live animal (or freshly killed meat) is thus an important part of the ritual of Chinese cooking. When Assemblyman Mike Honda (D-San Jose), who is Japanese American, introduced a bill in 2000 to protect Chinatown's live-animal markets from a statewide ban on the importation of turtles and frogs, he explained: "This is an age-old cultural practice" (*Associate Press State and Local Wire* 2000).

According to Brian Barry, saying that a practice is part of one's culture is an anthropological rather than a moral statement: "The fact that you (or your ancestors) have been doing something for a long time does nothing in itself to justify your continuing to do it" (Barry 2001, p. 258). Barry's argument makes sense in that we have condemned and sought to end many cruel practices that were apparently integral to cultures and ways of life. The plantation owner's insistence that slavery was vital to the southern culture and economy was, in the view of the abolitionists, morally irrelevant. Notwithstanding Barry's objections, "it's part of my culture" is a claim that now carries considerable weight in contemporary political discourse in the United States. *Per* multiculturalism, the painful history of racial and cultural oppression in the United States has created a presumption in favor of the preservation and protection of minority cultures (Parekh 2000; Young 1990). In the eyes of multiculturalists, the argument "When in Rome . . ." may be imperialistic, but the argument "When in Chinatown . . ." has *prima facie* legitimacy and should, absent other serious arguments, carry the day (Renteln 2004).

Immigrant advocates make a second and related argument, derived from multiculturalist discourse, that their critics are demonstrating racism, ethnocentrism, or cultural imperialism.⁴ Paul Wartelle, attorney for the Chinese vendors sued by the coalition of animal advocates, said on more than one occasion that "they're just picking on a bunch of vulnerable people because they're members of a racial minority" (*Contra Costa Times* 1997). Several elected Asian American politicians who intervened in the conflict shared Wartelle's view. Supervisor Leland Yee denounced the lawsuit as racially motivated (Epstein 1997); Supervisor Mabel Teng urged Governor Pete Wilson and the Fish and Game Commission to reject a proposed ban on the importation of turtles and frogs; Assemblyman Mike Honda sponsored a bill seeking to prevent the Fish and Game Commission from imposing such a ban; and Supervisor Tom Hsieh vowed to fight the proposed ban, calling it racist, unfair, and "disrespect[ful of] our traditions, cultures, and values" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1996). The fact that *nativism* is a staple component of U.S.-political discourse—that conservative Republicans and right-wing nativist groups consistently blame immigrants for the nation's problems and call for draconian measures to exclude and marginalize them—helps to explain the resonance of these charges.

History also contributes to the resonance of these charges—in particular, the history of how Whites have constructed both Mexicans and the Chinese as degenerate peoples in order to rationalize the exploitation of these groups. Modern-day denunciations of horse tripping as cruel and unacceptably violent echo long-standing

constructions of the Mexican “race” as savage and barbaric. Prior to the U.S.-Mexican War of 1848, Whites consistently characterized Mexicans as a mixed or mongrel race afflicted with not only Spanish but also Indian and African blood. Unlike Whites, who were bearers of pure Anglo-Saxon blood, the Mexicans were necessarily degenerate—“un-Christian, uncivilized, and racially impure” (De León 1998, p. 158)—and engaged in savage rituals such as human sacrifice and cannibalism. The very color of their skin, like that of Africans and Native Americans, signified depravity. In addition, Whites insisted that Mexicans were primitive, backward, and indolent. Together, Whites used these racialized constructions of Mexicans as degenerate (a dangerous, corrupting influence) and lazy (unable to use God’s bounty as He intended) to justify their own use of violence in appropriating Mexicans’ land and other resources.

As Whites began to challenge Mexican rule, first in Tejas and then throughout the Southwest, American fiction celebrated the colonizing process, showcasing “shifty, brutal, and treacherous Mexicans” (Delgado and Stefancic, 1998, p. 210) being displaced from their lands by honorable, God-fearing Anglos. During the early decades of the twentieth century, as the dispossession of Mexican natives of the Southwest proceeded, American films featured as a stock villain the violent Mexican *bandido*, who spent his time “stealing horses or gold, lusting after pure Anglo women, shooting noble Saxon heroes in the back” (Delgado and Stefancic, 1998, p. 210). As with the Native Americans, those resisting the process of colonization were constructed as an aggressive threat such that the colonizing process seemed necessary and providential. The Mexican *bandido* image is far from dead today, as is evidenced by the contemporary racialized construction of Mexicans (and Latinos generally) as violence-prone gang members and juvenile delinquents.

Similarly, modern-day condemnations of the live-animal markets as cruel and disease producing tap into historical constructions of Chinatown as “the preeminent site of urban sickness, vice, crime, poverty, and depravity” (Shah 2001, p. 1). From its inception in the late 1800s, San Francisco’s Chinatown, often described by public health officials as a “plague spot” and “cesspool” of epidemic disease, served as a potent symbol of what was different and dangerous about the racial/cultural “other.” The American racial imaginary transformed what were products of discriminatory legislation—Chinatown’s racial segregation, overcrowding, poverty, lack of health care—into essential traits of its Chinese residents (clannishness, unwillingness to assimilate, degeneracy, filthiness). The decadence and regressiveness of Chinese culture, it was claimed, threatened the dynamic progressivism of American culture, much as the stench and disease of Chinatown threatened to spill over racial, spatial, and class boundaries and endanger White bodies.

In addition, the minstrelsy of the mid-1800s specifically derided Chinese eating habits as deviant and disgusting. Robert Lee writes: “Food habits, customs, and rules are central symbolic structures through which societies articulate identity; you are, symbolically at least, what you eat” (Lee 1999, p. 38). Minstrel-show performers focused on the Chinese consumption of animals considered nonfood animals by Whites (dogs, cats, mice, and rats), as in this stanza from “John Chinaman,” a song published in 1855: “I thought of rats and puppies, John, / You’d eaten your last fill, / But on such slimy pot-pies, / John, I’m told you dinner still” (Lee 1999, p. 44). The White working class and its allies deployed arguments about Chinese degeneracy to counter the serious threat posed by cheap, plentiful Chinese labor. These constructions of the Chinese fed into and were fed by the growing storm of anti-Chinese agitation that gave rise in San Francisco to discriminatory ordinances such as the foreign miners’ tax (1854), the queue-cutting ordinance (1876), and

the various “laundry ordinances” of the 1870s and 1880s (McClain and McClain, 1991).⁵

As proof that animal advocates are imperialists in sheep’s clothing, immigrant advocates frequently point to the supposed “double standard” applied by animal advocates to immigrant animal practices. Their argument goes something like this: “You cannot criticize us immigrants for practice A when the majority’s practice B is comparably cruel; if you do, you are applying a double standard that reproduces the discrimination we have historically suffered.” *Per* multiculturalist discourse, the idea here is that the majority presumptively lacks the moral standing to be able to criticize the immigrants’ practices because (1) it has historically stood in a relationship of dominance relative to them; and (2) it engages in practices that are comparable. Immigrant advocates further suggest that animal advocates’ supposed application of a “double standard” shows that their stated concerns about cruelty toward animals are at least in part pretextual; one of their real motivations must be to single out and persecute the vulnerable “other.” When the California legislature was debating the horse-tripping bill in 1994, Assemblyman Richard Polanco (D-Los Angeles) criticized the bill for targeting Mexican immigrant practices and ignoring the majority’s rodeo practice of calf tripping.⁶ Some *charro* association officials additionally asserted that the well-financed animal rights movement was targeting *charros* because they are predominantly working-class and lack the resources to fight back. These arguments about majority aggression against immigrant communities undoubtedly help to mobilize many Mexican Americans and Chinese Americans in defense of the *charreada* and live-animal markets, respectively. Even for those who have reservations about these forms of animal usage, the call to arms in defense of coethnics can prove hard to resist.

Scholars, too, have gravitated toward a multiculturalist interpretive framework regarding these controversies, arguing that Whites engage in “cultural imperialism” around animal practices in order to define immigrant minorities as “out of place,” and thereby perpetuate their power over them (Elder et al., 1998; Griffith et al., 2002; Nájera-Ramírez 1996). Geographers Glen Elder, Jennifer Wolch, and Jody Emel, for example, write: “By scrutinizing and interpreting subaltern practices on animal bodies . . . through their own lenses, dominant groups in the United States simultaneously construct immigrant others as uncivilized, irrational, or beastly, and their own actions as civilized, rational, and humane” (Elder et al., 1998, p. 82). Noting with disapproval a “pervasive bias against ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in their uses of animals,” political scientist Alison Renteln argues in *The Cultural Defense* that there should be a presumption “in favor of the right to culture unless a significant demonstrable harm can be shown to exist” (Renteln 2004, p. 94; p. 113). Anthropologist Olga Nájera-Ramírez contends that the *charreada* is actually a form of cultural resistance to U.S. domination. According to her interviewees, the *charreada* provides a space where Mexicans can belong, be themselves, and express group pride in the face of a hostile majority culture. The event itself is heavily inflected with nationalistic music and rhetoric, and “the image of the charro has become representative of *lo mexicano* (literally, ‘Mexicanness’)” (Nájera-Ramírez 1994, p. 1).⁷ By linking Mexicans on both sides of the border, the *charreada* as transnational practice expresses a “counterdiscourse of resistance against Anglo domination, cultural erasure, and the demeaning portrayal of Mexicanos” (Nájera-Ramírez 2002, p. 2).

Filmmaker Eric Lin’s *Chinatown* (1999), filmed in San Francisco’s Chinatown and distributed by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association, makes a similar point about the conflict in San Francisco’s Chinatown. The film

depicts the diversity of Chinese opinions about animal practices; it opens, for example, with a Chinese Buddhist monk releasing a frog into the wild. At the same time, the film suggests that most elements of the Chinese community read the actions of animal advocates as a continuation of White society's century-old assault upon Chinatown. Bound together by a sense of external threat, denizens express their anxieties in various ways. The protagonist, a female waitress, has recurrent nightmares about cannibalism and reflects that the animal activists are taking food away from the Chinese in order to weaken them and turn them into food for others. Her angry young male acquaintances complain about the Hollywood movie *Chinatown* (directed by Roman Polanski in 1974), in which the area is depicted as an irredeemable "shit hole" filled with opium dens, brothels, and shops selling rat meat. Once again the interpretive framework emphasizes the priority of defending immigrant minority cultures against White cultural imperialism.

THE MULTICULTURALIST MORALITY TALE: ELISIONS AND SUPPRESSIONS

Like all interpretive frameworks, the multiculturalist framework slides easily into reductionism, involving the following problematic moves. First, the multiculturalist framework essentializes the activity of animal advocates as a form of *cultural imperialism*. Second, it essentializes cultures (both majority and minority) as coherent, unitary wholes. Third, it elides ideological, rhetorical, and strategic differences among animal advocates, the mainstream media, politicians, and others, by lumping these distinct entities together as "the dominant group(s)." Finally the multiculturalist framework denies that animal advocates are in fact as critical (if not more so) of the animal practices of the majority as they are of the animal practices of immigrant minorities. These moves are crucial to charging the conflict with a particular moral valence, one which valorizes immigrant minorities as victims and demonizes their critics as malevolent aggressors.

Are animal advocates agents of a hegemonic majority intent on devaluing Mexican and Chinese culture and valorizing its own? To begin with, there is no American cultural consensus or single "majority" point of view about the limits of permissible treatment toward animals. The animal defense movement is itself marked by serious ideological and strategic divisions, and the broader public holds widely varying opinions about live-animal markets, rodeos, hunting, trapping, circuses, farming, experimentation, and all other forms of animal usage. Although little research has been done on this issue, impressionistic evidence suggests that there is no "Mexican line" or "Chinese line" on animal issues, either. The notion that we are looking at a "clash of cultures" over animal usage is therefore misleading. What we are really looking at is a set of conflicts among interested parties who hold different positions on specific animal-usage issues and belong to different racial/ethnic groups, as well as the broader political entailments that then attach to these conflicts.

Far from being representatives of the majority, animal advocates are more accurately seen as challengers who relentlessly criticize majority animal practices and press for change. There are no animal advocacy groups devoted exclusively to curtailing the practices of immigrant minorities. To the contrary, the explicit goal of animal advocacy is to end cruel or unjust practices toward animals *no matter who the perpetrators are*—Whites or minorities, natives or immigrants, men or women, etc. Precisely because they challenge some of the most powerful forces in U.S. society—multibillion dollar interests such as the meat and dairy businesses, pharmaceutical

and biomedical research companies, and the entertainment industries—animal activists are ridiculed, marginalized, and criminalized (Beers 2006; Finsen and Finsen, 1994; Munro 1999). A case in point: by passing the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act in 2006, Congress enhanced the federal government's power to define and punish animal activism as terrorism.

If animal defense organizations focused exclusively on immigrant minority practices and made arguments about the inferiority or intrinsic barbarism of minority cultures, then they might justifiably be charged with racism and cultural imperialism. However, this is not the case in these controversies. Animal advocates are no more interested in trashing immigrant cultures than they are in celebrating their native culture.⁸ Instead, they advance a moral discourse about the wrongness of being cruel to animals. Rather than suggesting “When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” or “My culture is superior to yours and should therefore supplant yours”—alternate credos of the cultural imperialists—these animal advocates effectively assert, “You should stop this animal practice because it is cruel, inhumane, and causes suffering to the animals involved.” The San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SFSPCA) said of horse tripping, “No animal should have to endure the suffering caused by this cruel practice,”⁹ and of Chinatown's live-animal markets, “[These conditions] *are among the most inhumane we have ever encountered*” (italics in original).¹⁰

A few things are noteworthy about the cruelty discourse advanced by animal advocates. First, it does not focus on immigrant cultures *in toto*, only particular practices; there is no suggestion that immigrant cultures are especially inclined toward cruelty or that the majority culture is disinclined in this way. Second, it does not make a comparative assessment or assert that the majority culture is superior to the minority culture. Animal advocates do not stand within the majority culture passing judgment on the minority culture, but stand apart from and challenge the practices of both, on behalf of animals who cannot defend themselves. Now, one could argue that animal advocates implicitly judge immigrant animal practices to be worse than those of the majority to the extent that these campaigns target horse tripping and live-animal markets and not majority practices. However, the premise here is false. The diverse groups involved in these campaigns—Action for Animals, California Equine Council, American Tortoise Rescue, SFSPCA, In Defense of Animals, United Poultry Concerns, and others—spend the majority of their time and energy on campaigns that do target majority animal practices, including American rodeos, the slaughtering of horses, industrial farming, animal experimentation, and the treatment of companion animals. Their involvement in specific campaigns against immigrant animal practices thus cannot be taken as evidence of their bias against immigrants; it would be more accurate to say that they are unwilling to exempt immigrant minorities from their general interdiction against animal cruelty. Like all social movement organizations, animal advocacy groups make strategic choices within certain material and ideological constraints. They believe that animal suffering and abuse are ubiquitous. To maximize the effectiveness of scarce resources, they try to design winnable campaigns. Campaigns are more likely to succeed if they (1) focus on flagrant, dramatic, visible kinds of animal cruelty; (2) speak to the common dispositions of the majority; (3) do not face powerful, organized opposition; and (4) stay narrowly targeted. The campaigns against the *charreadas* and live-animal markets fit these criteria, as do many campaigns targeting majority practices.

There is more to say about the charge that animal advocates employ a “double standard” in judging immigrant practices. It is not at all clear why immigrants are entitled to be the last in the reform queue. Who is to say that animal advocates can

only criticize immigrant minorities once the majority's house is totally in order? Why must animal advocates prove that what immigrant minorities do to animals is as bad as or worse than what the majority does? Should disadvantaged immigrant minorities get a pass from any and all forms of moral scrutiny? Immigrant minorities are entitled to protection against racism and nativism, but should they therefore be entitled to immunity from criticism for their treatment of animals? Does a multiculturalist sensibility really entail this position? As Paula Casal (2004) writes, the issue of *noncomparative desert* (what treatment animals deserve) should be seen as separable from and perhaps more important than the issue of *comparative desert* (how much immigrant minorities should be pressed to change their animal practices relative to the majority). If giving animals protection from cruelty is a moral good, then it is a moral good *even if* the rule is not applied everywhere to the same degree at the same time. Requiring the universal, simultaneous application of this rule to all possible parties would, practically speaking, thwart social change efforts altogether (Casal 2004).

The multiculturalist interpretation of these animal-related controversies “goes imperial” by asserting itself in such a way as to mischaracterize and suppress the potentially competitive moral discourse about cruelty toward animals. Chinatown vendors and *charreada* practitioners usually deflect the question of animal cruelty by pointing to animal advocates’ supposed “double standard,” thus displacing attention from how humans inflict suffering on animals to how the majority scapegoats immigrant minorities. Many scholars make similar moves. Recall Alison Renteln’s argument that there should be a presumption “in favor of the [immigrant minority’s] right to culture unless a significant demonstrable harm can be shown to exist” (Renteln 2004, p. 113). Renteln believes that most immigrant animal practices will survive this test, which implies that she must not count animals as beings who can suffer “significant demonstrable harm.” Animals are tacitly defined out of the equation. The only time Renteln considers what might be called the animals’ perspective is when she makes the following statement: “From the chicken’s point of view, participating in a religious [Santeria] ceremony is more dignified than winding up in a bucket of fried chicken!” (Renteln 2004, p. 101). It is not clear what evidence Renteln bases this claim on—what about religious significance would redeem violent death in the mind of a chicken?—but it is curious that she talks of chickens as beings who have a point of view and an interest in dignity, even as she excludes them from moral consideration. Similarly, Olga Nájera-Ramírez’s “The Racialization of a Debate: The *Charreada* as Tradition or Torture” (1996), despite the promise of its title, focuses exclusively on the mainstream media’s ethnocentric treatment of the *charreada* and says nothing about the substantive claims made by animal advocates about the event. In Eric Lin’s *Chinatown*, animal rights activists are White, young, immature, loud, and obnoxious. Hectoring Chinatown’s residents and suborning racially motivated violence, they are caricatures not characters and, therefore, say nothing. In addition to calling out White ethnocentrism around immigrant animal practices, Elder et al. (1998) do advocate rethinking the status and treatment of animals, but they are the clear exception in the literature on this issue.

Through its various iterations during this century, multiculturalism’s promise has been a powerful one: to decenter the center, challenge domination and its truths, and mitigate power’s effects. Yet in these conflicts we see multiculturalist discourse “going imperial” and reducing complex power dynamics among different human and nonhuman animal groups to a single hierarchical relationship of human majority over human minority. Opponents of the live-animal markets have been thwarted for more than a decade, and, although California passed a ban on horse tripping, this

appears to have resulted more from skillful political maneuvering than from a public consensus that the interests of animals trump the interests of immigrant minorities. Judging from the newspaper coverage of the controversy, it is not at all clear who won the public relations battle on this issue. What about the hierarchy between humans and animals? As Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert write, “Human-animal relations have . . . been filled with power, commonly the wielding of an oppressive, dominating power by humans over animals” (Philo and Wilbert, 2000, pp. 3–4). In one sense, the neglect of this hierarchy is not surprising. The ideology of human supremacy—based on the related notions that humans are vitally different from and superior to other animals, and that humans have intrinsic moral worth while other animals do not—is one of the master narratives of Western culture (Plumwood 1993). In another sense, though, it is strange to consider that multiculturalist discourse might function to enshrine power’s effects in this area.

CRUELTY IS CRUELTY IN ANY CULTURE

According to animal advocates, the immigrant animal practices in question are morally wrong because they are cruel and/or cause marked suffering. It would be hard to dispute that horse tripping causes horses to suffer. Anyone hearing a bare description of the event—chasing an animal until it runs hard and then lassoing its front legs so that it falls on its face or flips over—can surmise that the animal will feel pain when brought down. But those who have specific knowledge of horses as a species will have a keener appreciation of how much suffering is engendered here. For one thing, there are the physical facts. Horses are large, heavy animals (weighing up to 1000 pounds or more), whose legs are thin and delicate relative to their body mass. Because of her weight and size, a horse who is tripped while running at full speed experiences a much more violent, forceful crash than would a smaller, lighter animal (such as a calf).¹¹ She is also more likely to fracture her legs or other bones when she falls. Tripped horses do in fact suffer from a variety of grievous injuries ranging from lameness and facial lacerations to broken necks to death. Furthermore, horses are “flight” animals who survive in the wild by fleeing from predators. Due to evolutionary adaptation, they are sensitive and fearful animals. Even a domesticated horse who is comfortable with humans may startle violently at sudden movements and loud noises. A horse used in *manganas* exhibits signs of terror and severe distress: she jerks her head upward, rolls her eyes around, sweats, and runs wildly to elude the *charro* chasing her down. She may even rear up on her hind legs and try desperately (and unsuccessfully) to jump the wall around the arena to escape. Her emotional suffering is palpable.

Chickens, frogs, turtles, and other animals suffer anguish and physical pain in live-animal markets such as those in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Chickens are intelligent, feeling animals with individual personalities.¹² When a hen is packed into a wire cage with other chickens so tightly that she cannot move, for long periods of time, she experiences the psychological and physical hardship of an animal who wants and needs to move around freely. She cannot reach food or water or make even small movements to relieve her discomfort. All of her natural behaviors—including pecking, dust bathing, walking, and stretching her wings—are frustrated. When she is grabbed by her feet and thrown into a bag for the customer, she naturally feels fear; she may also be injured or have bones broken. Slaughter methods in live-animal markets inflict pain as well. Turtles are alive and fully conscious when their shells are ripped off or when their limbs are cut off or their bodies cut in half with a knife or

saw. Frogs are alive and fully conscious when they are skinned with a knife. Although they are not able to scream and fight back, turtles and frogs are able to feel.¹³

The choice to focus on alleviating cruelty (as opposed to securing “rights,” for instance) is overdetermined. Organizations such as the SFSPCA are self-described humane groups whose stated mission is to fight cruelty and improve animal welfare. Some of the other animal groups who have become involved in these conflicts, such as In Defense of Animals or United Poultry Concerns, go beyond this to talk about animal “rights” and “entitlements.” Because the least common denominator among all animal protection groups is their opposition to animal suffering, a discourse about cruelty can unite welfare-oriented and rights-oriented groups in a workable coalition. Opposition to cruelty is also a least common denominator within the broader public. Most Americans would say that they repudiate cruelty (lest they be seen as sociopathic!), and both federal and state laws recognize the prevention of cruelty and the humane treatment of animals as legitimate matters of public interest. Animal advocacy groups understand the importance of the process that David Snow and Robert Benford (1988) call “frame alignment.” That is, they know that their framing efforts are more likely to succeed if they begin where their audience already is, ideologically speaking. Charges that horse tripping and live-animal markets are “cruel” and “inhumane” are tailored to speak to the public’s existing sensibilities.

Animal advocates reject the charge that they are unfairly targeting minority cultures. For them, cruelty is cruelty in any culture. United Poultry Concerns, which helped to raise funds for the lawsuit brought against Chinatown live-animal vendors, writes on its website: “Live-animal markets epitomize In-Your-Face, I-Don’t-Give-A-Damn cruelty to animals. . . . The issue is not culture but a degrading human tradition, from Ming Lee to KFC, that . . . needs to be changed” (*Poultry Press* 1997). During the California legislature’s debate about horse tripping, the California Equine Council made this statement:

The few *Charreada* Federations opposing this bill see this issue as a “cultural right.” The sponsors and endorsers of this bill perceive it as a “cruelty issue.” The question is: does culture supersede cruelty in the State of California? There is no constitutional protection of culture. Both Cesar Chavez and the Mexican-American Political Association oppose the tripping of horses and see the practice as a cruel cultural anachronism. . . . This is not an attack upon Mexican-American culture. The purpose of AB49X is not to ban *charreadas*. There are, however, several events in the *charreadas* that have cruel consequences for the horse (cited in Renteln 2004, p. 108).

In its “Statement on San Francisco Live Animal Markets,” the SFSPCA suggests that the city shows favoritism to the Chinese community by exempting it from anticruelty laws which would, if applied, proscribe live-animal market practices. Matthew Kaplan, chair of the Commission on Animal Control and Welfare (which proposed a ban on the sale of live animals for food), makes a similar point in his article “San Francisco Should Not Tolerate Animal Cruelty.”¹⁴ Chinese animal vendors, he argues, resist the imposition of regulations on their slaughter methods even though every slaughterhouse in the country is regulated. He adds: “Playing the race card in an attempt to continue torturing animals is disgraceful and unacceptable.”

Even if we provisionally accept that animal advocates are not motivated by nativism or racism, the question remains: Are anticruelty campaigns illegitimate if they benefit from, take advantage of, or even deepen majority prejudices toward immigrant minorities? What if being racist is what enhances the “winnability” of a

campaign? When the news magazine show *20/20* aired a segment on horse tripping, “Pity the Horses,” which expressed cultural intolerance and played upon anti-Mexican feeling (Nájera-Ramírez 1996), did this compromise or invalidate the efforts of Action for Animals and the California Equine Council? When racist, xenophobic agitators like Frosty Wooldridge call for the exclusion of immigrants because of their animal practices, does this tarnish the efforts of animal advocates?¹⁵ These are not easy questions to answer. Giving succor to the Frosty Wooldridges of the world should be avoided; it is right to expect animal groups to tailor their rhetoric and agenda to take reasonable precautions. At the same time, condemning animal advocacy on the grounds that it inflames existing prejudices does not seem right either. Rick Avanzino of SFSPCA is not Frosty Wooldridge and the distinction between the two is important. It is not tenable to argue that one can never say anything critical about any aspect of any disadvantaged group’s actions for fear of exacerbating that group’s disadvantage. For one thing, there is a real danger of exoticizing and marginalizing immigrant minorities, placing them outside of the circle of moral dialogue, criticism, and community. For another, the focus on protecting immigrant minorities from persecution, while entirely valid, should not be allowed to displace and shut down the other moral discourse in play here, that of the cruel treatment of animals. Sometimes there is no morally irreproachable course of action.

Now a multiculturalist might reply: “Even if animal advocates do not argue the superiority of their own culture, their assertion of a universal value—the evil of cruelty—is ethnocentric.” But is the assertion of the existence of universal values by definition *ethnocentric*? As many have argued, claims about the culture boundedness of all assertions are nonsensical in that they themselves assume universal form; they also presume the untenable notion that cultures are discrete wholes that can be neatly marked off from one another (Parekh 2000). In general, I concur with multiculturalist theorist Bhikhu Parekh that (1) the assertion of certain universal values (e.g., the value of human life) is appropriate and not intrinsically incompatible with multiculturalist beliefs in justice, fairness, and equality; and (2) these values should be very basic and few in number. Parekh writes: “Universal moral values are those we have good reasons to believe to be worthy of the allegiance of all human beings” (Parekh 2000, p. 127). The interdiction against cruelty (whether inflicted upon humans or animals) seems to me to fit this description.

This particular value (that cruelty is wrong) is not in fact contested by the parties involved in these controversies. Spokespersons for the Mexican and Chinese communities do not endorse cruelty; to the contrary, they strongly disavow it. What is contested here is the definition of what constitutes cruelty. Animal advocates view horse tripping and live-animal markets as cruel because they cause significant suffering to the animals involved. *Charros*, who view their practice as an artful and culturally laden engagement with animals and nature, argue that it is not cruel because there is no infliction of needless or gratuitous suffering. In other words, suffering is not inflicted for its own sake but is incidental to the display of skill and prowess, much as in the American rodeo. Defending themselves against the charge of cruelty at a California Assembly hearing in March 1994, the Federation of Charros stated: “No information or indictment has ever been filed alleging that the event of *Manganas* [horse tripping] subjected any animal to needless suffering.”¹⁶ Chinatown vendors, similarly, view live-animal markets as sites of cultural and culinary production that do not inflict gratuitous suffering and, in any case, are no more cruel than the majority’s farms and slaughterhouses. Immigrant advocates thus reject the cruelty charge by (1) defining cruelty as the infliction of gratuitous suffering and arguing that they are not engaged in this; and (2) arguing that, even if what they do

is cruel, it does not deserve attention because it is no more cruel than are the majority's practices.

Is this a "clash of cultures" over the definition of *cruelty*? It is true that culture can influence definitions of *cruelty* by shaping our sense of the proper conceptual and spatial placement of different kinds of animals (Emel and Wolch, 1998; Philo and Wilbert, 2000).¹⁷ Because many Whites see horses as superior to live-stock animals (cows, pigs, etc.) and lack appreciation for the cultural significance of the *charreada*, they are probably more likely than are many Mexicans to judge horse tripping to be cruel. Similarly, many Whites see turtles as pets or wildlife, whereas many Chinese people may see them as food animals. This means that Whites are probably more likely than are the Chinese to see the treatment of turtles in Chinatown's live-animal markets as cruel. Pius Lee, cochair of the Chinatown Neighborhood Association had this in mind when he said: "[What] animal rights activists don't understand is the distinction between animals for food and animals for pets. They are separate. They're two different issues" (Lee 2000). Lee suggests that *cruelty* is a concept properly applied to the treatment of pets, but not to food animals. While many Americans may accept this distinction, most animal advocates contest the notion that the suffering of food animals is morally irrelevant. In any case, it would be a gross oversimplification to say that definitions of *cruelty* match up closely with cultural group boundaries. For one thing, definitions vary within cultures: some Americans think that hunting is cruel; others do not. For another, definitions cross cultural lines: some Whites think that horse tripping is cruel; some Mexican Americans agree. Some Chinese Americans deny that chopping the heads off of live fish is cruel; many Whites agree. Is it ethnocentric, then, for animal advocates to assert their definition of *cruelty* over that of *charros* and live-animal vendors? Because definitions do not match up with cultural boundaries, and because animal advocates assert their definition of cruelty over those of majority elements (pet owners, scientists, and the meat industry) as well, the case for ethnocentrism is not very compelling. Not every disagreement about values is an example of cultural imperialism.

MUTUALLY UNSETTLING DIALOGUE

When the multiculturalist interpretation of these animal controversies "goes imperial" and drives anticruelty discourse off the table, what is lost? For one thing, an opportunity for us as a society to consider the legitimate ethical issue of how we should relate to animals. Some of multiculturalism's luster as an oppositional force is also lost, I think. For a justice narrative to ignore and even reinscribe another form of oppression is problematic, though not uncommon. Just as there are strong reasons for not interfering with historically disadvantaged immigrant minorities, there are strong reasons for not inflicting suffering on animals. In both cases, the mitigation of oppressive power is a forceful moral imperative. Thus it would be similarly problematic if the anticruelty discourse were to predominate to the extent that immigrant minority concerns were silenced. One way to avoid a scenario in which one moral concern stifles the other is to fully recognize the normative dilemma posed by these conflicts and address it through moral dialogue.

Multiculturalism theorist Bhikhu Parekh (2000) makes some useful suggestions about generating "intercultural dialogue," or moral dialogue across racial/cultural lines. Dialogue, he avers, is a method of handling differences while showing mutual respect and building moral community. In his view, the majority should respect a

minority community's right to culture but also feel free to criticize aspects of that culture, all the while remaining mindful of the danger of cultural imperialism. The minority should, in turn, offer explanations or defenses of its practices and feel free to raise questions about the validity of the majority's values and practices as well. The key to the success of this dialogue is its "bifocality," meaning that "neither the majority nor the minority way of life can escape the other's scrutiny" (Parekh 2000, p. 293). All who participate are (potentially) transformed because the dialogue "forces each party to become conscious of its values and reasons for holding them, and contributes to their critical self-knowledge" (Parekh 2000, p. 271). Difference here is not a threat to be obliterated but a mirror for the self, a mirror that denaturalizes without necessarily invalidating the ways of the majority. This kind of mutually discomfiting dialogue realizes important democratic values such as transparency, fairness, and inclusiveness.

I explained above that immigrant advocates charge animal activists with using a "double standard," or targeting immigrant practices when the majority's practices are comparably cruel. In response, I made two points: first, animal activists do in fact spend most of their time challenging majority practices, and, second, there is no *prima facie* reason why immigrant minorities should be last in the reform queue. I add a third point here: if immigrant advocates are concerned with fairness (as opposed to using majority practices for cover—so that they can continue to cause suffering to animals), then they should seek not to silence criticism from animal advocates but to broaden its focus, through moral dialogue, to include majority practices as well.

In the current scenario, animal advocates charge immigrant minorities with cruelty, the latter close ranks, invoking the multiculturalist defense, and a pitched battle ensues. If bifocal dialogue were to develop, the scenario would be different. First, in a manner respectful of concerns about racism and nativism, animal advocates would present reasons why immigrant minorities should change their animal practices. Second, the latter would take these concerns seriously, rather than deflecting them, and would explain and defend their practices, with the option of raising questions about majority animal practices. So, Mexican Americans might present both *charreadas* and majority practices such as American rodeos and horseracing as proper subjects for evaluation and scrutiny, and Chinese Americans might suggest a closer look at both live-animal markets and conventional farms and slaughterhouses. Finally, different segments of the majority and immigrant minority communities would weigh in, bringing disparate and contradictory interests and beliefs into the mix. Animal advocates, hunters, farmers, and racing enthusiasts would participate in the debate alongside *charros*, live animal vendors, Buddhists, and minority animal advocates. Because views about animals do not match up with racial or other group boundaries, interesting cross-cutting solidarities (and cleavages) might develop.

Clearly, this kind of dialogue comes with no guarantees. Building moral community is difficult in the context of unequal group power, for instance. But it is also true that following the multiculturalist dictum "leave my culture alone" can amplify the exoticization and marginalization of immigrant minority cultures. Immigrants need protection from cultural imperialism and nativism, but receiving and giving moral criticism and engaging others on issues of moral concern are important parts of membership in a moral community. The risks of being seen as outside of this community may well be higher than the risks of being included.

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NOTES

1. The other states that have banned horse tripping are Florida, Illinois, Maine, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.
2. K. Anthony Appiah (1996) coined this phrase to describe the fact that collective identities tend to dominate other identities.
3. Nájera-Ramírez (2002) points out that the *charreada*, though transplanted from Spain to Mexico, was a feature of the regions now known as the American West and Southwest when these areas were still part of Mexico.
4. Multiculturalist discourse today is not just (or even primarily) a reaction to assimilationist pressures. Historically, White ethnics have been pressured to assimilate to the Anglo majority, but groups of color—Blacks, Native Americans, Mexicans, Chinese, etc.—have been, to varying degrees, subject to the opposite pressure; they have been forcibly denied cultural, social, and political belonging. Multiculturalist discourse today is a retort to this history of racialized exclusion and owes as much if not more to antiracist and anticolonial thought as it does to Horace Kallen's cultural pluralism.
5. During this period, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (known as the *Chinese Six Companies*) became the leading voice of Chinatown, its defender against a hostile White society. The Chinese Six Companies has acted as a representative for the Chinese American community in the current controversy over Chinatown's live-animal markets.
6. Polanco tried to add an amendment banning calf tripping, but the amendment was defeated. If successful, Polanco would have turned American rodeo interests against the bill.
7. The image of the *charro* "became thoroughly integrated with the ideas of manhood, nationhood, and power" in the patriarchal *hacienda* system (Nájera-Ramírez 1994, p. 4). Women are not allowed to compete in the *charreada* events; some women participate in a female precision riding team, where they ride sidesaddle in lacy full skirts.
8. Former screen star Brigitte Bardot has blasted Muslims as "barbaric" and "uncivilized" for engaging in *balal* slaughter and made similar observations about Koreans for eating dogs. The activists involved in the horse-tripping and live-animal market controversies were for the most part more scrupulous about avoiding the appearance of racist and colonialist thinking. The SFSPCA, for example, publicly lamented the fact that the live-animal market conflict had raised racial tensions in San Francisco. This undoubtedly explained its willingness to work out a formal agreement with the Chinatown live-animal vendors, who signed but then disregarded the document.
9. See (http://info.sen.ca.gov/pub/93-94/bill/asm/ab_0001-0050/abx1_49_cfa_940331_200936_asm_comm) (accessed March 20, 2007).
10. SFSPCA, "Report to the California Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife, Submitted in Opposition to AB 238," March 10, 1999. Contact SFSPCA, 2500 16th Street, San Francisco, CA 94103.
11. "Horses are large animals with a high center of gravity, capable of traveling at fast speeds on fragile legs, while calves are smaller animals with a low center of gravity moving at slower speeds on much sturdier limbs" (International Fund for Horses 2003). This is not to say that calf roping does not cause suffering—it does—but only that horse tripping can cause more severe injuries to the animals involved.
12. See (<http://www.hsus.org/farm/resources/animals/chickens/>) (accessed March 20, 2007). Karen Davis of United Poultry Concerns has done more to educate humans about the capacities and individuality of chickens than anyone else. See (<http://www.upc-online.org>) (accessed March 20, 2007).
13. We have at least three good reasons to think that vertebrates (including turtles, frogs, and fish) feel: they have a central nervous system with features in common with our own; they cry out in pain and/or move to escape sources of pain; the ability to feel pain is an evolutionary adaptation that enhances the individual animal's likelihood of survival (Singer 2002, pp. 10–17).
14. Available at (<http://users.california.com/~animalwrites/Matts.htm>) (accessed March 26, 2007).
15. Information available at (http://info.sen.ca.gov/pub/93-94/bill/asm/ab_0001-0050/abx1_49_cfa_940331_200936_asm_comm) (accessed March 20, 2007).
16. Information available at (http://info.sen.ca.gov/pub/93-94/bill/asm/ab_0001-0050/abx1_49_cfa_940331_200936_asm_comm) (accessed March 20, 2007).

17. During the last century, Americans have distanced themselves from the slaughter of animals for food by locating slaughterhouses outside of central urban areas. For this reason, San Francisco's live-animal markets appear transgressive, even leaving aside the issue of what kinds of animals are being sold. See Philo (1995) for an account of how animal husbandry was banished to rural areas historically.

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