

“Low down Dirty Rat”

Popular and Moral Responses to Possums and Rats in Melbourne¹

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ABSTRACT

Possums and rats are both found in large numbers in the city of Melbourne, Australia. The two species share much in common, including an ability to flourish among humans and a predisposition for building nests in houses and eating food and plants intended for humans. Yet despite numerous similarities possums and rats are afforded strikingly different levels of protection before the law. The death of a possum must be justified and carried out painlessly. The same does not apply to rats, who may be exterminated freely and in ways that are painful. Considered from the perspective of the principle of “unnecessary suffering” we find that such inconsistent treatment is difficult to justify. We find that the rat’s historical association with disease may account for some of our animosity towards the species. Popular culture, which accords favorable treatment to possums and adopts contradictory attitudes to rats, appears to influence our attitudes in important ways. Our study does not demonstrate one way or the other whether rats are often used to represent undesirable characteristics because many humans have an aversion to them, or whether we have an aversion to them because of the cultural messages that encourage us to perceive of rats as abject. Rather, our conclusion is

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that human cruelty to animals is contradictory and irrational and that when another species potentially threatens human lives and human self-interest we react brutally and without due consideration.

Keywords: Possums, rats, animal welfare, ethics, law, popular culture, cruelty, disease, necessary suffering, Possum Magic.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper was inspired by an anecdote told to us by a professional animal worker from Melbourne Zoo. Apparently it is not uncommon for members of the public to request assistance from the zoo in the care of orphaned baby possums. The well-intentioned citizen explains that he/she found the possum in the garden or park, took the possum home and provided the animal with food and much tender loving care. The infant responded extremely well. However, the family feel unable to continue to provide care. They ask the zoo if it will step in and look after the orphaned creature. With apparent regularity, the zoo staff agree to assist, but upon inspection of the animal explain that the infant is not a possum but rather a rat! On hearing this news the carer screams, and drops the animal as if the animal were a “monster”. All of the love which flowed from human to “possum” immediately dries up and is replaced by a deep-seated sense of revulsion. Why is it that the response many humans have towards a once-loved fellow creature can cease so suddenly and dramatically? In this paper we seek to better understand our inconsistent attitudes towards nonhuman animals and our willingness to lavish care on some animals while subjecting others to serious pain. We do so using a distinctively interdisciplinary approach. We consider the issue through the lens of the law, ethics and popular culture. Our interdisciplinarity affords us an insight into this complex phenomenon that would be difficult to achieve if we were to consider the issue from a single disciplinary perspective.

1.1. *Possums: the cute but imperfect neighbor*

It is well established that the way humans treat nonhuman animals is highly inconsistent (O'Sullivan 2011). At one extreme, many companion animals living in the developed world are lavishly indulged (Hadley and O'Sullivan 2008; 2009). At the other extreme we find nonhuman animals who are

considered pests and who are therefore vulnerable to harmful treatment, including death via painful means. Which animals do we nurture and which do we persecute? How do we come to decide? We find that possums and rats share many characteristics. This is evidenced by the Australian Museum website dedicated to helping the public differentiate rats from other animals, especially the Ringtail Possum (Australian Museum 2010). Yet, despite the numerous similarities, we do identify some differences of note between possums and rats.

The possum family consists of 27 different species of animal, ranging from the Pygmy Possum, weighing just 7 grams, to the 4.5 kilogram Brush-tail Possum, the largest possum living in Australia today. The two most common and best known species of possum are the Brushtail Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecular*) and Ringtail Possum (*Pseudocheirus peregrines*). They live alongside humans in most Australian cities. They are the focus of this paper as we are primarily concerned with the human/nonhuman animal interactions as they occur in Melbourne, Australia.

Possums are corpuscular, spending all day asleep in a nest and venturing out at dusk and dawn to feed (McDonald-Madden et al. 2000). They are herbivorous and prefer fruit trees, vegetable and decorative garden plants to their native, pre-urbanization food sources. Possums are not aggressive and pose no threat of attack. However, they are equipped with climbing claws and sharp teeth meaning they are capable of hurting a human if cornered or captured. Yet despite this, reports of possum attacks are rare to non-existent. Possums do not carry or spread diseases that impact on humans.

But that is not to suggest that possums are the perfect urban neighbor. Brushtail Possums are noisy and messy. All possums require nesting space and while they are evolved to find sanctuary in tree hollows, in modern times they show a strong disposition towards building nests in roof and wall cavities. The tendency to nest in buildings constructed *by* humans, *for* (often exclusively) human purposes, is a source of ongoing irritation. Annoyance caused by possums seems to be associated with the noise they make running around in roof cavities. The noise generated by possums is particularly problematic because they are active at night while humans are typically trying to sleep. Possums also have a habit of defecating just outside their nesting site often resulting in droppings on paths and verandas. Finally, possums are elusive animals. They appear at night and enter peoples' homes, often via building gaps that are difficult to locate. In many cases it is difficult for humans to stop possums nesting in buildings, even if they want to. The ability to enter and exit buildings undetected can also create problems if a possum dies in a roof or wall cavity. The possum is

therefore a prominent part of the Australian landscape, including the contemporary urban cityscape, and simultaneously a significant source of nuisance to people battling to maintain their home as human-only (or human invited-only) space.

1.2. *Rats: the quintessential urban dweller*

Unlike possums, rats are found throughout the world. While there are 56 species of rats, the best known are the black (*Rattus rattus*) and brown (*Rattus norvegicus*) rats. Indeed, the black and brown rats have been so successful in evolutionary terms that many other species of rat are island endemics and are under threat from competition from black and brown rats.

Rats are thought to have originated in Asia, most likely China, and spread through the known world via trade routes. Rats have travelled by ship to all parts of the globe, such that rats are now found in almost all human settlements. In cities, rats often live in sewers enjoying the damp, dark habitat. It is said that there are as many rats in major cities as people, if not more. Rats are usually active at night and pass largely unobserved amongst human populations.

The two common species of rats are opportunistic survivors and often live with or near humans. Rats are omnivores and will eat anything that is remotely nutritious, contributing to their success in human cities where food is abundant in waste dumps and homes. In addition to eating food intended for human consumption, rats also commonly contaminate food supplies, especially with their feces. Rats can serve as vectors for certain pathogens and which cause disease, such as Lassa Fever, Leptospirosis and Hantavirus infection. Despite this, rats have been consumed in many places including Naples, China, and the Philippines.

But rats are more than simply urban drain dwellers in the modern context. Some people keep rats as companion animals. Such animals are often referred to as “fancy rats”. Fancy rats are domesticated brown rats. People have kept rats as pets since at least the nineteenth century. Rat fancy societies continue to thrive with groups in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Since 1974 the Nebraska Wesleyan University has held a Rat Olympics and in 2003 in America the inaugural World Rat Day was instituted (Burt 2006, 135). Rats are social and smart animals who can be trained and make entertaining companions. Rats have been used extensively in research and education due to their small size; availability; rapid reproductive capacity; ability to live in small cages; their general

hardiness as a species; and possibly also the fact that rats have a long history of being disfavored by humans. As a result, an incredible amount of knowledge has been collected on these highly intelligent, aggressive and adaptable animals.

1.3. *Similarities and differences*

The speed with which they breed is one of the important differences between rats and possums. Possums are relatively slow breeding with the average female Brushtail living 6.5 years and producing seven offspring in her lifetime (Isaac 2005). Ringtails can live up to seven years and will produce one or two litters per year, based on the age of the female and abundance of food. Litter sizes can range from one to three offspring (Pahl and Lee 1988). In comparison, rats are rapid breeders and can breed throughout the year if the conditions are suitable. A single female can produce five litters a year with a gestation period of only 21 days. Rats are a boom species. Their numbers can expand rapidly and easily reach plague proportions. While some people argue that possums are too numerous in suburban Melbourne, they are most certainly not at plague proportions. In addition to their speed of reproduction, there is a range of other differences between the two species. For example, while possums are a solitary, territorial species, rats live in large colonies, grooming each other and sleeping together.

Despite the differences, rats and possums share many characteristics. For example, both are species of mammals. Possums and rats are both active at night and largely dormant during daylight hours. They have both adapted remarkably well to urban environments. They thrive among humans and are therefore species that have benefited from human migration around the globe and urbanization. Both species are very inclined to utilize human constructs for nesting, especially buildings, where available. Both are numerous in cities, including Melbourne and both are often considered to be a pest. Finally, both are capable of making charming companions.

From a species perspective, possums and rats have much in common. From a legal perspective possums and rats are treated very differently. We tend to afford possums considerable preferential treatment when we create laws to protect their interests and also influence the nature of the human/possum or human/rat relationship.

2. LEGAL RESPONSES TO POSSUMS IN MELBOURNE

While possums are a common feature throughout Melbourne, and indeed Australia, their abundance does not necessarily equate to popularity. For example, on May 1, 2011, Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper lead with the headline *The Possum Wars* reporting that "Furry, cute, noisy and destructive: the common possum has got Melbourne residents up in arms". Just six months earlier the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Robert Doyle, had described possums as "vermin" and was quoted as saying: "I come out of my house in South Melbourne and I'm virtually waist deep in possum poo". Such media reports suggest a level of disquiet throughout the community. Furthermore, they attest to the firsthand experience the people of Melbourne have with their possum neighbors: an experience that is not universally positive.

Although possums are omnipresent, only a minimal amount of research has been undertaken into how Australians cohabit with possums and their feelings about that geographical proximity. In a 2009 paper, Power surveyed 24 Sydney residences, all sharing their property with one or more possums. Power found that interviewees have mixed feelings about the possums with whom they cohabitated, and that those feelings were filtered through complex thought patters. Typically respondents attributed possums an elevated status because they are a native species. Power found that many sought to accept the presence of possums in their home because possums represent a link to lost or diminished bushland and therefore nature. At the same time, many interviewees attested to the difficulties associated with accommodating possums within the house and most had tried to keep possums out, but often accepted them because their efforts to exclude possums were not successful.

A number of different laws regulate the lives of possums. Those laws seek to negotiate between the desire on the part of possums to nest in homes and tree filled parks, and the human desire to keep possums at arm's length: that is, to enjoy the uniquely Australian character of the cute and furry possum, without having to manage the noise and mess associated with having to share intimate space with them. Possums receive some protection under the *Wildlife Act 1975* (Victoria) which provides all wildlife in Victoria with a general protection against harassment and damage to habitat. Yet despite the protection against harm afforded all wildlife under the Act, an exemption was established in 2003 in relation to the Brushtail possum, meaning that their legal status moved to that of "unprotected". In practice, the 2003 edict means that Brushtail possums living in buildings, in municipal parks, or municipal gardens may be "controlled", but that "the

only method of capture permitted is by the use of a cage trap”. Where trapping does take place, the trap must not cause injury, and the possum must be protected from rain or wind, direct sun and domestic animals (*Victoria Gazette* G28 [2003], 1766-7). Possums trapped on municipal property cannot be released and must be killed. This must be done by a veterinarian in accordance with the rules set out in the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986* (Victoria).

Yet trapping is not the only means used to keep possums at bay. Throughout the city of Melbourne it is common to see trees with large metal bands around the trunk. Referred to as collars, the metal devices are attached to trees to prevent possums running up the trunk and therefore nesting in the branches. According to the city of Melbourne’s *Ringtail and Brushtail Possums Factsheet* (N.D.), the trees are banded to prevent possum “feeding and nestling activities damaging the foliage of vulnerable trees”. It also states that if one tree is at risk then surrounding trees will also be banded. While this does not constitute extermination *per se*, banding is intended to make parks a less attractive habitat for possums. Without shelter the possums must move elsewhere.

But it is not only public servants who are legally entitled to take issue with where possums set up home. Possums regularly occupy domestic dwellings and people living in the city of Melbourne have a legal right to take strong action if they do not wish to share their home with a possum. The Victorian State government’s policy response is laid out in a document called *Possums* (2011). It explains that while it is lawful to remove possums from roof cavities, captured possums must be released within 50 meters of their place of capture. The 50 meters rule acknowledges the territorial nature of possums and reflects research which demonstrates that possums do not fare well when relocated outside of their established home-range. However, the laws regulating the release of possums provide for a very convenient exemption. They allow for possums to be “humanely killed” by a veterinarian in cases where relocation is “not reasonably possible”. Because there is no mechanism to test the reasonableness of home owners’ or tenants’ wish to have a possum killed, it seems likely that anyone who does not wish to risk a possum returning to their roof should be able to find a vet willing to put the offending possum down. Or, people who trap possums themselves may choose to relocate the possum far from their home. This would be a cheaper option and again points to the enforcement challenges inherent in the possum relocation laws as they are currently structured.

In short, the laws regulating the lives of possums are ambiguous. They start with the assumption that possums should be protected on the basis that they are wildlife. They then create an exemption in the case of

Brushtail Possums, based in part on their abundance and in part on their propensity to take up residence in places that humans would prefer to keep to themselves. That exemption treats the invasion of human only spaces very seriously. In the case of possums who occupy state managed land and buildings it equates to certain death. If the possum chooses a private residency they may receive a reprieve if the owner or occupier wishes to go to the expense of identifying and sealing up the possum's entry point. However, even if the owner does not wish to do so, the law takes a compassionate view on how possum intruders are to die; stipulating the need for a painless death via lethal injection from a veterinarian.

2.1. *Legal responses to rats in Melbourne*

Before the law, rats receive little to no protection against harm. This is despite the fact that most reasonable people would be likely to think that both possums and rats have a similar capacity to suffer. Further, recent research has revealed that not only are rats highly intelligent but that they are empathetic creatures who will put their own well-being aside to rescue their fellows from perceived harm (Bartal, Decety, and Mason 2011).

Since 2010 there has been a sizable increase in Melbourne's rat and mouse population. As *The Age* reported in April 2012 "Rats are invading houses across Melbourne, as changing weather conditions lead to rising numbers of rodents" (Cohen 2012). The same article quoted evolutionary biologist Mark Elgar as saying that "As the population increases [...] an increasing number of rats would be facing a housing crisis so they would then be increasingly encroaching on potentially more risky human habitation" (Cohen 2012). By 2012, rodent control accounted for 70 per cent of business reported by one pest controller in Melbourne. Yet despite increasing numbers of rats in the city of Melbourne and surrounds, rats receive very little press. This may be because of their capacity to go about their business largely undetected. It might also be because there is almost universal agreement that rats are undesirable housemates and should be treated as such.

The *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986* (POCTAA) does quite a lot of the work of articulating how unwanted rats can be killed. Despite the Act's name, it does allow for a painful death, and it does single rats out for particular treatment. For example, traps that uses electrocution as a means to kill an animal are generally prohibited, by specifically permitted in the case of rodents. But while rats (along with mice) are afforded a particularly low level of interest protection under POCTAA, some limits

do apply. They include a requirement that the jaws on rodent traps must be smooth, rather than sharp, and they must “humanely” kill the animal. The Act is also specific in relation to the use of glue traps. Glue traps are particularly harmful as they cause the animal to become stuck, meaning they don’t die instantly, but rather die from dehydration, starvation, predation, or self-mutilation. POCTAA places limitations on who can set glue traps and where they may be laid. The Act requires that they only be used by commercial pest controllers acting under license by the Minister. Yet the public is able to purchase Ratsack freely from the supermarket for use in the suburban home. Ratsack leads to a particularly painful death. Its symptoms include vomiting, bleeding, seizures, swelling and foaming at the mouth. Although the careless use of Ratsack can lead also to the accidental poisoning and painful deaths of animals for whom we typically have a higher degree of sympathy such as dogs, cats, birds, this is not considered a strong enough reason to ban sales of the poison – such is our fear of rats.

In short, the law allows humans to control both possums and rats, including by killing unwanted animals. However, the law does treat the species differently. The death of a possum must be justified and painless. The death of a rat requires no justification and may inflict considerable pain. But that pain is not without limits and the law does seek to reduce the suffering experienced by rats in some cases. In the next section we consider whether the way in which the law sharply differentiates between possums and rats is ethically justifiable. We conclude by considering reasons why humans might seek to afford preferential treatment to possums compared to rats.

3. ASSESSING THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF POSSUMS AND RATS AND THEIR LEGAL PROTECTIONS IN MELBOURNE?

Thinking in the field of animal ethics has advanced to a point where few would argue that animals have no moral standing (Francione and Garner 2010; Palmer 2010). It is widely accepted that at least all mammals, birds and some reptiles, are sentient and that sentience matters in that it is equated with pain and suffering. There is a broad consensus that the sentience of animals means that we have some moral obligations to them. Sentience and the acceptance that animals can be harmed forms the basis of modern animal welfare ethics. The most widely accepted principle in the complex field of animal ethics is that it is wrong to cause unnecessary pain and suffering to animals, termed the principle of unnecessary suffering

by David Gardner (Francione and Garner 2010). Different philosophers ground this principle on different logic and argument, but all hold that sentience matters and that those that can feel pain and can suffer should not be made to do so unnecessarily. However arguments abound concerning the scope of the term “animal”, what constitutes suffering, and which actions are “necessary” and which are not.

The principle of unnecessary suffering allows us to examine the differences and similarities in the way we treat possums and rats to determine if there is sufficient difference between the species to warrant the distinctive legal response each receives. The principle of unnecessary suffering also provides a standard against which we can measure if the treatment of possum and rats is morally defensible.

Both rats and possums are mammals. It is therefore safe to assume that there is nothing in the definition of “animal” that would include one and exclude the other. In deciding where to draw the line with respect to animal rights Tom Regan attributes a special moral status to adult mammals (Regan 2004). The concept of special relationships may be used to argue that we have greater duties and responsibilities to some individuals as opposed to others (Palmer 2010). In the case of possums and rats it may be argued that possums are native animals while rats are an invasive species. Most frequently we consider special relationships as a ground for positive duties of protection or assistance. If rats were to threaten the security of possums it could be argued that as native species possums deserve our assistance. That might constitute a special relationship such that it obliges us to kill rats in order to save the lives of possums. While this may be intellectually sound, in reality both possums and rats thrive in human habitats, especially urban centers such as Melbourne. Where controls are implemented to reduce numbers, it is done to address the nuisance both species cause to humans, not because the rat places the possum at risk. Moreover, the unnecessary suffering principle does not require that special relationships be taken into account in order to determine the necessity of pain and suffering.

Is there a difference in the two species' capacity to experience pain? While we can never know definitively that two beings experience pain in the same way, it is reasonable to consider if there is anything in either their behavior or physiology that would lead us to think that normal possums feel pain in a way that is significantly different to that of normal rats. Certainly both possums and rats possess similar nervous systems and similar brains. That suggests that their experience of pain is probably not vastly different.

Yet possums and rats are different to the extent that they do have different breeding practices. Rats breed fast and are capable of producing an

average of 35 offspring each year. Little care is given to the young who are fully weaned by five weeks. Rat mortality can be as high as 95 per cent per annum, with rats living on average one year. By contrast, possums only produce 1-2 offspring per year. The youngster stays with the mother for 12 months with the average female producing six to seven offspring in her life (Isaac 2005). Thus the loss of an offspring is indicative of more investment and more costly to the species. Possums live on average for 6.5 years. As such it may be argued that killing a possum is more significant than killing a rat. Therefore the killing of possums may require greater consideration than the killing of rats. Yet this type of moral distinction is not recognized in law. Both rats and possums may be killed with impunity. What differs is the method.

3.1. *Are rats and possums a threat to human well-being?*

Rats are often considered a vector for disease and plague. The vector for transmission of disease is fleas, with both the densities of rats and the fleas per rat increasing the likelihood of disease transmission (Durham and Casman 2009). Rats' preference for living out of sight in sewers, rubbish tips and basements is probably responsible for the perception that they spread germs and filth. While a failure to control numbers may result in an infestation of rats who have the capacity to spread disease, that does not morally justify the causing of harm. Killing rats may be promoted as necessary to stop plague proportions of a potentially dangerous animal. But the methods of killing are not consistent with the avoidance of unnecessary pain and suffering. Glue traps, snap traps and poison all result in significant levels of pain and suffering.

Possums are less threatening to people. At worst they make a mess, eat the roses and thump around at night. While inconvenient they are not a disease risk nor do they pose any direct threat to humans. The nature of Australian animals is that they regulate their numbers based on the availability of food, hollows and predation. In many species, including possums, this means that the total numbers are self-limiting and densities remain stable over time (Isaac 2005). The removal of possums creates a vacuum that new possums will occupy. The removal of an individual possum is not a solution to removing the nuisance. Since European colonization cities have become ideal territory for possums. But while food is abundant, nesting holes and hollows are not, thus possums have made use of human structures. With care possums can be excluded for entering buildings, roofs and wall cavities. Strategic locations of possum boxes can allow for possums to

nest in a suitable location without entering a home. Thus the removal and killing of possums is neither necessary nor effective in managing possum populations. Short of whole-species elimination we will always cohabitate with possums in green leafy suburbs.

While the removal and killing of possums is not necessary, the terms of removal and killing are regulated to minimize pain and suffering. The law surrounding unwanted possums in Melbourne requires that the animal be captured and released within 50 meters. This is done to ensure that pain and suffering from loss of territory are avoided. Alternatively, in the case of death, it must be achieved via a painless lethal injection. This may be said to be consistent with the moral requirement to avoid unnecessary suffering. Moreover, excluding possums from food sources like trees, will act to reduce populations through self-regulation, but should be implemented with care to ensure that no possums are trapped up trees at the time the collars are attached.

In assessing the current treatment of possums and rats against the widely accepted principle of unnecessary suffering, we have argued that both species experience pain and have the capacity to suffer. The necessity of controlling possum numbers seems tenuous and thus actions taken to control possum numbers are morally dubious. For rats the situations are equally morally challenging, yet for a different reason. While it may be necessary to reduce rat numbers, the methods of killing rats seems to be unnecessarily brutal and rats enjoy little protection from significant suffering.

Another relevant factor is that rats present a perceived threat to human well-being. In contrast to possums, rats do carry disease. As Burt points out, however, even the association of rats with the bubonic plague has been subjected to exaggerated and irrational fears:

The disease most linked to rats and which has the greatest cultural impact on human in history is bubonic plague. Attitudes to bubonic plague parallel attitudes to rats themselves. Though it is not necessarily the most lethal disease in terms of the death rate it is the one that strikes the most fear, much in the same way that the rat is the most hated animal. (2006, 115)

Far more people have died world-wide from malaria, tuberculosis, small-pox, cholera and influenza yet none of these epidemics historically have had the power to invoke the degree of public panic aroused by fear of the plague believed to be carried by rat (Burt 2006, 115). Recent global scares concerning Avian Flu demonstrate that when humans feel threatened by another species, ethical considerations, including humane methods of killing the offending species receive little if any attention. Animal organisations have reported acts of great cruelty in these situations. In April 2013, The

Human Society International claimed that sheep exported out of Australia, but rejected for health reasons by Pakistan, were brutally killed with many reportedly clubbed, stabbed and buried alive. In China in 2013 the outbreak of a new strain of the H7N9 avian influenza resulted in the culling of hundreds of thousands of birds. Many were buried alive to limit possible contamination. Likewise, when Foot and Mouth Disease broke out in the United Kingdom in 2001, up to 10 million apparently healthy cattle were slaughtered. This is despite Foot and Mouth Disease being a minor flu like ailment. As one commentator observed at the time:

Foot-and-mouth disease is a form of flu, treatable by proper veterinary care, preventable by vaccination, lethal neither to humans nor to animals. These animals, millions of them not even infected, were all killed only because their market value had been diminished and because trade policy required it – because, in short, under the circumstances it was the quick and convenient thing to do. By the one measure we now apply to these creatures, they had all become worthless. For them, the difference between what happened and what awaited them anyway was one of timing. (Scully 2002, IX-X)

It appears that whenever human interests are threatened by nonhuman animals, the latter are viewed as expendable and in many instances subjected to painful deaths. Is it possible that rats, having historically been identified with the bubonic plague, continue to be killed indiscriminately and with great cruelty primarily for this reason?

4. HELLO POSSUMS! GOODBYE RATS! EXPLORING THE SUBURBAN ABJECT

The one area in which the rat enjoys some popularity is popular culture – but not to the same degree as the possum. The possum has come to occupy an elevated position in Australian popular culture. The word “possum” itself is now a friendly moniker in Australian idiomatic language. Dame Edna Everage, possibly Australia’s best-known stage comedian, invariably welcomes her audiences with the very Australian greeting, which she has made world famous, “Hello possums!”. The greeting has become a trademark of her bizarre persona. It both makes her audiences feel cute and cuddly, while also reminding them they are a funny bunch of bush creatures who are not quite in the same class as Dame Edna. Parents often affectionately call their children “possum” rather than conventional terms of endearment. Possums enjoy a prominent place in Australian story-telling. The most popular Australian children’s picture story book of all time is Mem Fox’s *Possum Magic*

(1983), which tells the story of Grandma Poss, an endearing bush creature with magic powers that sometimes go awry. Told from the point of view of Grandma Poss the narrative overturns the anthropocentric, or human-centered view of the universe to which Darwin's theory of natural selection had delivered a therapeutic shock in the late 19th century. Continuously in print since its publication in 1983, *Possum Magic* is illustrated by Julie Vivas, who depicts Grandma Poss wearing spectacles, coloured sandals and a blue apron covered in yellow stars. Grandma Poss knows bush magic, itself a nonhuman power, yet needs spectacles to compensate for her poor vision. The effect of such anthropomorphisation is to undermine gently any rigid boundaries between human and animal.

Anthropomorphism is to attribute human emotions and the expression of such emotions to the animal. In his famous work, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) Charles Darwin argued that the emotions evolved in human and animal alike and that animals express all of the emotions, through facial and bodily muscles, sounds and cries, that are expressed by humans including fear, anxiety, grief, dejection, joy, love and devotion. In his conclusion Darwin wrote the "origin of the various expressions which may be hourly seen on the faces of the men around us, not to mention our domesticated animals, ought to possess much interest for us" (1998, 360).

In the following decades and centuries, scientists and animal behaviourists in particular have been quick to criticise any attempt to anthropomorphise the animal world, that is, to affirm that nonhuman animals express emotions shared by human animals or to search for the origin of these expressions as Darwin urged. One possible reason for this is to maintain a strict division between human and nonhuman animal. Another reason may be to justify our continued use of animals for our own gain as in animal experimentation, hunting and animal sports, and the farming of animals for human consumption. Paul Wells states:

The denial of expressiveness in animals, or indeed, other human beings, amounts to a decision that animals do not possess a voice, a language, a mode of communication through their bodies, and a fundamental rejection of the likeness that might characterise animal identity and animal cognition. (2009, 96)

While some might argue that anthropomorphism demeans the animal, by removing what it is that is animal about them, it also has the effect of blurring boundaries between human animals and nonhuman animals. In both classical culture (opera, ballet, painting) and popular culture (myths, fairy tales, song, film) we have anthropomorphised animals in order to find a

language with which to understand the expression of emotions in nonhuman animals whether wild or domesticated.

The ubiquitous possum has also influenced Australian cultural exhibitions. In 2011 the Melbourne Town Hall’s City Gallery staged an exhibition called *Crepuscular*, which celebrated the various wildlife species that become alive in the city at twilight. One of the most conspicuous creatures with whom we co-habit is the possum, who comes out at dusk as people depart from the parks and gardens. One of the key exhibits was a Ringtail possum, noted for the acrobatics he or she enacts, hanging from the ceiling. Evolution sees to it that these crepuscular creatures have learnt how to live alongside human species in shared urban and parkland spaces. The exhibition argued that animals such as the possum are “making the new world that we’re in – evolution is on a new course because of human intervention. We can’t undo it” (Northover 2011). As humans destroy the natural habitats of the nonhuman animals, more and more creatures are moving into urban areas, including our homes, in order to survive.

The possum occupies an unusual position because it disturbs the boundaries between human and animal, often in a troubling manner. It appears that one of the reasons that many find possums such a threat is their ability to cross the human/animal habitat threshold, in particular by nesting in the roof of the family home. In other words, they live “above”, out of reach, at the rim of the line between house and sky. In a sense they are “on top” of the human animal, the latter noted for their hierarchical approach to all aspects of life. In this context, possums become abject because they disturb domestic boundaries and hierarchies, reminding us of the permeable nature of human society and culture. Some popular children’s picture books, such as *Possum in the House* (Jensen 1989) and *Possum Goes to School* (Carter 1992), explore this theme. They examine the power of the possum to cross the boundary between human and animal spaces, arguing that the most sensible approach is to learn to co-habit with the possum.

4.1. *Rats in the ranks*

In Australian indigenous myths such as the story of *Bilargun and Daroo* the rat is not at all denigrated. It explains how the platypus was born of a strange but happy union between the water-rat, Bilargun and Daroo, the duck. When the couple had offspring the babies had a duck’s bill and webbed feet and the water rat’s fur coat and flat tail. In more recent popular culture the rat has been assigned a place of honour. *The Rats of Tobruk*, for instance was the name given to a garrison of Australian soldiers who

defended the port of Tobruk in Libya during World War II. They dug a network of tunnels and shelters, in addition to the trenches, in which to secure themselves from the enemy and from which they launched attacks at night. When Radio Berlin described them as “trapped like rats” they claimed the name as a mark of pride, even having a medal struck in the image of a rat. In 1944 Charles Chauvel directed a film titled *The Rats of Tobruk*, which starred the iconic Australian actors Chips Rafferty and Peter Finch. The term “rats of Tobruk” signifies bravery, cunning, and fierce determination. More recently, Australian television produced a new and popular police series titled *Water Rats* (1996-2001) based on the adventures of men and women in the Sydney Water Police. Again the name signified cunning combined with courage.

Australian children's literature is not without its classic rat characters from *Jimmy the Brush-tail Rat* by Daisy Fry (1952) to Paul Jennings' *The Spitting Rat* (1999). In 2010, *The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley*, the story of a happy rat, won The Children's Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year award. Written by Colin Thompson and Amy Lissiat, the narrative compares Riley, a happy rat with people, who seem never to be happy. Riley is happy because his needs are few and his tastes simple. When the animated film, *Ratatouille*, was released in Australia in 2007, it became an instant hit. *Ratatouille* dreams of becoming a great French chef despite the huge task of working in a profession in which rats are the enemy. Despite the rat's ambiguous status in the human world, *Ratatouille* sparked a craze for pet rats, suggesting the power of popular culture to influence people's behavior. Australia's friendly disposition towards rats was clearly affirmed on May 16 2012 when workmen accidentally destroyed a famous piece of street art, *Parachuting Rat*, painted on the brick exterior of a restaurant, by the world renowned artist, Banksy. There was a great public outcry – as much for the loss of the adventuresome little rat as for the loss of a Banksy. Although the rat seems to hold a key place in Australian popular culture, in reality Australians kill, capture and poison rats without remorse. In contrast to the possum, there have been no attempts to legalize the humane removal of rats, let alone their humane killing. Possibly, the possum fares better because it is a native Australian animal. The explanation, however, is more likely to be that historically the rat, much more than the possum, has been represented in popular culture, myth and religion as an abject creature, both reviled and revered.

In his fascinating study Jonathan Burt writes: “Rats are fundamentally ambiguous creatures occupying intriguing positions around notions of the sacred, the profane and the apocalyptic” (2006, 49). Burt offers details of cultures which have revered and deified rats, others which have associated

the rat with damnation and the devil and yet others which have viewed the rat as harbingers of the plague and the apocalypse. In Hindu cultures rats are viewed as lucky, and in some areas of India they are thought to be incarnated human beings and therefore sacred. In the Chinese horoscope the rat, the sign of commerce, signifies charm and imagination. It is the rat's sharp teeth, propensity to cannibalism if deprived of food and ability to gnaw through hard objects such as wood, bone and leather, which have made it such a creature of terror in horror literature. George Orwell in 1984 and Edgar Allen Poe in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, both acclaimed works, draw on the rat's formidable gnawing ability as a source of horror. Robert Browning based his famous poem, *Rats!* on the legend of *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (Hendrickson 1983, 138). Browning exploits all of the major fears about the threats rats pose to humans. He apparently wrote it for a friend's young son and did not plan to publish it:

They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cook's own ladles [...].

Yet as discussed above, popular culture also depicts rats as cute and lovable as evident in the much-loved figure of Ratty from *Wind in the Willows* (1908) and the rodent chef in the recent global box office hit *Ratatouille*. Why are human attitudes to the rat so ambivalent? And does this account for the very different ways in which we treat possums in contrast to rats?

Burt provides a possible answer to human ambivalence to, and exploitation of, the rat when he discusses the common view of “human/rat mirroring” (2006, 13). Burt presents the views of various writers who have seen the rat as “the twin of the human”. Rats like humans have most successfully learnt the art of adaptation; rats follow humans so that they might live off human food supplies; rats thrive on the waste left in the wake of human warfare; rats like humans have learned to negotiate the complex networks of modernity; and rats like humans are highly intelligent, rapacious and successful. Burt writes that “the rat, in its own peculiar way, could be described as a totem animal for modernity” (Burt 2006, 18). It is interesting to note how the concept of the human/rat twin is expressed in language. This is through the many ways in which we link the word “rat” to an adjective to designate certain forms of human behavior as in “you dirty, rotten rat”, “cunning rat”, “sneaky rat”, “sleazy rat” and so on. It is difficult to think of another animal whose name is used in this way and with such regularity.

It would appear then that human ambivalence towards the rat, perhaps greater than its ambivalence towards any other creature, may rest on the

perceived similarities between the rat and human, which for many people may not be consciously apprehended. These ambivalences, however, are most strongly expressed in popular culture, although as yet the positive attributes of the rat have not led to any significant attempts to introduce legal regulations to protect rats from harm and unnecessary suffering. As other creatures receive more and more legal and humane protection, the rat remains as humankind's necessary abject "other" which, because it is our dark twin, we cannot afford to release it from the grip of superstition. Otherwise, the myth of an *essential* difference between human and nonhuman animals might be even further eroded and animals, such as rats, might be accorded the right to have more than a bare existence.

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