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ANIMALS AND HOME: INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

ABSTRACT An overview of the essays included in the Special Issue highlighting the contribution the issue makes to scholarship.

KEYWORDS: Animals, pets, home, domesticity, interdisciplinary

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In the past two decades home life has become a focus for historical research. The layout of the home, its meaning, organisation, material culture and domestic rituals and practices have been increasingly scrutinised, as well as its meaning in a social and emotional sense. As Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling have shown, a sense of home is often created by an emotional attachment to an imagined space (Blunt and Dowling 2006). But one important aspect of home life—the role of animals—has been almost completely overlooked. Studies of
homes, domestic practices and family relationships rarely mention animal presence. This “failure to include animals in discussions of the nature of the home” was critiqued by leading animal studies scholar Erica Fudge in 2006, but relatively little has been done to address the issue in historical studies. Yet, scholars from different disciplines have increasingly called attention to the role of animals in social life. In recent decades studies of human-animal relationships have developed and diversified, and a large body of scholarship now explores animal-human relations (Kean and Howell 2018). While the cultural, economic and social significance of animals has been an important theme in this literature, discussions are sometimes abstract and removed from the everyday spaces and places they inhabited. In May 2019, we organised an international conference on Animals and Home at the Institute of Historical Research in London, as part of the AHRC Pets and Family Life Project (AH/N003721/1). Developed from this conference, this special issue aims to bring home and animals together to interrogate the shifting relationship between animals and ideas of home, and consider home as a lived, inter-species experience across time and space. Crucially, the essays collated in this issue ask how animal presence changed the meaning of home in Europe between the early medieval and modern periods?

Bringing together approaches from sociology, cultural geography, history, literature and visual studies, this issue showcases how different methodologies bring specific dimensions of the human-animal domestic relationship into view. Historicising the domestic human-animal dynamic highlights temporal and spatial specificity while bringing everyday practices of “home” life under scrutiny. Contributions from Harriet Evans-Tang and Laura Gelfand highlight the importance of visual and tactile worlds in understanding the often uneasy and contested place of animals within the home. Tang, Gelfand, and Nora Schuurman and Taina Syrjämaa explore the role of animals in defining boundaries within domestic space, and between the home and the outside world. The relationship between animals and families is a focus for Stephanie Howard-Smith and Schuurman and Syrjämaa—demonstrating how their emotional value was framed in different ways. Howard-Smith and Karen Jones both tackle the issue of the place of animals in home material culture—in relation to both living and dead animals. Howard-Smith, Tang and Schuurman and Syrjämaa examine the role of animals in everyday life and bring debates about animal agency to bear on daily practices within the home. Taken together, the essays demonstrate the powerful impact of animals on domestic, social and emotional life, while revealing the historically contingent relationship between animals and home in different periods and places, from medieval Iceland to contemporary Finland.

In this special issue, home is defined in relation to a sense of “domesticity”: that is, the organisation of space and things, people and relationships, rituals and routines. One of the core contributions
of this issue is illuminating the agency of animals in shaping understandings and experiences of domesticity: what spaces are defined as “home,” how are those spaces policed and organised and for whose benefit, what routines and rituals take place, and how do human-animal dynamics constitute the atmosphere and emotionality of home? Ranging across chronological periods, the essays demonstrate shifts in understandings and experiences of home depending on socio-economic context. The most striking change perhaps is from medieval Icelandic conceptions of home as residence and workplace, an intimate and relatively porous space for humans and animals (Tang), towards the early modern elite conception of home as an increasingly private sanctuary. Howard-Smith charts the importance of animals in shaping the material space of home but, also, in giving expression to expansive ideas of cross-species family membership. By the nineteenth century, heightened conceptions of home as a refuge from the exploitation of an industrialising world coincided with the increasing expansion of consumer culture that made home and its contents an expression of individual (or familial) identity and values (Jones). As several of the essays show, who was included (and excluded) from home, and how, was a core indicator across western culture of broader ideals of the domestic as a sacred space, and gendered (and species) roles and responsibilities within the home and conceptions of familial normativity. Relationships with animals could play an important part in the construction of masculine and feminine roles (Jones and Howard-Smith). Notably, several of the essays interrogate how animals helped constitute the emotionality of home with animal presence creating home feeling (Tang), animals as agents in the creation of networks of kinship feelings (Howard-Smith) or in creating inter-species affection (Schuurman and Syrjämaa). Each of the essays reflects, albeit differently, on the embodied and sensory qualities of animals, dead and alive.

What is most striking for our purposes is the shift in human-animal relations within the home and what animals might be classified as “domestic.” First, Tang demonstrates how, in early medieval Iceland, conceptions of human-animal homes could incorporate livestock. These homes were places of inter-personal relationships between humans, and humans and animals, of labour and sustenance where humans and animals were co-dependent, and of shared responsibility where humans and animals had obligations and could be prosecuted for failing to fulfil, or contravening, them. Gelfand charts the hardening lines between animals that were included and excluded from the home from the medieval period onwards by paying attention to the increasing domestication of the dog while the wolf became beyond the pale, despite the two species sharing 98 per cent of DNA. Howard-Smith takes the case study of the lap dog as example par excellence of the increasing domestication of (some) animals to become members of home and family, sharing not only space and objects with humans but
becoming embedded in human-oriented rituals, such as mourning, too. Schuurman and Syrjämaa stake a powerful reminder that animals were not simply incorporated into human conception and practices of home but that animals exerted agency in negotiating shared living spaces and home rituals.

Second, the essays chart the shifting status of animals in the home over time, from the early medieval period when animals helped constitute a sense of “home” (Tang), to the increasing sequestering of wild beasts and livestock from “domestic” animals in the later medieval period (Gelfand), to the rise of an industry centred on the “pet,” a term for animals that presupposed a domestic companionship (Howard-Smith; Schuurman and Syrjämaa). Jones’s article complicates this trajectory by considering the place of dead animals—or, more specifically, animalia—to consider humans’ increasing objectification of animals as items without animation or sentience for display within the home. As her article demonstrates, the changing dynamic between home, humans and animals in the modern period needs to be considered in both a colonial and environmental context, especially as we continue to live with the consequences of western, white men’s assertions of dominance over the natural and non-western world.

Indeed, several of the articles draw out the ongoing implications of humanity’s history with animals. Gelfand notes that the demonization of the wolf as a predator, embodying antithetical values of home, from the medieval period onwards not only resonates in continued ambivalence towards the fate of wolves across the western world but that the tropes of such demonization have become familiar in the depiction of other species, for instance, the Pit Bull Terrier, that somehow appear to contradict notions of home as a safe space and how such tropes are often loaded with pejorative assumptions about race and class too. Shuurman and Syrjämaa highlight the lasting consequences of the commodification of cats and dogs as pets in shaping the ways humans and animals negotiate shared living space. Jones, meanwhile, demonstrates how the commodification of the dead animal contributed to shaping, and perpetuating, conceptions of domestic and “exotic” animals as things and the long-term environmental catastrophe that results from such mindsets.

The essays produced here draw on myriad methodologies to demonstrate both animal studies and scholarship on “Home” as a site of interdisciplinarity across different historical periods. Tang evaluates Icelandic sagas in conjunction with archaeological evidence to identify animal contributions to home space but, also, to reflect on how literary culture can facilitate reflexive thinking about home feelings in archaeological remains, particularly in contexts where printed sources and first-person accounts are scant. Working in a context where written accounts tend to originate largely with legal and ecclesiastical bodies, Gelfand brings secular and sacred textual representations of wolves
and dogs into dialogue with the visual to advance a “cultural studies” approach to conceptions of home and animals in medieval Europe. Focusing on the Georgian elite, Howard-Smith examines correspondence and diaries, alongside inventories of home to consider the literary, visual and material constitution of domestic animal companionship in privileged households. Jones, meanwhile, is explicitly interested in the materiality of taxidermied animals which she locates within a burgeoning print culture of media and prescriptive advice that commented on “fantastic beasts” as consumer goods of empire. Taken as a whole, these essays highlight the difficulty of accessing the presence and meaning of animals in the homes of pre-modern and modern peasants, labourers and industrial workers and the necessity of turning, as Tang does, to more imaginative sources to access the life experiences of non-elites or, as Gelfand shows, illuminating elite group’s cultural representations that were intended to be pervasive across different social groups. It is Schuurman and Syrjämaa’s consideration of nineteenth and twentieth century first-person accounts, either through oral or written narratives, that highlights a more diverse socio-economic experience of animals and home. Overall, the essays showcase the potential for empirically-grounded research into human-animal relations to challenge human-centred understandings of home and to anchor philosophical consideration of animal agency in experiences of domesticity.

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