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Article

Animals Other than Human Animals and Their Claim to Equal Consideration in Coronavirus and Criminological Study: Examining Harm to Domesticated Dogs during COVID-19 in the UK

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Abstract: While the financial and social support afforded to United Kingdom (UK) ‘animals other than human animals’ (AOTHAs) welfare charities, such as the RSPCA and Dogs Trust, could suggest that they are valued intrinsically within Western society criminological texts largely omit them from recognition, with some important exceptions, see non-speciesist criminology. Most human animals likely do not want to directly or indirectly harm AOTHAs and even value relationships with “companion” AOTHAs. Regardless, AOTHAs have been victimized throughout history and continue to be. This article examines harm to AOTHAs in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic to argue that abuse proliferates where harmful subjectivities are generated by society’s acceptance of (1) the anthropocentric culture, and (2) when humanity values their individual advancement within the competitive consumer culture. Companion dogs were specifically focused upon within this article due to their so called close emotional and physical proximity to human animals, with proximity meaning that they were directly impacted by the lockdown measures implemented. The coronavirus pandemic was addressed by governments throughout the world by initiating an array of social restrictions. Because of these social restrictions, millions of individuals within England, and in countries such as the United States of America (USA), decided to adopt or purchase dogs for a variety of reasons, including to help them mitigate feelings of isolation and loneliness and to provide them with an excuse to participate in outdoor exercise. In order to determine the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had upon the plight of domesticated companion dogs within England, semi-structured interviews, document analyses, and observation research were undertaken. The initial analysis of data presented here suggests that the coronavirus pandemic threatened the wellbeing of dogs within England, with their reproductive, physical, medical, and psychological wellbeing being put at risk.

Keywords: anthropocentric culture; consumer culture; coronavirus; dogs



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1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic instigated a time of great social change. Despite the fact that human animals were significantly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic and have been the subject of academic attention surrounding this topic, how AOTHAs have been impacted by the pandemic cannot be ignored. As the coronavirus pandemic unfolded, an unprecedented number of domesticated companion dogs were adopted, commodified, and exploited. Dogs became a panacea to the loneliness, boredom, and anxiety that proliferated within an environment of social restrictions and mandated isolation. The demand for companion dogs rose in line with social restrictions (Mills 2020; Watson 2020), driving price tags to spiral, along with impulsivity and a proliferation of new, inexperienced, or predatory and opportunistic breeders. Whilst the social restrictions which were implemented impacted human animals throughout England, these same social restrictions impacted the wellbeing of domesticated companion dogs. While this trend is recognized throughout social media

and news media, criminology as a discipline has largely neglected this area of study, justifying the production of this research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Anthropocentrism and How Dogs Are Valued

The study of AOTHA and their bond with human animals has gained a large interest in the social sciences (Bastian et al. 2012; Amiot and Bastian 2015; Dhont et al. 2019). After decades of research, it has become obvious that AOTHA suffer at the hands of human animals. Criminologists and other social scientists have tried to identify the causes for this exploitation to try to find a way to prevent its occurrence (Agnew 1998; Beirne 1999; Earnshaw 1999; Flynn 2001). Rationale is important to identify for the experiences of dogs appointed as domesticated companions within the coronavirus pandemic to be understood.

Throughout social science research, a clear picture has emerged; dogs and fellow AOTHA are treated differently to human animals due to the belief in some sort of fundamental inferiority (Cazaux 1999). In fact, humanity adopts an anthropocentric view (Cazaux 1999; Sollund 2011). Anthropocentrism is the idea that human animals and their needs, desires, and wishes are more important than the needs, desires, and wishes of AOTHA and that humanity and its flourishing should be prioritized even at the expense of others (Agnew 1998; Cazaux 1999; Earnshaw 1999). While the growth of AOTHA welfare organizations and charities (Carter 2007) and the increased protection granted to AOTHA, especially dogs appointed as domesticated companions within English law, could demonstrate how the acceptance of an anthropocentric stance has reduced within the 21st century, dogs and their treatment are still largely based upon their instrumental, rather than their intrinsic, worth (Beirne 1999, 2014; Flynn 2001; Francione 2007; Robertson 2015).

Linked to the belief in human animal progression and superiority, according to green criminologists, AOTHA and the suffering that they experience are largely determined by how they benefit the human animal population (Beirne 1999, 2014; Flynn 2001; Borkfelt 2011). Dogs have been a popular AOTHA to 'own' as a domesticated companion for decades and dogs are adopted as domesticated companions largely due to the belief that they benefit the human animal 'owner.' However, the correlation between pet ownership and human animal wellbeing is not absolute. Research has shown that contextual variables influence research results (Rodriguez et al. 2021). Variables such as the participant's gender and employment status and the differences identified between individual AOTHA have been identified as factors that influence findings. Even so, the consensus remains that a dog within the home can provide comfort (Amiot and Bastian 2015; Mueller et al. 2021; Rodriguez et al. 2021). When a dog is stroked and pet, oxytocin is released, relieving anxiety and stress within the human animal (DeMello 2021).

Evidence also indicates that dogs appointed as domesticated companions are fundamental within the developmental stages of children, where their presence within the home is more likely to reduce negative views surrounding AOTHA and the environment in the future. For example, the earlier a human animal is in contact with a dog, the less likely they are to view other AOTHA and the environment in a negative light, and the less likely they are to cause them harm (Twardek et al. 2017; Sykes et al. 2020). According to theory surrounding development and learning, AOTHA are even used to help children develop an understanding of emotions and attributes, with individuals applying positive or negative characteristics to AOTHA to help with the visualization of these characteristics (Amiot and Bastian 2015).

The domestication of dogs first occurred around 15,000 years ago, when hunter-gathers decided to tame wolves to assist in hunting (Case 2008; Bergström et al. 2020). After thousands of years of selective breeding (selection based around the qualities that benefitted human animals), a new species formed: the dog (Case 2008). Subsequently, dogs, for thousands of years, have been viewed as extremely beneficial to the human animal, and this is well-known by popular society today. However, unlike dogs being domesticated and used to assist humanity with hunting, dogs are predominately used today for companionship

(DeMello 2021), with the phrase ‘man’s best friend’ being used frequently when discussing the place of dogs within human animal society. This point alone, and the recognition that AOTHAs within the home benefit human animal development and wellbeing, should indicate that dogs (a domesticated companion) are protected from suffering and that they are not subjected to abuse, as a direct result of the positive impact they can have upon their human animal ‘owners’ (Borkfelt 2011; Arluke and Irvine 2017). Even so, just by looking at some of the first instances of AOTHA violence that have been documented by academics, this concept is refuted (Ascione 1993; Flynn 2000; Beirne 2002, 2004).

While the understanding that dogs provide great social and physical benefits for their human animal ‘owners’ should mean that they are likely to be protected from suffering throughout the pandemic, in line with the theory surrounding anthropocentrism, society has adopted and accepted a nature–culture divide, or rather a ‘them and us’ ideology. The natural–cultural divide represents the belief that humanity is fundamentally different from nature; hence, AOTHAs’ wellbeing and needs cannot be considered equally to that of human animals (Heuberger 2007; Borkfelt 2011). This ideology was adopted to protect moral sensibility. With humanity positioning itself above the natural world, no matter how domesticated AOTHAs become, their suffering and lives will always be valued as inferior to their human animal counterparts (Cazaux 1999). Therefore, the nature–culture divide is a tactic used to maintain social order and human animal flourishing (Borkfelt 2011). Historically, this nature–culture divide occurred through both religious and scientific justification; however, it is still profound within the 21st century (Harrison 1998; Beirne 1999; Cazaux 1999; Singer 2009; Sollund 2011; Taylor 2011; Harden 2013; Kymlicka and Donaldson 2014).

The influence of the anthropocentric culture on the daily lives and treatment of dogs and fellow AOTHAs, according to green criminologists such as Cazaux (1999); Wadiwel (2009); Sollund (2011, 2017); Beirne (2014); and White (2018), can further be seen by reflecting upon the language adopted to describe both the beings themselves as well as the experiences in which they are victimized. Unlike other AOTHAs from less socially valued species and AOTHA categories (such as those who are ‘wild’ or used within the agricultural industry for food, fur, and other resourceful materials (Wyatt 2013, 2014; Nurse and Wyatt 2020)), dogs are frequently named and spoken about using personal pronouns in the same way that a human animal would be. The use of personal pronouns and affectionate names to refer to the domesticated companion arguably could make it extremely challenging to abuse dogs as they are, instead of separated from humanity, spoken about in a manner similar to human animals (Mitchell 2011; Sealey and Charles 2013). The understanding that humanity holds greater respect for dogs appointed as domesticated companions can further be seen by comparing their treatment to less valued AOTHAs. For example, society is greatly opposed to the use of dogs within scientific experiments but are less convicted to end the suffering of other AOTHAs within scientific research, such as rats who are, in comparison, valued poorly and sometimes even villainized (Taylor and Signal 2009). Similarly, the consumption of dogs for food within England is extremely frowned upon and illegal, yet the same moral conviction cannot be said for the consumption of pigs or cows (AOTHAs who have similar if not greater cognitive ability to the dog, whom in comparison is spared from this suffering (Rajecki et al. 1993; Flynn and Hall 2017)).

Although Arluke and Irvine (2017) stated that the closer the being is to the human animal (emotionally, physically, genetically, or culturally), the less likely they are to be subjected to abuse and negative treatment, abuse is still rife. While speciesism (see Singer 1976, 1995, 2009, 2011) is seen as occurring between the species (where AOTHAs are discriminated against not just by them not being human animals but by them belonging to AOTHA species that hold little social value), and whilst within this theory domesticated companion dogs should be subjected to minimal abuse due to the valuation placed upon the companionship that they provide, dogs suffer immensely at the hands of human animals (Beirne 2002). While it is widely believed and accepted that dogs are valued as family members, close emotionally as well as geographically to humanity, the language adopted by society still places dogs as being less than (Hirschman 1994). Terminology such as ‘pet’

and ‘owner’ being adopted signifies a fundamental separation between the human animal and the AOTHA, in which the human animal is fundamentally superior to and in control of the dog (Andreozi 2013). Therefore, the placement and valuation of dogs and fellow AOTHA as secondary citizens within society are able to be maintained largely due to the anthropocentric culture that still dominates society. However, whether the anthropocentric culture has been impacted by or if it influenced the treatment of dogs throughout the course of the coronavirus pandemic is still up for debate.

Therefore, a ‘dark side’ to this human animal–AOTHA bond was found. A close relationship with human animals does not necessarily mean just treatment but instead opens up more opportunities for exploitation. Dogs are frequently physically, psychologically, and socially abused, with them often being purchased/adopted without due care. Individuals often do not consider their environment, financial stability, or the time they have available when deciding whether or not to purchase a companion (Flint et al. 2017). In fact, a close geographic relation to dogs does not guarantee positive human animal interactions. Dogs frequently become victim to instances of domestic violence—they are, similar to the rest of the family, at risk of abuse from the perpetrator (Flynn 2000; Beirne 2002; Nurse 2013). Subsequently, while dogs are granted great social value for the benefits that they provide, this does not necessarily mean just treatment during the pandemic. Instead, the possibility for neglect or exploitation has risen due to the social distancing measures implemented, which is a neglect that requires immediate academic attention.

2.2. Domesticated Companion Dogs and Their Inadequate Protection from Harm within a Consumer Society

Before conclusions can be made surrounding how the pandemic has impacted the lives of domesticated companion dogs, it is necessary to analyze further their plight prior to March 2020.

The victimization and suffering that domesticated companion dogs experience is exemplified by the ‘pet’ dog industry. Puppies, due to their instrumental valuation and objective status, have become victims to the practice of impulsive purchasing that dominates a consumer society. A dog’s ‘cuteness’ and social value blind the consumer’s reason and the desirability to obtain knowledge about the best way to care for a puppy, whether the puppy is suitable for their lifestyle, if they can provide for the needs of the puppy in question, and whether they are purchasing from a reputable breeder or seller (Yeates and Bowles 2017; Maher and Wyatt 2019).

A society that values conspicuous consumption and production has resulted in the precarious position of domesticated companion dogs. Within modern society, such as the need to continuously consume products beyond need, the desire to purchase unhealthy breeds and to follow unhealthy breed standards (those that encourage physical discomfort and acute medical conditions that can severely restrict a dog’s mobility or respiratory functions, such as brachycephalic breeds) has maintained in order to enhance and protect the dog’s consumer valuation and hence the social status of the so called ‘owner’ (by needing to continuously consume the ‘best’ product (Maher et al. 2017)). This need to continuously consume the new and best product results in, according to Veblen (1899), immense waste, even if this waste was not intended, waste in the form of undesirable and unwanted dogs. Nonetheless, the ideology of a consumer culture does not only encourage the purchasing of certain breeds, even if this breed type is not suitable for the prospective ‘owner’ (for example, due to them requiring a higher frequency of exercise), but it also encourages the purchasing of a breed type based on a dog’s physical appearance, perhaps their ‘cuteness’ valuation, aggressive appearance, or desirability within a given community (Maher et al. 2017; The Kennel Club 2018, 2021a; O’Neill et al. 2020; Packer et al. 2021). For example, the RSPCA (2022) have seen a stark rise in practices such as ear cropping due to the desire to obtain a dog who appears aggressive to gain a degree of status amongst a certain social group. Ear cropping is illegal within England (Animal Welfare Act 2006, c. 45). Due to it being legal in countries such as the USA, however, individuals can mutilate

puppies within England without getting caught. In order to perform this, individuals purchase fake microchips online that are programmed to appear as though they were issued within the USA or another nation where such practices are legal, a technique that significantly restricts the ability of law enforcement officers to effectively police such practices in England (Heaney 2021). While this is not the case, an individual is able to argue that the dog was bought within another country where the cosmetic procedure is not outlawed (Strauss and Milgram 2019). This, accompanied by the consumer valuation placed upon this practice, fails to deter individuals from gaining a dog with a certain look (arguably an aggressive appearance), even if the process in which it takes to achieve this desired look is extremely painful and dangerous (Hughes et al. 2011; Maher et al. 2017; Battersea 2021; RSPCA 2021a).

We are, of course, familiar with the existence of built-in obsolescence in the world of consumer electronics and motor cars, but this is a phenomenon replicated in relation to AOTHA. For AOTHA other than domesticated companions, such as those used within the agricultural industry, their valuation as a consumer product is obvious (Hribal 2007; Beirne 2014; Cudworth 2017). However, for dogs (domesticated companion dogs) the consumer culture's influence on their treatment is harder to visualize. Individuals actively purchase dog breeds that are popular within a given society to preserve or form their social identity (Beatson et al. 2009). Many individuals detail how their dog acts as a valued family member within the home, and for many the death of a loved companion dog is more devastating than a human animal family member (Hirschman 1994). Even so, thousands of dogs are relinquished and even abandoned when a new desirable product comes onto the market due to the consumer culture encouraging the obtainment of a younger and cuter dog. A dog's breed is not the sole determiner of abandonment, however, with the relinquishment and/or euthanasia of an older dog frequently occurring due to their age failing to preserve their consumer valuation (Irvine and Cilia 2017). Likewise, if a dog's behavior becomes too much of an inconvenience, they are at increased risk of surrendering to a shelter. While the product is still functional, its function is no longer desired, and individuals are therefore encouraged to purchase a product that is more convenient and one that does not require additional work (Ferrell 2013, 2020).

As a result of the growing popularity of domesticated companion dogs, organized criminals have begun to smuggle puppies into the country to sell them to willing customers. With dogs being present within the lives of millions of individuals within Britain (there are currently around 9.6 million dogs residing in the UK (PDSA 2021)), a number of legislation changes have been introduced to regulate the production, use, training, and treatment of dogs to protect their welfare. For example, 'pet' passports, Animal Health Certificates (AHC), and BAZAI directives have been implemented to regulate the safe transportation of dogs over state lines (Strauss and Milgram 2019; GOV.UK 2021). In addition, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (c. 45) stipulated and outlined the five freedoms: five fundamental needs that must be protected when an AOTHA is in human animal care. The AOTHA must be provided with access to an appropriate diet and fresh water; have access to a suitable environment; be able to exhibit natural behaviours; be housed either solely or with other AOTHA depending on species requirements; and be housed in an environment that protects them from pain, injury, and disease (Animal Welfare Act 2006, c. 45). The high level of legal protections afforded to dogs and with dogs being apocryphally viewed as 'man's best friend', and hence frequently respected on an emotional level, could suggest that they are protected from abuse. However, according to green criminologists, even though the protection that dogs are afforded within law and society is increasing with every passing year, the law and society in general are still human animal-centered—both are anthropocentric to the core. While the inconsistencies within AOTHA welfare laws have received increased criticism among the public, such as with dogs being valued by their property status within England (Theft Act 1968, c. 60), due to individuals increasingly viewing their domesticated companion dog as being more valuable than an inanimate object, dogs are still positioned within law as an owned object. Because of this, a dog's valuation

is based not on their health or intrinsic value but upon whether he/she is considered a desirable product to possess and upon their economic valuation. With this in mind, and by 'owners' being compensated financially for harm committed towards a domesticated companion dog, such as theft ([Theft Act 1968](#), c. 60), a dog is valued largely by their instrumental worth. Therefore, legal loopholes remain that enable a certain degree of harm to maintain when in the human animal's interest ([Francione 2007](#); [Yeates and Bowles 2017](#); [Strauss and Milgram 2019](#)). However, whether these loopholes have caused mass suffering to occur during the coronavirus pandemic, one which threatened the physical health of millions of people, requires investigation.

Due to the high consumer value placed upon dogs and their lives, industrial-style breeding sites for puppies, known as 'puppy farms' or 'puppy mills', operate legally throughout Europe. The breeding and selling techniques associated with puppy mills are extremely damaging to the dog's mental and physical well-being. Dogs are kept in cramped, damp cages where they receive little human animal contact or exposure to other dogs. Bitches are bred continuously until they are no longer able to reproduce. They are exhausted, frightened, and frustrated, meaning that they are unable to care for their puppies socially or physically. Consequently, puppy farms fail to prepare a puppy for its future life as a 'human animals' companion' ([McMillan et al. 2011](#); [McMillan 2017](#); [Wauthier et al. 2018](#)). However, such inhumane practices remain, as they satisfy consumer demands at a cheaper price ([Wauthier et al. 2018](#)). Accordingly, following the concept of fetishistic disavowal (where individuals actively dismiss the known negative consequences of their actions so that they can fulfill these actions without moral backlash ([Žižek 2010](#))), individuals recognize that their acquisition of identity would be negatively impacted if meaningful welfare provisions were put into place. As a result, poor breeding has been able to occur due to people believing in the illusion that restricting the consumer culture would limit satisfaction and individual gratification ([Elliott 1999](#)).

Not only are dogs frequently subjected to unethical and cruel breeding techniques such as those present within puppy farms, but they are also often transported to be sold illegally, something which is made possible by the globalization of consumer markets. Puppies are weaned from their mothers too early and are often transported without receiving the vaccinations required under law. Even though policies have been put into place to protect against this, such as Lucy's Law in 2019 that bans the third-party sale of puppies in England, and the introduction of 'pet' passports, such legislative changes are riven with loopholes and the inadequate enforcement of existing regulations ([Strauss and Milgram 2019](#); [GOV.UK 2020b](#)).

Consequently, while the intensity and diversity of abuse in which domesticated companion dogs are subjected to has been outlined, and although such treatment is both unethical and requires immediate change, it is important to understand how the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the harm experienced by domesticated companion dogs, justifying the rationale for this research.

2.3. The Current Climate

Even though it is evident that AOTHAs are not provided with sufficient protection from harm within England and Wales, the coronavirus pandemic brought about a time of great social change. Throughout the pandemic, we were living within a climate that had more rules on socializing than ever seen in England outside of war time. The stay-at-home orders and national lockdowns that were implemented within the years of 2020–2021 had profound impacts upon humanity ([GOV.UK 2020a](#); [Lacobucci 2020](#)).

Studies have tended to focus upon how there was a decline in the public's mental health and how mental health services were put under immense strain due to an increase in demand for their services as people struggled to cope with job loss and isolation brought about by the pandemic ([Bland et al. 2020](#); [Chen et al. 2020](#); [Kato et al. 2020](#)). While most coronavirus literature focuses upon how human animals were impacted, AOTHAs and their victimization have been largely ignored. Throughout the pandemic, research

uncovered how there was a rise in cases of domestic violence (Havard 2021). According to criminologists, cases of domestic violence are usually committed in conjunction with domesticated companion abuse (Flynn 1999, 2000). In fact, criminology originally studied the abuse suffered by dogs within the setting of the home to help form patterns to indicate when human animals suffered occurrences of domestic violence and to predict future interpersonal violence (such as the 'progression thesis' (Flynn 1999, 2001; Beirne 2002, 2004; Nurse 2013)). From this trend alone, it is expected that the abuse committed towards dogs has risen, further justifying the importance of researching dogs and their victimization during the pandemic. Even with the link between domestic violence and violence against AOTHAAs being well known, AOTHAAs still do not have the focus that they deserve. While AOTHAAs have been castigated as predators, both in life and death, they have largely been ignored as victims (Moore 2005). As a result, the recognition given to AOTHAAs from a variety of species, such as the domesticated companion dog, surrounding their treatment and how they have been personally impacted by the pandemic and by humanity's response is still largely absent within coronavirus literature.

In fact, just by scrolling through social media and news media, dogs have been at the forefront. Even before research was conducted, the desire to purchase and adopt dogs during the pandemic was difficult to ignore with dogs appearing on social media and news media daily. The adoption of these so called 'pandemic puppies' was framed as a good occurrence, benefitting the human animal in terms of companionship and exercise (Stonehouse 2021). However, whether this trend brought about benefits to AOTHAAs is a different story and in fact gained limited consideration within academia. Thus, a gap in understanding and research became clear.

3. Theoretical Framework

In order to justify this research's theoretical position, language use, and rationale, an explanation of how academia has previously framed the suffering of AOTHAAs and limitations of these approaches are required. The suffering experienced by dogs appointed as domesticated companions is not always considered illegal. Until recently, AOTHAAs have been absent from debates surrounding victimology and social justice (Borkfelt 2011). Whilst academics have debated the position of AOTHAAs within society for centuries, more recently, criminologists have started to seriously consider AOTHAAs and their place within criminological thought, their claim to political and social protection (White 2018), and consequently their claim to criminological attention when studying the coronavirus pandemic. Criminology in its essence should ensure that justice is sought for all members of society no matter their social status or species.

With criminologists and social scientists beginning to recognize the derogatory status granted to AOTHAAs, because society values anthropocentrism, projects that focus on tackling their abuse and suffering should center around the notion of harm, rather than socio-legal definitions of crime. Crime is a social construct, with acts being considered illegal if their occurrence negatively impacts the dominant culture of the time and the way of life of the dominant social classes (Dorling et al. 2008; Lynch et al. 2015; Goyes and South 2017; Raymen and Smith 2019). Measuring an act's harmfulness on the grounds of its legality can be seen as insufficient when recognizing the subjective nature of criminal law. While criminal law aims to eradicate harm, and whilst actions are provided with an illegal definition when they cause immense harm to both AOTHAAs and human animals, what harms should receive social and legal attention is a decision that is largely determined by the dominant social and ideological order. Hence, studies that neglect harmful actions and instead focus solely on criminally defined acts are likely to neglect the daily suffering of AOTHAAs due to their status as second-class citizens (Moore 2005). In fact, the suffering experienced by dogs appointed as domesticated companions is not always caused by illegal activity, suffering which, if we have the best interests of the AOTHA at heart, should not be ignored. Therefore, an act's legal definition should not be used as the sole indicator of

an act's destructive nature, reinforcing the reason why harm, rather than solely crime, is focused upon within this article (Raymen 2021).

Although the introduction of critical criminology and its reflection on harm is vital, it is evident that not all harm can demand criminological attention. Instead, acts need to produce long-lasting and significant harm for them to receive criminological and meaningful legal consideration (Lin 2006). If not, the ability for the criminal justice system to tackle and prosecute such instances of harm would be extremely challenging. Instead, an act that produces significant suffering (may it be physical, social, or emotional, no matter its legal definition) should receive academic consideration (Beirne 2002; White 2013; Gibney and Wyatt 2020). If not, any harm, no matter its severity (such as someone stubbing their toe on a door) could be up for criminal trial and prosecution, which would, of course, devalue the justice system and the true suffering experienced by billions of beings across the globe. Thus, whilst this project grants great consideration to the harm suffered by dogs within the coronavirus pandemic, harm that may be seen as arbitrary (for example, a dog not being taken on the walking route of their choice) was not considered.

4. Materials and Methods

Qualitative research was deemed the most appropriate research methodology to adopt to answer the question: 'how have domesticated companion dogs been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic?' Additionally, a triangulation of research methods were used to ensure the reliability of results and to enable a critical analysis. This also ensured that the researcher's bias was limited by allowing a variety of components and viewpoints to be revealed in order to best answer the research question outlined.

In order to answer the research questions, new dog 'owners' (those who purchased a dog within the pandemic) and professionals, such as veterinarians, AOTHA welfare organizations, and breeders, were interviewed. These interviews were undertaken to understand how the pandemic and social distancing policies that were implemented to curb the spread of the virus impacted the welfare of domesticated companion dogs. Seventeen semi-structured interviews were undertaken. These interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Thematic analysis was used after the interviews were transcribed to identify patterns of significance.

It is impossible to ignore the uncertain climate that was present when the research was being conducted in terms of social distancing. Because of this, and due to the anxiety that many people suffered and continue to suffer from surrounding social contact, many interviews were conducted online via Zoom. It was up to the participants which method they preferred to use (in person or online).

In line with this, documents that covered and focused on the documentation of industry trends, AOTHA welfare trends, and law and policy initiatives were also analyzed to better understand how the pandemic and social distancing protocols introduced impacted dogs, their care, and their welfare. These documents were found by searching AOTHA welfare groups' databases, government papers, and political databases; through searching online newspapers; and searching academic journals for articles and statistics relating to the dog breeding industry and dog welfare during the coronavirus pandemic. The documents were chosen based on their reliability and ability to answer the research question.

Finally, to complete the triangulation of research methods, observation research was undertaken by contacting a variety of dog breeders on the website 'Gumtree.' Gumtree is a popular British advertisement website where individuals can both sell and buy a range of products throughout the United Kingdom. Gumtree was chosen as the place for contacting breeders due to it providing the researcher with a list of practicing breeders within a designated area who were advertising a litter of puppies at the time of research. After initial contact was made with possible breeders, a time, date, and location was decided on for when the researcher would observe the dog breeder's practices and the puppies' breeding, raising, and selling conditions. The prospective breeders were recruited through convenience and purposive sampling techniques.

Even though the in-depth data generated by undertaking interviews and observations provided personal accounts of the phenomena under study, by limiting the research in terms of generalizability, this criticism is limited through analyzing these data in conjunction with external documents. Secondly, even though the interview participants may not have been representative, with it being unlikely that individuals who were producing and buying dogs illegally or harmfully would have taken part in the research (harmful practices which were in fact adopted by thousands), this limitation was mitigated by observing the breeding practices of those advertising on Gumtree and by analyzing the documents produced by academics, AOTHA welfare organizations, and news media.

Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify themes and codes that provided in-depth insights into the research question, enabling the researcher to reveal, through reflecting upon the data's context and construction, the hidden meanings surrounding these data. When analysis took place, green criminological understandings and the theories surrounding consumerism were focused upon to form the analysis section of this article.

When analyzing the data sets, harm was seen to have occurred when a dog was intentionally or unintentionally restricted from being able to fulfil its fundamental needs and natural requirements (may they be nutritional, social, physical, or psychological (Nurse 2017)). Thus, if an act meant that a dog was unable to fulfil its natural or daily functions, then it was granted focus no matter its so-called 'harmlessness' or the reasons for why it occurred (see Raymen 2021).

The researcher gained ethical approval for the research being undertaken as part of a PhD and its use within additional publications. Interview participants were made aware that they were able to contact the researcher at any time, withdraw their participation, find out more details about the research if required, and that their participation could appear in other publications linked to the original PhD thesis. This ensured that the participants were informed of what the research's aim was and how their data would be used. In order to ensure that the identity of the research participants was protected from identification to the best of the researcher's ability, the data sets were pseudonymized. This was also ensured by omitting identifiable information from the data sets such as the participants name, location, or address.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Impulsively Purchasing Dogs

Through the initial observation and analysis of data, it was uncovered that all stages of a dog's life have been significantly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. When the pandemic struck, stay-at-home orders and social isolation measures were implemented to curb its spread. Because of the restriction of social mobility, the increased time individuals had at home, and the subsequent feelings of social isolation and loneliness, thousands of households decided to purchase a dog (Packer et al. 2021). As a direct consequence of the increased demand for dog 'ownership' (with 2.5 million dogs being acquired within the UK between March 2020 and March 2022, many of which were first time 'owners' (PDSA 2022)), prices for puppies rose steeply, with some reaching the sum of GBP 5000 depending on the breed and age of the dog (Mills 2020; Watson 2020). While the increased monetary value of dogs could suggest that the decision surrounding dog appraisalment was made with caution and after extensive research, this was not the case. Many of those who purchased a dog in the time of the pandemic were first-time 'owners', i.e., those who were unaware of the behavioral, social, and environmental needs that dogs have (Packer et al. 2021). While this lack of knowledge could have been tackled through extensive research and through seeking professional support, from the analysis of interview transcripts many did little to no research prior to adoption. One individual, for instance, claimed that they purchased their dog without any knowledge of the breed or of their needs and brought their dog home the same day that they met them, resulting in them panic buying essential goods such as food, towels, and bedding (see Table 1). While individuals have been criticized in the past for obtaining dogs and other AOTHAs without undertaking appropriate research, the

pandemic saw an increase in the number of impulsive purchases. From the observations conducted with dog breeders, it became evident that breeders became used to consumers making impulsive decisions, with many expecting a decision on adoption within 10–20 min of meeting. In fact, if a decision was not made on the spot, then the breeders often became irritable (Observations 3 and 4).

In today's consumer culture, people often tackle states of uncertainty through impulsive and egocentric purchasing decisions (Winlow and Hall 2013; Smith 2014). This impulsive appraisal of dogs, therefore, is not a new phenomenon. With the pandemic intensifying feelings of uncertainty, a number of individuals purchased a desirable dog, rather than a dog breed suitable for their lifestyle. This phenomenon illustrates that, for some, the perceived health and emotional benefits alongside the identity and social gains attached to the ownership of certain breeds outweigh the potential and future suffering that their dog could experience, once again showing the influence of the anthropocentric culture, where 'AOTHA' suffering and harm are justified on grounds of human animal progression (Cazaux 1999; Sollund 2011). This trend in dog acquisition was witnessed when conducting interviews with new dog 'owners.' One participant (a first-time dog 'owner' who began to work from home during the pandemic because of restrictions) for example claimed how he sought advice about dog purchasing from the RSPCA:

Participant 4: ... I mean obviously you go through I think Battersea Dogs home, I think RSPCA and there a few other ones when they give you like a questionnaire, and they spit out the sort of dog that might be suitable for you. So yeah, we did a couple of those and some of the responses didn't quite fit with us it was kind of like well, I think some of them said you're still not, you're still not suitable for a dog and I think it was, it was down to the amount of time that we were going to leave it.

After describing their daily routine and the characteristics of their home and environment to the charity, they were advised that they should not purchase a dog as they would not be able to care for them properly. Even though this advice was given, the individual actively went against the advice, threatening the health and wellbeing of their dog for the gratification that could have been gained from their 'ownership.'

While the pandemic encouraged individuals to purchase dogs even if it was not appropriate regarding reducing the suffering experienced in terms of loneliness and a lack of purpose (by many being furloughed from their work), the pandemic and social restrictions severely threatened the standards of dog breeding. Though puppy farms or unlicensed and illegal breeders were in full force before the pandemic (as outlined above), there is growing evidence to suggest that these institutions capitalized on the growing demand for puppy 'ownership' within the pandemic (RSPCA 2021b). While the damage of puppy farms has been studied before, and despite the fact that policies and measures have been put into place to fight the spread and operation of puppy farms, such as Lucy's Law (GOV.UK 2020b), the pandemic's social distancing and social lockdown measures significantly impacted these operations. When conducting interviews with AOTHA welfare organizations such as the RSPCA, it was uncovered that, within the pandemic, due to both the demand for enforcement services to implement lockdown measures and to staff numbers reducing because of self-isolations, enforcement officers who specifically worked on the prevention of illegal breeding and transportation were extremely restricted in their ability to respond to cases of illegal breeding (see Table 1). With the price of puppies rising, and the decreased likelihood of a criminological response to illegal and cruel breeding operations, such practices became even more desirable (opportunistic breeding which was encountered in practically every observation conducted). This, combined with the fact that more first-time 'owners' purchased a dog within the pandemic (those who were less likely to recognize the operations of puppy farmers and illegal dog breeding), made the illegal selling and breeding of domesticated companion dogs more profitable.

Bearing in mind this conclusion and the fact that enforcement officers were unable to respond to reports of cruelty and illegal practices, the number of dogs that suffered both physically and emotionally from cruel transportation and breeding practices is impossible to determine. Because of the social restrictions put into place, enforcement agencies had to prioritize their resources, a prioritization which did not usually operate in the dog's interest. For these AOTHAs, however, the experience is likely to have a detrimental effect on their social, emotional, and physical development for the rest of their lives (due to many being bred for looks and profit rather than for health). Prospective dog 'owners' may have found it challenging to make sure that they did not purchase from unscrupulous breeders. Even so, due to many consumers making impulsive decisions—decisions made with little research into both the breed and breeder—many unknowingly bought puppies who had already experienced early trauma (PDSA 2021). Even though the harm associated with impulsive purchasing was made clear by many AOTHA welfare organizations, as detailed above, many actively went against such advice, ultimately placing the health of their dog at risk.

Veterinarians stated that there was growing concern over the demand placed on their services, with many practices having to close their doors to new clients due to the rapid rise in demand for dog 'ownership' (see Table 1). With more dogs being purchased, an increased number was required, and they continue to need veterinary care, increasing the physical risk to dogs both young and old. Veterinarians have voiced their concerns of the limitations surrounding their practices, with organizations such as the PDSA having to prioritize services for severely sick and injured patients (British Veterinary Association 2020a). As a result, monthly check-ups and vaccination courses were disrupted, which, according to an interviewed veterinary professional, could have resulted in mild issues developing into more acute problems if they were left for too long. With this in mind, not only were an increased number of dogs unable to receive the veterinary care that could have prevented a more severe issue from developing, but the rise in demand for dog 'ownership' also resulted in many breeding their family 'pets' with little to no regard for the physical and behavioral health of the puppies and dogs involved—an act which once again placed greater strain on an already overwhelmed veterinary service. Society consequently has witnessed and still is witnessing a worrying trend where veterinarians and AOTHA welfare centers are unable to tackle the growing pressure placed on their services, which is expected to have a devastating impact on the physical health of dogs for years to come. The overwhelming of veterinary services and the consequence this has on dog health was depicted by participant 6 (a veterinary surgeon) when detailing how overwhelmed veterinary practices became:

Participant 6: ... I think it probably will because there's more pets. More people, more pets registered. Some practices are not taking on new clients and new pets which is a bit like well where are they supposed to go?

The trend in dog acquisition and the pressure placed on veterinary services was accompanied by veterinary surgeries largely restricting their communication to online mediums (British Veterinary Association 2020b). While the shift towards online communications reduced the threat of viral transmission, for many, the thought of their dog going in for veterinary treatment without them became too much to bear—a stance that was adopted by many of the new and existing dog 'owners' interviewed for this research. A substantial number of individuals, as a result, decided to not take their dog in for veterinary care at a time when previously they would have. While the reasons for this could be many, the fact that individuals actively placed the health of their dogs at risk is a trend that was raised by all of the veterinary staff with whom I spoke. The active refusal to investigate a medical condition in the time of the coronavirus pandemic is a concerning trend, as thousands of dogs could have gone without essential medical intervention (see Table 1). Even when medical attention was sought, however, due to the online nature of communication, both veterinary professionals and dog 'owners' feared that the diagnosis made may not have been as accurate as before. According to one interviewee (someone who had years of

experience within the medical profession), a veterinarian relies upon all of their senses. With touch, sight, and smell, for example, being essential for the determination of the stage of an infection (see Table 1). While individuals were able to communicate their concern through both speech and photography, vets feared that, due to the public's lack of medical expertise, the 'owner's' description of a medical condition may have been very different to the actual diagnosis. This concern was detailed by one veterinarian who stated how they saw that an 'owner's' concept of pale gums was often very different to their own:

Participant 6: Very difficult you are asking the owners do the gums look pink? And the majority of the time it was like ah we need to see the animal anyway so it's sort of pointless. And we would see animals who said they were very pale when they weren't and the other way round, no the gums are lovely and pink, and I saw one dog the gums were grey as grey, and it was really, really ill but the owner doesn't know what they are looking for so.

Even though the adaption of veterinary services to the pandemic and social restrictions was essential, the indiscriminate shift towards online communication threatened the ability for 'owners' and veterinary professionals to accurately diagnose a medical condition and subsequently accurately treat it—all of which placed the physical and psychological suffering of dogs throughout England at risk.

5.2. Socialization and the Changes to Social Restrictions

Due to the rapid rise in coronavirus cases between the years 2020 and 2021, several laws and regulations were put into place to curb the spread of the pandemic, including those that primarily impacted dogs and their wellbeing. For example, during March 2020, a one-hour curfew was implemented on daily outdoor activity, something that, for many dogs, significantly impacted their daily exercise routines (Owczarczak-Garstecka et al. 2021). From the initial publications and reports of the news media and public figures, many started to argue that dogs somewhat benefitted from the stay-at-home orders and national lockdowns that were implemented (by reducing the time dogs were left on their own without company, water, and food (Bussolari et al. 2021; Holland et al. 2021)). On closer inspection, however, such optimism appears premature. Granted, dogs had the increased opportunity for human animal contact at the offset, but it became increasingly clear that, since the lifting of social distancing measures, a variety of behavioral problems developed. These behavioral problems occurred through incorrect socialization by 'owners' not preparing their dog for the swift changes that were made to their lifestyle. For many dogs, the lack of socialization and recent lifting of work from home orders has caused separation anxiety and aggressive behavior towards strange human animals, dogs, and environments to develop as they find the changes to their daily routines challenging (see Table 1).

Through conducting interviews with both existing and new dog 'owners', it became apparent that mature dogs were able to adapt to the changes brought about within and after the pandemic more easily than adolescent dogs and puppies (see Table 1). This is largely due to mature dogs having been exposed to the appropriate socialization, experiences, and training before the pandemic struck, meaning that they were able to reintegrate into wider society more easily than puppies and adolescent dogs who had not experienced these vital exposures within their early developmental stages (Harvey et al. 2016). Although 'owners' were warned of the possible consequences that could occur after social lockdown ended if they did not appropriately socialize their puppies, many individuals valued the instant gratification experienced from dog appraisal as more important than to grant consideration to the possible harms that their dog could suffer (valuing human animal flourishing over 'AOTHA' suffering (Beirne 1999, 2014; Cazaux 1999; Sollund 2011)). While professionals in the field offered training and socialization sessions throughout the pandemic, some professionals saw their assistance being turned down—decisions they believed people were able to justify due to social restrictions (see Table 1). Consequently, puppies and adolescent dogs were less prepared both mentally and socially for the rapid changes that they saw to their daily routines, with many developing behavioral problems

such as severe bite histories. While these behavioral problems could still be tackled through patient training, many AOTHA welfare charities and shelters fear a rapid trend in dog relinquishment. This means that individuals who purchased their dog either out of impulse or without experience start to go back to work and find their dog increasingly challenging, threatening the likelihood of successful dog ‘ownership’ (not only do people have less time to train their dog due to them going back to work, but because of the rapid changes made to their routines, their dogs start to display more undesirable behaviors (Serpell et al. 2017; Mikkola et al. 2021)). Albeit this research is still ongoing, from the initial contact made with welfare professionals, the suffering that dogs have experienced and are experiencing in terms of their social, emotional, and behavioral development is unquestionable.

Table 1. Overview of research data detailing the harm suffered by dogs during the coronavirus pandemic (in terms of their physical, behavioral, and psychological wellbeing).

Harm	Evidence
Impulsively purchasing dogs	<p>Participant 3 (a University student and mother who decided to purchase a dog for the first time during the pandemic): ‘I was like oh I’ll pay a deposit, I’ll just go and check, check him and pay a deposit and I did take my sister-in-law because she’s had dogs her whole life and I was like look [sister-in-law’s name] I don’t know what I’m doing can you come with me? I was like just see what you think, just check his gums, check his health, check his and I was like I’ll pay a deposit and pick him up when I’ve got his stuff. I when I was like, I was like can I just take him like I’d been at work all day, took him, took him home, and then I was at Tesco, B&M and I was just buying like all, everything he needed, really like, late at night, I had no food or anything, and then my neighbor came over and she had a spare crate and a blanket and stuff and like that was a God sent but um yeah.’</p> <p>Participant 1 (a member of the public affairs team at the RSPCA): ‘Um so what we know is that there was a lot of people, and the price of dogs increased from £750 to an average dog, to well over £1000, £2000. Um we saw people handing over cash because they were desperate to get a dog. From people that they have never met before, and um, they were never going to meet again. They wouldn’t do this if they were buying a car, they wouldn’t do this if they were buying an oven. But they did it because they were desperate to get a dog. Getting a dog is a very emotional purchase, so I don’t think the money, I still do not understand how people can go to a station.’</p> <p>The Kennel Club (2021b): ‘Almost one in five new owners (17 per cent) spent less than two hours researching their new puppy and where they would get it from, amidst soaring demand, rife scams and more widespread impulse buying during the pandemic.’</p> <p>Battersea (2020): ‘More than 40% of people who bought puppies during lockdown admitted they had not previously planned to get a dog, and with demand so high, and the market so lucrative, many may have inadvertently acquired these animals from less reputable sources.’</p>
Weak enforcement	<p>Participant 1 (a member of the public affairs team at the RSPCA): ‘... enforcement was even weaker under coronavirus because, you know, enforcement agents were not interested in catching dog nappers, they were interested in catching human traffickers, or drug traffickers or arms traffickers. They were not interested in catching someone coming home with 5 dogs that they shouldn’t have. It doesn’t, you know, it doesn’t really matter. So, I think that firstly, that the rewards became very high, the risks became very low, and enforcement also became very low, so it was a completely open market for dog dealers.’</p>

Table 1. Cont.

Harm	Evidence
Dogs not receiving veterinary care	<p>RSPCA (2020, p. 3): ‘Covid-19 impacted on the puppy trade in two areas. First there was a relaxation on certain enforcement efforts as staff were redirected onto essential Coronavirus business. One example is the cessation of checks by APHA at the final destination for imported commercial puppies to assess disease status and compliance of the import permits. Essentially if any irregularities in the documentation on imported puppies was not detected at the border post, no second checks were undertaken.’</p> <p>Participant 6 (a veterinary surgeon): ‘Some practices have a blanket no, no don’t take them in new clients and just focus on the ones they’ve got. Which is okay to a degree but what about when you’re not dealing with the others, they’re getting no treatment whatsoever.’</p> <p>Participant 6 (a veterinary surgeon): ‘... I think it probably will because there’s more pets. More people, more pets registered. Some practices are not taking on new clients and new pets which is a bit like well where are they supposed to go?’</p> <p>Participant 17 (a newly qualified/practicing veterinary surgeon): ‘... some people would not bring their animal to the vet so they would let it die at home if someone didn’t go out to them probably.’</p> <p>Participant 11 (member of DEFRA who has a background in veterinary surgery): ‘... what the risk of missing things um common things are common yes so know that so therefore there’s a good chance that um many of these things will sort themselves out. The old sort of Voltaire principle of keeping the patient amused while the patient cures themselves um there is a certain amount of varsity in that as well. It really is a question of missing the complex with the complicated put the stethoscope on the animal, listen to the heart and do those things and I would, the point I keep making to a lot of people is we keep forgetting the use of sense of smell. It’s something which you know is really important in terms of um diagnoses the smell of putrefaction, the smell of something going wrong you know a bandage going on too tightly and horrendous it can be, but the nose can tell you something has gone wrong quicker than sight as it may look perfectly normal. Equally bad teeth, bad gum, bad mouth, uremic cats, those are all smells and smells are vital in terms of that. Skin diseases some of those have an absolutely characteristic smell or a smell that says these needs looking at.’</p>
Not prepared for the lifting of lockdowns	<p>Participant 6 (a veterinary surgeon): ‘There’s a lot more anxious dogs out there. And they have never seen children before and it’s like how does that happen? We were on the beach the other day and a dog had a go at my daughter...’</p> <p>Participant 16 (a licensed breeder): ‘Um and she is very barky, very reactive, um quite nervy. It has taken me, I have had to do a lot, a lot of work with her to get her to show. I have qualified her for Crufts and everything, we got there but we are now doing indoor showing and that’s another new thing we are back in training classes again with her indoors. But she is very reactive. When she’s in the van and she sees somebody walk past she [imitates growling] and really, really reactive because she just didn’t see anybody apart from me and my husband until she was about 8 months old, and she had her sister with her.’</p> <p>Participant 8 (a woman in her 50s who is an existing dog ‘owner’): ‘... I think again that’s because he’s such an old boy. I think if he had been younger, a puppy, then definitely. But not at this stage because he’s so set and so and he’s so well rounded now I don’t think it would worry him. He’s very secure.’</p>

Table 1. Cont.

Harm	Evidence
Valuing their time over a confident and well-trained dog	<p>PDSA (2021, p. 11): ‘As lockdowns start to ease and owners begin to spend more time away from home again, those pets who have become accustomed to being with us constantly may find it difficult to adjust back to being left alone, putting them at risk of not being able to cope when alone and developing separation related problems.’</p> <p>Participant 12 (manager of a AOTHA rescue center): ‘... people liked to say that they couldn’t go to training classes, couldn’t have videos, um couldn’t have visitors and there were actually a lot of trainers giving training advice, and many were very quick going online, they were using Zoom and producing videos and doing online training.’</p>
Relinquishment	<p>Participant 12 (manager of a AOTHA rescue center): ‘Um during the actual lockdowns um we were still receiving surrender requests however people were willing to wait because we could only take in emergencies, since lockdown is lifting, we have seen an increase in the number of surrender requests definitely.’</p> <p>Participant 15 (welcome center manager for a local AOTHA shelter): ‘Um but if I look back at the November that’s just been, 144 dogs added to the waiting list. That doesn’t mean everyone will necessarily come into us, but it does mean that at last they are expressions from interest that they are wanting to or need to um relinquish their dogs. So that’s certainly what’s happened over this year that we, we have seen.’</p>

The initial findings support that the victimization experienced by dogs within and as a result of the pandemic is far reaching. Dogs of all ages have had their physical, psychological, reproductive, and emotional health put at risk largely at the expense of human animal emotional and social advancement. The stay-at-home orders and restrictions placed upon socialization encouraged feelings of loneliness and uncertainty to develop, which within an anthropocentric society, one that values humanity above the natural world, encouraged the obtainment of dogs even when not in the dog’s best interest (Beirne 1999, 2014; Flynn 2001). Feelings of loneliness and uncertainty, when found within the consumer culture, are tackled through the impulsive and egocentric appraisal of socially valuable products (one of which is the domesticated companion dog (Young 2007; Winlow and Hall 2013)). Due to dogs offering human animals both social and emotional benefits, individuals purchased dogs in their thousands in a climate that could not satisfy the dog’s needs (due to the restrictions in place).

6. Conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic represents a time of great uncertainty and social change that provides society with the opportunity to reflect upon its past, current, and future treatment and relationship with the natural world and AOTHAs. Even though their plight within modern culture has been depicted as extremely precarious, when looking at domesticated companion dogs, the impact that the virus has had on their position and how it has led to or impacted the suffering that they are subjected to is profound. Due to the uncertainty experienced within the coronavirus pandemic, individuals started to buy dogs without undertaking appropriate research. While many were made aware of the possible consequences that could have arisen from such impulsivity, the influence and acceptance of the nature–culture divide and consumer culture enabled individuals to actively distance themselves from such outcomes, encouraging individuals to purchase out of impulse for egocentric and human animal advancement (Beirne 1999; Cazaux 1999; Bauman 2005; Young 2007; Borkfelt 2011; Aas 2013). Law enforcement officials and veterinarians became overwhelmed, with them having to prioritize their services, which often placed the health of dogs at direct risk. In line with this, while the need to properly socialize a dog is well known, and despite the fact that ‘owners’ were warned about their limited ability to do so within the context of the pandemic, individuals continued to seek dog acquisition in the thousands.

As a result, whilst domesticated companion dogs have suffered from abusive and neglectful treatment for centuries, the pandemic merely intensified the suffering experienced, in part due to the acceptance on a societal level of an anthropocentric separation between human animals and AOTHAs (Beirne 1999; Jamieson and McEvoy 2005; Fudge 2006; White 2018).

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