From the Rural Idyll to the Animal Industrial Complex: Advancing an anti-speciesist rural criminology of disaster

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Abstract

Animal agriculture is a major driver of climate-related and zoonotic disasters. Nonhuman animals are not only casualties of these crises but are also deeply entangled in the exploitative human–animal relationships that give rise to them. While rural criminology has offered valuable contributions to understanding rural crime, it often treats nonhuman animals—especially those farmed for food and fibre—primarily as property and commodities, disregarding them as victims in their own right. This is compounded by the enduring influence of the rural idyll, which romanticises farming and obscures the role of animal agriculture as a core component of the animal industrial complex.

Building on the foundational insights of non-speciesist criminologists, this paper proposes a conceptual shift to an *anti*-speciesist criminology. In particular, it advances an anti-speciesist rural criminology of disaster, grounded in the recognition that exploitative human–animal relations are central to the suffering experienced by both human and nonhuman animals alike, as well as to environmental degradation and the proliferation and intensification of disasters. Drawing on insights from ecofeminism, critical race theory, and critical animal studies, the paper highlights how speciesism is enmeshed with other systems of oppression, including racism, sexism, colonialism, and ableism. Dismantling speciesism as part of this broader matrix is essential for confronting the systems that give rise to disasters, rethinking harmful relationships among humans, nonhuman animals, and the more-than-human world, and opening possibilities for more relational, reciprocal, and just ways of being.

Keywords: Nonhuman animals; rural criminology; non-speciesist criminology; disasters; animal industrial complex

Introduction

Animal agriculture is a major driver of both the climate crisis and zoonotic disease transmission, playing a central role in the proliferation and intensification of disasters (Besch, 2024; Leighton, 2021). Nonhuman animals are not only victims of these disasters but are also entangled in the exploitative human–animal relations produce them (Marchese & Hovorka, 2022). Despite this, disaster research has largely overlooked animals, or has approached them through an anthropocentric or speciesist lens—continuing to prioritise human lives at the expense of meaningful consideration of nonhuman animals (Fraser et al., 2021; Irving, 2009). To address this, anti-speciesist research and praxis are needed which challenge hierarchical human–animal relationships, fostering more relational, inclusive, and reciprocal ways of being and coexisting in the world.

This paper situates itself within rural criminology, a field that has offered valuable insights into crime and harm in non-urban contexts (Donnermeyer, 2016). However, it has often treated nonhuman animals—especially farmed animals—as human property and commodities, failing to recognise them as victims in their own right. In so doing, it inadvertently reflects speciesist assumptions by centring human experiences and overlooking the myriad harms perpetrated against animals in rural areas. This anthropocentric focus reinforces the marginalisation of nonhuman animals within criminological inquiry and limits the field's capacity to address the full spectrum of harm occurring in rural contexts. Drawing on the foundational work of non-speciesist criminologists (Beirne, 1999, 2007, 2009, 2022; Cazaux, 1999; 2007), this paper proposes a conceptual shift to an *anti*-speciesist criminology. More specifically, it introduces an anti-speciesist rural criminology of disaster—one that acknowledges the central role of exploitative human–animal relationships in generating widespread suffering, environmental degradation, and the increasing frequency and severity of disasters. This approach challenges the rural idyll by recognising that animal agriculture in rural areas is a foundational part of the animal industrial complex—a profit-driven system supported by corporate and state interests that prioritises economic growth over the wellbeing of human and nonhuman animals and the planet (Twine, 2013).

This paper begins by introducing rural criminology as a field of study that challenges the urban-centric focus of more conventional strands of criminology. It upholds that while rural criminology rightly recognises that rural crime is not simply an extension of urban crime, it must also resist reinforcing dichotomous distinctions between rural and urban spaces and, along with it, the rural idyll. The paper then turns to the concept of speciesism—that is, discrimination against nonhuman animals based on species—and explores how it underpins the routine harm inflicted on nonhuman animals in rural settings. Drawing on ecofeminism, critical race theory, and critical animal studies, it argues that speciesism constitutes a form of structural oppression rooted in the same systems that sustain racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, and classism (Donovan, 1990; Adams, 2020; Ko, 2020a; Ko, 2020b; Taylor, 2017), revealing that the oppression of human and nonhuman animals is co-constituted and mutually arising (Ko, 2021).

The paper conceptualises disaster through a social lens—not merely as external shocks to human environments, but as events that reveal the deep-seated vulnerabilities and instabilities within social systems themselves (Enarson et al., 2018). This perspective foregrounds a consideration of the impact of disasters on nonhuman animals, including those categorised as 'wild' and 'domesticated', as well as those occupying spaces of liminality. Ultimately, the paper advocates for an anti-speciesist rural criminology of disaster—one that interrogates the structural conditions that normalise violence against nonhuman animals, challenges the anthropocentric and speciesist assumptions embedded in disaster discourse, and promotes more inclusive, relational, and justice-oriented approaches to understanding and responding to harm in rural contexts. I maintain that while disasters are profoundly harmful and often exacerbate existing injustices, they can also disrupt entrenched hierarchies and create openings for unsettling, entrenched hierarchies and reimagining relationships among humans, nonhuman animals, and the more-than-human world. Though destructive, these ruptures should be seized upon as opportunities to embrace more relational, reciprocal, and just ways of being.

Rethinking rurality: Rural criminology, the rural–urban continuum, and the animal industrial complex

Rural criminology challenges the 'urban bias' within conventional criminology by examining crime in rural areas and among rural populations (Donnermeyer, 2016). Rather than viewing rural crime as merely an extension of urban crime, it considers how certain forms of crime may be endemic to rural communities themselves (Donnermeyer, 2016). Nevertheless, the concept of the 'rural' is highly contested and cannot be reduced to a single homogenous category, given the vast diversity of rural areas that exist globally. Similarly, what constitutes the scholarly field of 'criminology' is also debated, with conventional criminology focusing on legal definitions of crime, and critical criminologists advocating for a social harms-based approach (Pemberton, 2007). As such, rural criminology occupies a complex and contested space, requiring a context-specific lens for understanding both legally defined crimes and the myriad of lawful yet harmful practices that may not be classified as crime but have devastating and far-reaching consequences.

To navigate this complexity, it is helpful to move beyond viewing the 'rural' and 'urban' as oppositional categories. Instead, rurality can be more accurately conceptualised along a rural–urban continuum (Champion & Hugo, 2004). This is not to say that the distinction between rural and urban areas is not useful or significant, nor is it to suggest that there are not considerable disparities between rural and urban areas in terms of access to resources, services, infrastructure, and supports (Konjar et al., 2018). Rather, it is to highlight that the rural–urban divide can reduce these areas to a false dichotomy—one that oversimplifies spatial realities by ignoring how rural and urban areas often overlap, intersect, and blend into one another, rather than existing as clearly demarcated or mutually exclusive zones. Insisting on an 'either/or' between the rural and urban can also perpetuate an 'us versus them' mentality, positioning rural and urban communities in opposition to one another,

and casting that which lies beyond the familiar as strange, threatening, inferior, or, conversely, idealised.

The 'rural idyll' is one such idealisation; it is a romanticised construct that portrays rural areas as uncontaminated by the harsh realities of urban life (Short, 2005). "In these idealised narratives of landscape", Donnermeyer et al. (2013) explain, "nature is a repository of everything civilisation is not: pure, uninhibited, non-rational and free of intent" (p. 80). The rural idyll is depicted as a simpler, more harmonious, and peaceful place, devoid of crime and criminality (Donnermeyer et al., 2013). However, the rural idyll obfuscates the myriad social and economic challenges faced within rural areas, perpetuating a simplistic and misleading narrative that overlooks the complexities and difficulties faced by rural communities. Of particular relevance to this paper is that romanticised visions of rurality conceal the industrialised violence embedded within contemporary industrialised agricultural practices.

The rural idyll evokes images of small, family-operated farms, where farmers are valorised as 'salt of the earth' figures devoted to caring for animals and the land (Pedersen & White, 2021). Within this framework, animals are portrayed as willing participants in their own subjugation—content, and even eager, to offer themselves up for human use (Cole & Stewart, 2019). This idealised vision obscures the reality that these farms have been increasingly absorbed into broader capitalist systems (Donnermeyer et al., 2013). As Lovell (2016) observes: "[w]hat were once small, family-owned farms are now large concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and the mechanised slaughterhouses collectively referred to as factory farms" (p. 139). These industrialised operations are profoundly harmful—not only to the animals bred for exploitation and slaughter, but also to the workers within these facilities. It is also extremely damaging to the environment, with animal agriculture being a major contributor to the climate emergency, climate-related disasters, and zoonotic disease transmission (Besch, 2024; Leighton, 2021; Marchese & Hovorka, 2022).

The industrialisation of animal agriculture is part of what critical animal scholars refer to as the animal industrial complex (Fitzgerald & Taylor 2014; Twine 2013). The animal industrial complex, as Twine (2013) explains, is "a partly opaque and multiple set of networks and relationships between the corporate sector, governments, and public and private science; with economic, cultural, social, and affective dimensions; and encompassing an extensive range of practices, technologies, images, identities, and markets" (p. 91). Animal agriculture lies at core of the animal industrial complex—where animals are bred, confined, and killed to meet global demand, all while being tightly woven into networks of corporate and governmental interests (Twine, 2013). In this way, the animal industrial complex is not separate from rural life but is deeply embedded within it. The rural idyll, however, helps to obscure the harms embedded within the animal industrial complex, perpetuating a cultural narrative in which farmers are idealised as honest and hardworking, while vegans and animal advocates are stereotyped as urban, elitist, and disconnected from the 'realities' of food production (Pedersen & White, 2021). Such narratives not only delegitimise ethical critiques

of animal agriculture but also reinforce the invisibility of the systemic violence that is rife throughout the industry.

While animal cruelty is pervasive within, and even endemic to, animal agribusiness, it is activists and whistleblowers who face criminal sanctions when attempting to expose such abuse. Ag-gag laws in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia make it illegal to film or photograph the conditions of factory farms and slaughterhouses without the consent of the owner (Lovell, 2023). These laws effectively criminalise efforts to expose animal cruelty, thereby protecting the agricultural industry and perpetuating a culture of secrecy in which gross abuses of animals thrive. Confronting the realities of animal agriculture involves moving beyond both the rural–urban divide and the myth of the rural idyll, acknowledging the extensive harms that are concealed within these spaces—towards human and nonhuman animals, the ecosystems that they are part of, and the planet as a whole. This paper maintains that in order to fully account for the violence and exploitation occurring in rural settings, rural criminology must expand its analytical lens to include the structural oppression of nonhuman animals, adopting an anti-speciesist perspective that challenges the normalisation of human dominance and the moral exclusion of other animal species.

Beyond speciesism: Revaluing animals in rural criminology

Conceptualising 'speciesism'

While rural criminology has made considerable strides in moving beyond the urban-centrism of more conventional strands of criminology, both fields share a common tendency to adopt an anthropocentric focus—one that marginalises the victimisation of nonhuman animals and, in doing so, inadvertently reinforces speciesist assumptions. 'Speciesism' refers to discrimination against nonhuman animals, based on the assumed superiority of humans (Ryder, 2013). The term highlights how nonhuman animals experience oppression on the basis of species membership, while humans derive privilege from belonging to the dominant species group (Fraser et al., 2021).

Speciesism not only describes the hierarchy of humans over other animal species, but also the ranking of animals based on characteristics valued by humans. Flynn and Hall (2017) refer to this phenomenon as 'hierarchical speciesism'. The positions of animals on species hierarchies are determined by traits including sentience, resemblance to humans, and perceived 'cuteness' (i.e., the 'Bambi effect' [Ferreday, 2011]) (Flynn & Hall, 2017). Species hierarchies are arbitrary, reflecting human biases rather than inherent characteristics of animals. For example, companion animals (or 'pets') such dogs and cats occupy a higher position on the species hierarchy than farmed animals like pigs, cattle, and chickens. This is due to the emotional proximity of companion animals to humans and their cultural framing as family members, in contrast to animals who are farmed for human use and consumption. Hierarchical speciesism also extends to 'freeborn' or 'wild' animals, where native species are often favoured over introduced species, with the former seen as valuable and worthy of protection, while the latter are viewed as harmful and invasive.

Critical perspectives on human-animal oppression

Ecofeminists, critical race theorists, and critical animal scholars have offered powerful frameworks for understanding speciesism as a form of structural oppression that arises from the same roots as racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, and classism (Donovan, 1990; Adams 2020; Ko, 2020a; Ko, 2020b; Taylor, 2017). For example, the dairy industry is reliant on the reproductive exploitation of female cows, mirroring patriarchal control over women's bodies (Adams, 2020). Similarly, environmental destruction is deeply gendered, as it is often enabled by masculinist logics and patriarchal power structures—reflected in the dominance of men in extractive industries, polluting corporations, and policymaking roles—which normalise violence against women, nonhuman animals, and nature (Burrell, 2024). Meanwhile, slaughterhouse labour is often performed by migrant and racialised workers under dangerous, low-wage conditions, highlighting the racist and classist dimensions of animal agriculture (Kelly, 2024). To illustrate, a recent report on the experiences of Pacific Island migrants working in Australia's meat processing industry under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme revealed that workers feel exploited and trapped—enduring long hours of physically demanding labour, tied to a single employer in isolated rural towns, and constrained by restrictive visa conditions (Moolchand & Marshall, 2025). Colonial logic further reveals these entanglements of oppression: under the doctrine of *terra nullius*, First Nations people of Australia were denied sovereignty and positioned as part of the natural landscape—akin to fauna—justifying their dispossession and the violent seizure of their lands (Samson, 2008). Likewise, ableist structures have long drawn on comparisons to animals to devalue and oppress disabled people, portraying them as lacking reason, agency, and autonomy (Taylor, 2017). Such examples reveal how the exploitation of nonhuman animals both derives from, and is sustained by, the same structural forces that devalue and control marginalised groups of humans.

Building on insights such as these, the concept of 'zoological racism', as articulated by Ko (2021), reveals the multidimensional oppression experienced by Black people and nonhuman animals. Rather than treating racism and speciesism as discrete forms of oppression which intersect, this framework reveals how white supremacy underpins the human–animal divide, in which the 'the human' is elevated above the 'the animal' (Ko, 2021). The animal, as Ko (2020b) maintains, "is a category that we shove certain bodies into when we want to justify violence against them, which is why animal liberation should concern all who are minoritized, because at any moment you can become an 'animal' and be considered disposable" (p. 131). In this way, 'the animal' refers to both animalised groups of people as well as nonhuman animal species, both of whom experience oppression through complex processes of animalisation.

Zoological racism is rooted in the historical entanglements of colonialism, slavery, and scientific racism, where Enlightenment-era thinkers and race scientists constructed classificatory systems that positioned racialised humans as closer to animals in order to legitimise their subjugation (Kappeler, 1995). Enslaved African people, First Nations people, and other colonised populations were routinely portrayed as less evolved or more animal-like,

serving to naturalise their marginalisation and exploitation. Under this logic, white supremacy functions as both anti-Black and anti-animal, reinforcing domination across race and species lines (Ko, 2021). Thus, zoological racism reveals how the human–animal divide does not rest on neutral or purely biological distinctions but, rather, reflects the entangled logics of speciesism and racism as mutually reinforcing systems of oppression affecting both human and nonhuman animals alike.

Ecofeminism offers a further framework for understanding how the same logic that justifies violence against nonhuman animals underlies human oppression. This logic, termed the 'logic of domination' by Warren (1990), operates through entrenched hierarchical dualisms—such as masculine/feminine, reason/emotion, culture/nature, and human/animal—that legitimise violence and inequality against human and nonhuman beings (Plumwood, 1993). These dualisms are not neutral or descriptive; they function to elevate one side of the dualism (masculinity, rationality, culture, humanity, etc.) while devaluing the other (femininity, emotion, nature, animality, etc.).

Rooted in classical Greek thought, these dualisms have evolved over time, taking different forms across different historical contexts (Plumwood, 1993). European intellectual and political projects, driven by Western modernity, colonial expansion, and Enlightenment rationalism, sought to categorise and control the world through rigid dualisms—dividing reason from emotion, mind from body, and civilisation from savagery—thereby embedding these oppositions deeply within contemporary Western worldviews. This framework justified—and continues to justify—the subjugation of colonised peoples, women, and animals by positioning them as irrational, inferior, and closer to nature.

Although dualistic thinking is dominant within Western imperialist traditions, it is not universal (Plumwood, 1993). Many Indigenous worldviews—such as those of First Nations peoples in Australia—offer fundamentally different understandings of the human–nature relationship. The idea of 'Country', for example, is not just a physical place but a living, sentient entity that encompasses land, water, skies, people, animals, and spiritual beings (Cameron, 2020). Such perspectives challenge the anthropocentric assumptions of dominant Western paradigms and persist despite ongoing efforts at colonial erasure. Ecofeminist thought critiques the reductive logic of hierarchical dualisms, highlighting their persistent hegemonic influence and facilitates a critical examination of the power structures that marginalise alternative worldviews.

Drawing on Ko's (2020a, 2020b) analyses of zoological racism and the human–animal divide as foundational to racial hierarchies, alongside ecofeminist critiques of hierarchical dualisms (Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 1990), it becomes evident that ostensibly distinct forms of oppression are rooted in a shared logic of domination. This logic constructs and reinforces dualisms—such as human/animal, nature/culture, and masculine/feminine—not as isolated systems, but as enmeshed structures that sustain power and exclusion. Consequently, racism, colonialism, speciesism and sexism should not be viewed as merely intersecting or parallel, but as mutually arising and co-constituting (Ko, 2020a). This entangled logic—grounded in the marginalisation of both human and nonhuman others—

extends into academic disciplines, including criminology. Just as systems of oppression are shaped through interlocking hierarchies, so too are disciplinary boundaries informed by anthropocentric assumptions that render nonhuman animals invisible within criminological inquiry.

The marginalisation of nonhuman animals in (rural) criminology

Conventional criminology has long been criticised for exhibiting speciesism (Beirne, 1995; Cazaux, 1999). In this space, nonhuman animals are often disregarded and, when they are considered, are typically objectified, devalued, and othered (Beirne, 1999; Cazaux, 1999). The use and abuse of nonhuman animals is not regarded as serious crime; instead, it is often portrayed as a minor property offence, as if animals were merely objects (Beirne, 2007). This marginalisation is not unique to conventional criminology. Much like its mainstream counterpart, rural criminology has also tended to relegate animals to the periphery. Encouragingly, however, a growing number of rural criminologists are beginning to engage with animal-related issues, including so-called 'wildlife' crimes such as hunting and poaching (Edmond, 2020; Nurse, 2020), as well as illegal hunting and shooting (Harkness et al., 2023). There is also some consideration of the abuse of farmed animals (Lovell, 2016); however, there is an overall scarcity of rural criminological research in this area. More often than not, discussions of farmed animals within rural criminology focus on 'livestock' theft, with the primary emphasis on the experiences of farmers rather than animals. There are also issues with the language being used in these spaces. Referring to farmed animals as 'livestock' can perpetuate the view that they are merely human property—living stock reduced to units of production—thereby making their commodification appear natural, neutral, and inevitable (Twine, 2013; Yarwood & Evans, 2000). Moving forward, rural criminologists should challenge the speciesist language and assumptions surrounding nonhuman animals and consider them as victims in their own right. Indeed, harms against animals should be recognised as worthy of attention not because of their potential impacts on humans—positioned as the 'owners' of animals—but because of the devastating effects these harms have on animals themselves.

Disasters and rurality: From a non-speciesist to an anti-speciesist criminology

Building on the foundational insights of scholars such as Beirne (1999; 2007; 2009; 2022) and Cazaux (1999; 2007), who have powerfully argued for a non-speciesist criminology, this paper seeks to extend their important work by proposing a shift in emphasis toward what I term an *anti*-speciesist criminology, to more explicitly convey the active resistance required to confront species-based hierarchies and violence. While the term non-speciesist has been foundational in opening space for animals within criminological inquiry, it may not fully capture the critical stance needed to challenge the systemic privileging of human over nonhuman life—just as just as the terms 'non-sexist' and non-racist' do not go far enough in actively opposing sexism and racism. By centring the harms experienced by animals as significant in their own right, this paper contributes a conceptual refinement that seeks to deepen and advance the ongoing project of a criminology that takes animals seriously.

Given that many harms against nonhuman animals occur in rural settings—and often go unnoticed or unaddressed—it is crucial for rural criminology to adopt a *critical* anti-speciesist focus. A critical harms-based approach rejects mainstream positivist definitions of crime as mere violations of the criminal law, arguing that the study of crime should be broadened to consider social harms (Pemberton, 2007). This is especially important when considering that the vast majority of harms committed against nonhuman animals are perfectly legal (Sollund, 2008)—ranging from the severe mistreatment and abuse endured on factory farms, to the widespread destruction of habitats driven by relentless urbanisation and agricultural expansion. To develop a truly anti-speciesist rural criminology, it is essential to acknowledge the suffering of nonhuman animals bred for slaughter, reproductive exploitation, and fibre, recognising their treatment as severely unjust.

It is also important to recognise that these legally sanctioned harms are not isolated; they are deeply enmeshed with broader ecological crises. The widespread exploitation of farmed animals has been linked to the increasing frequency and severity of disasters occurring on an unprecedented scale (Besch, 2024)—ranging from climate-induced catastrophes to pandemics resulting from zoonotic disease transmission. As this paper will argue, reimagining human relationships with nonhuman animals and the more-than-human world is not only a matter of justice but may also be essential to mitigating the destructive impacts of such disasters and preventing further harm to the planet's diverse inhabitants—as well as to the planet itself. Nevertheless, to fully grasp the significance of this argument, it is necessary to critically interrogate how the concept of 'disaster' is understood.

Understanding 'disasters'

The term 'disaster' is used to describe a broad range of events, including biological disasters (e.g., zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19 and H1N1 [Swine Flu]), natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, floods, fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, and tsunamis), and human-induced disasters (e.g., oil spills, mass shootings, terrorist attacks, plane crashes, and economic breakdowns) (Boin et al., 2018; Fraser et al., 2021). Disaster researchers have historically focused on 'natural' disasters; however, there has, more recently, been a shift towards the study of 'human-induced' events (Boin et al., 2018). There are, nevertheless, limitations to these classificatory systems, with anthropogenic climate change and zoonotic disease transmission blurring the distinction between natural, biological, and human-induced events (Fraser et al., 2021). Disasters wreak havoc on social intuitions and structures, but these same institutions and structures contribute significantly to the emergence of disasters in the first place (Perry, 2018). For instance, human activities like intensive animal agriculture lead to habitat loss for nonhuman animals and increased contact between humans and 'wild' animals which facilitates the transmission of zoonotic diseases (Marchese & Hovorka, 2022; Mishra et al., 2021). It is also a major driver of anthropogenic climate change, which is exacerbating the incidence and severity of natural disasters (Besch, 2024). Disasters, then, mark the incursion of the 'natural' and 'biological' realms into human social and physical spaces, whilst at the same time being fundamentally produced by the very social systems and physical environments they disrupt.

Perry (2018) outlines three major paradigms through which disasters are understood: the *classical*, *hazards*, and *social* approaches. Broadly speaking, the *classical* approach conceptualises disasters as disruptions to the social order brought on by exceptional events, causing physical destruction and loss of life, and necessitating people to deviate from existing norms in order to survive and adapt (Perry, 2018). The *hazards* approach posits disasters as the encroachment of 'natural' hazards (e.g., floods, fires, etc.) onto human environments—whether they be physical, constructed, or social (Perry, 2018). Finally, the *social* approach characterises disasters as social phenomena, understood as "social disruption[s] originating from the interruption of the social system and relation"" (Perry, 2018, p. 11). Within this framework, disasters are understood as socially constructed, human-induced events. While such approaches might reference an external agent, catalyst or hazard, they position the locus of disaster within the social realm, highlighting that vulnerability is inherent within the social structure itself (Perry, 2018).

The 'vulnerability paradigm', informed by a social approach to disasters, considers the extent to which marginalised populations differentially experience disasters (Irving, 2009). Here, vulnerability is defined as an individual or group's "capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard" (Blaikie et al., cited in Irvine, 2009, p. 4). In this sense, the destructive impact of disasters arises not merely from 'external' events but from inherently unstable social structures to begin with (Irving, 2009). For example, during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, low-income and predominantly Black communities in New Orleans were disproportionately affected due to systemic inequalities in housing, infrastructure, and access to emergency services (Anderson, 2008). Nevertheless, while disasters have devastating impacts and can exacerbate existing inequalities and injustices, they also present opportunities for transformation. As significant and disruptive social events, disasters can catalyse shifts in behaviours, attitudes, and norms (McEntire, 2015). As this paper argues, these moments of disruption should be viewed as opportunities to dismantle entrenched hierarchies and systems of oppression, and to transform destructive modes of relating to humans, nonhuman animals, and the more-than-human world into more just, equitable, and relational ones.

This paper adopts a social approach to disasters, positing them as fundamentally social phenomena with causes and impacts deeply intertwined with social structures (Enarson et al., 2018). Although disasters result from the incursion of hazards on constructed physical and social environments, they are fundamentally social in nature (McEntire, 2015). Just as disasters mark the incursion of 'natural' into 'human' domains, humans contribute to the creation of disasters through our encroachment on the natural world. The role of capitalism cannot be understated in this regard, which encourages endless economic growth at the expense of environmental sustainability. This is illustrated by the 'treadmill of production', where continuous industrial expansion and resource extraction lead to environmental degradation and increased risks of disaster brought on by the climate emergency (Stretesky et al., 2014).

Animals and disasters

A social approach to disasters demands attention to how nonhuman animals—both 'wild' and 'domesticated'—are affected by the same socio-environmental systems that shape human vulnerability. These animals are entangled in structures of exploitation and control, yet often face heightened risks due to their dependence on human systems or their exposure to the harmful consequences of those systems. Where 'wild' animals are said to occupy the realm of 'nature' that is 'independent' from humans, 'domesticated' animals live under human control. Wild (otherwise known as 'freeborn') animals are those who live independently from humans. Domesticated animals, on the other hand, refer to animals whose breeding, diet and care are under the control of humans (Irving, 2009); they are those who "have been rendered dependent on human beings, and who have lost their ability to live independently in the wild" (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011, p. 62). Domesticated animals include companion animals, farmed animals, and animals used for research and entertainment (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011).

However, the dichotomy that is drawn between 'wild' and 'domesticated' animals is overly reductive in assuming that animals are either "free and independent, inhabiting the wilderness 'out there'" (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011, p. 62) or are "captive and independent, living under our management" (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011, p. 62). Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) reveal that the wild/domesticated animal dichotomy overlooks many animal–human relationships that do not fit neatly into either category. They describe 'liminal animals'—like pigeons, possums, squirrels, and rats—as those that are neither fully domesticated nor entirely independent from humans either. These animals inhabit human spaces such as homes, backyards, and parks, often seeking out the benefits of proximity to humans, such as access to food or shelter (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011). With this in mind, this section will explore the impacts of disasters on wild and domesticated animals but, in so doing, will problematise the wild/domesticated dichotomy.

'Freeborn' animals

Freeborn, or wild, animals are those who live independently from humans, residing within natural or wilderness settings. Freeborn animals are significantly impacted by disasters—perhaps, most notably, those associated with climate change. The increased frequency and severity of climate-driven disasters cause freeborn animals enormous harm, including loss of life, injury, habitat destruction, and displacement (Fraser et al., 2021). A 2022 report from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) on the impact of Australia's 2019-2020 bushfires revealed that nearly 3 billion animals were either killed or displaced by the fires, including 143 million mammals, 2.46 billion reptiles, 180 million birds, and 51 million frogs. There are other human-induced disasters that are of significant detriment to nonhuman animals. For instance, disasters such as oil spills have devasting effects, causing suffering and death for countless birds and marine life, and leading to long-term damage to their habitats and ecosystems (Irving, 2024).

A 2020 New South Wales parliamentary inquiry warned that without urgent action, the state's koala population could be extinct by 2050. The report identified several threats to koalas' survival, with the loss and fragmentation of habitat—exacerbated by bushfires and land clearing—being of primary concern. In Victoria, however, koalas are facing overpopulation within isolated and fragmented habitats such as Budj Bim National Park, where high densities have led to the over-stripping of eucalyptus trees, causing food shortages and ecological stress (Hicks & Best, 2025). This is largely a result of human land misuse: the expansion of commercial blue gum plantations has artificially inflated koala populations by providing an abundant but temporary food source. When these plantations are logged, koalas are displaced and forced back into already degraded environments with limited resources (Hicks & Best, 2025). Following a bushfire in March 2025 that destroyed 20% of the Budj Bim National Park, over 700 koalas were culled by aerial shooting. The Victorian government justified the action as a welfare response, but critics argue it reflects ongoing failures in habitat management and a speciesist mindset that treats nonhuman animals as expendable when their presence becomes an inconvenience (Hicks & Best, 2025). More broadly, the situation highlights how capitalist land-use priorities and short-term economic interests continue to drive ecological instability and the harming of nonhuman animals.

While the bushfires in Victoria led to lethal interventions against koalas, the COVID-19 pandemic had mixed impacts on nonhuman populations of freeborn animals. During this time, Rutz et al. (2020) called for an examination of the impact of reduced human mobility—which they termed 'anthropause'—on nonhuman animals, maintaining it would provide an invaluable opportunity to assess "human-wildlife interactions in the twenty-first century" (p. 1156). In terms of the impacts of the 'anthropause' on freeborn animals, Rutz et al. (2020) remark on reports of animals making greater use of urban spaces. They observe:

> There not only appear to be more animals than usual, but there are also some unexpected visitors. People have reported sightings of pumas in downtown Santiago, Chile, of dolphins in untypically calm waters in the harbour of Trieste, Italy, and of jackals in broad daylight in urban parks in Tel Aviv, Israel (Rutz et al., 2020, p. 1156).

Rutz et al. (2020) hypothesised that during the lockdowns, many animals would thrive in urban settings due to the reduced presence of humans. However, they suspected that some species would struggle without humans (e.g., liminal animals such as rats and gulls reliant on discarded human food) (Rutz et al., 2020).

In terms of other negative impacts of COVID-19 on freeborn animals, the pandemic led to increased wildlife poaching, as fewer tourists and reduced patrolling allowed poachers greater opportunities to target endangered animal species (Fraser et al., 2021). This reveals that while disasters have enormous impacts on wild animals, the category of 'wild animal' itself remains fundamentally flawed due to the intricate webs of interdependency existing between human and nonhuman animals. As noted by Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011), even so-called 'wild' animals exist in complex networks of interrelation with humans and are extremely vulnerable to the impacts of human activities. Wild animals do not simply dwell

within ‘nature’; they frequently move in and out of spaces shaped and inhabited by humans (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011).

The ability of freeborn animals to navigate green spaces within more urban areas during the COVID-19 lockdowns highlights the difficulty of drawing a sharp distinction between natural and human environments—just as it is not always easy to distinguish between the rural and urban. This reinforces the idea that both the natural–human and rural–urban divides are best understood as continuums. Some urban environments incorporate rural-like features—such as green spaces and community gardens—while many rural areas are increasingly shaped by urbanisation, including suburban development, urban sprawl, and industrialised agriculture (Champion & Hugo, 2004). While disasters are often framed as the natural world encroaching upon the human, it is more often the case that human activity encroaches upon the habitats of freeborn animals. Through deforestation, urbanisation, infrastructure development, and agricultural expansion, the boundaries between rural and urban, and between natural and human environments, are becoming increasingly difficult to disentangle (Champion & Hugo, 2004).

Domesticated animals

Disasters do not only impact freeborn animals, they also have severe consequences for domesticated animals, including (but not limited to) those used for human companionship or farming. As previously indicated, domesticated animals are defined as those who live under the control of humans and who would not be able to survive in the ‘wild’ (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011). Of course, as was the case with ‘wild’ animals, the category of ‘domesticated’ animals is also problematic as it denies the existence of animals who occupy spaces of liminality and may not live entirely under human control—e.g., ‘feral’ cats and dogs who were once domesticated, and even domesticated animals still possess some agency and routinely engage in acts of resistance. Nevertheless, despite the problems with this category, it is evident that hierarchical speciesism (Flynn & Hall, 2017) is in full operation in disaster management efforts. Companion animals are valued more than those who are farmed, due to their role as ‘pets’ and emotional companions, whereas farmed animals are predominately viewed as commodities.

Companion animals are common in many households and are often regarded as family members (Travers et al., 2017). Some human guardians disregard evacuation orders during natural disasters to stay with their companion animals (Travers et al., 2017), while countless others are abandoned as human lives take precedence (Irving, 2009). Extreme weather, rising infectious disease rates, and water scarcity force humans and nonhuman animals into migration, effectively turning them into climate refugees (Evans, 2021). Research further reveals an increase in men’s violence against women in the aftermath of disasters (Enarson, et al., 2016). Since men abuse companion animals in cases of intimate partner violence to exert power and control over women (Newberry, 2017), violence against companion animals is also at risk of increasing in the aftermath of disasters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and border closures heightened the risk of danger for

companion animals, as they were confined in abusive environments similar to those faced by humans (Fraser et al., 2021).

While there has been some progress towards species-inclusive disaster management for companion animals, these frameworks do not necessarily recognise animals as worthy of safety and protection in their own right (Fraser et al., 2021). Companion animals are often included in disaster plans for anthropocentric reasons, such as human guardians frequently returning to disaster sites to reclaim their pets; the bonds between guardians and companion animals influencing decisions that may endanger first responders; and the potential health risks and public safety threats posed to humans by abandoned or lost animals from disease and aggressive behaviour (Day, 2017; Fraser et al., 2021). While human–animal relations are important, disaster management plans must do more to recognise the inherent worth of animals and to ensure the wellbeing of all species—not just those kept for human companion.

Farmed animals suffer greatly during natural disasters, and animal agriculture—a major driver of climate change—contributes to the increasing frequency and severity of these events. While humans share close bonds with companion animals, the proportion of farmed animals far outweighs those kept for human companion. As Singer (2015) has noted, for most people, their primary interaction with nonhuman animals occurs when they are served as food on their plates. In terms of the global proportion of mammals, humans and farmed animals make up a combined total of 96% of the world's mammal biomass, whereas freeborn mammals constitute only 4% of the world's mammals (Ritchie, 2022). If the plight of animals is not enough to prompt changes to consumption habits, surely these shocking numbers reveal that reliance on animal agriculture is unsustainable.

Farmed animals face numerous risks during disasters, including displacement, hypothermia, heat stress, traumatic injuries, and disease outbreaks that can wipe out entire herds or flocks (Irving, 2009). In 2020, Denmark mandated the mass culling of approximately 17 million mink due to a novel strain of COVID-19, which posed a potential health risk by reducing the efficacy of vaccines (Groves & Hughes, 2022). However, it was later revealed that the cull was ordered without proper legal authority (Groves & Hughes, 2022). While animal rights advocates expressed concern for the mink, public outrage largely focused on the devastation of the mink industry and the loss of livelihoods for farmers (Groves & Hughes, 2022).

The treatment of farmed animals during disasters is often determined by their value as commodities, resulting in minimal public support for their rescue (Irving, 2009). In the aftermath of Hurricane Rita in 2005, for instance, animal activist Miyun Park remarked: "A typical press report reads: 'According to the American Farm Bureau Federation, farmers in southwestern Louisiana were hurt most by Hurricane Rita, which has resulted in the loss of 30,000 cattle and seriously harmed rice fields and the harvest of sugar cane.' The farmers were hurt, but the cattle were merely 'lost'. Serious harm was reserved for the rice fields" (cited in Irving, 2024, p. 1). A similar pattern emerged during the 2025 floods in New South Wales, where countless cows and other farmed animals were swept away (Belot, 2025). Media coverage overwhelmingly framed the event in terms of economic loss and devastation

to farming operations, with animals described primarily as 'property' rather than sentient beings in distress (Belot, 2025; Claughton et al., 2025).

Just as the wild/domesticated animal dichotomy fails to hold up to scrutiny, so too does the distinction between natural and human-induced disasters. Destructive and exploitative human–animal relationships contributed to the emergence of COVID-19, which is thought to have arisen from a 'wet market' in Wuhan, China, selling nonhuman animals (living and slaughtered) for human consumption (Marchese & Hovorka, 2022). Similarly, the ongoing global spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), which originated in a commercial goose farm and spilled into wild bird populations, highlights how intensive farming creates conditions for deadly diseases to emerge and devastate ecosystems (Marchese & Hovorka, 2022). The 2009 swine flu pandemic, linked to industrial pig farming, further illustrates how intensive animal agriculture creates ideal conditions for new pathogens to emerge and spread, with devastating consequences for both human and nonhuman life (Marchese & Hovorka, 2022). What these crises ultimately reveal is the urgent need for an anti-speciesist perspective—one that not only recognises the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman suffering, but actively challenges the hierarchies and systems that normalise animal exploitation.

Conclusion: Advancing a rural anti-speciesist criminology of disaster

Building on the foundational insights of non-speciesist criminologists (Beirne, 1999, 2007, 2009, 2022; Cazaux, 1999, 2007), this paper advances a conceptual shift toward what I term an *anti*-speciesist criminology. While non-speciesist criminology has been instrumental in carving out space for nonhuman animals within criminological inquiry, the term 'non-speciesist' does not fully convey the active resistance required to dismantle speciesism—just as the terms 'non-sexist' or 'non-racist' do not go far enough in opposing sexism and racism. Given that many of the most egregious harms against nonhuman animals occur in rural settings, and often remain normalised and invisible, it is imperative that rural criminology adopt a critical, anti-speciesist approach. This is particularly vital when considering animal (ab)use, where the vast majority of harms—including those that occur on factory farms and through habitat destruction—is entirely legal (Sollund, 2008). To develop a truly anti-speciesist rural criminology, it is essential to confront the systemic exploitation of animals—whether for slaughter, reproductive exploitation, or the extraction of materials like leather and wool—and to recognise these as deeply unjust practices.

This paper has revealed that despite some exceptions (see Edmond, 2020; Nurse, 2020; Lovell, 2016 & 2023), rural criminology has largely treated nonhuman animals as property and commodities, failing to take their suffering seriously. Rural criminologists have challenged the myth of the rural idyll and the rural/urban dichotomy (Donnermeyer et al., 2013); nevertheless, the continued marginalisation of nonhuman animal (ab)use may also reflect the broader cultural influence of the rural idyll and deeply entrenched speciesist attitudes. This idyll obscures the reality that animal agriculture in rural settings is a core component of the animal industrial complex—a vast, profit-driven system underpinned by powerful corporate and government interests, which reinforces structures that prioritise

economic growth over the wellbeing of humans, nonhuman animals, and the planet. An anti-speciesist rural criminology of disaster is essential to revealing how harms perpetrated against nonhuman animals are not merely collateral, but are central to the emergence of disasters affecting all life forms.

Given that the exploitation of nonhuman animals is central to the emergence and intensification of disasters, addressing climate-related and zoonotic crises requires an approach that is grounded in anti-speciesist practices. One immediately accessible and impactful action is adopting a plant-based diet, which can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and lessen the environmental burden of industrial animal agriculture (Loy & Jacquart, 2024). Beyond individual consumption, there are broader strategies that can contribute to disaster mitigation—including revegetating former agricultural lands to restore ecosystems and biodiversity (Mokany et al., 2025); advocating for legal reforms that grant animals rights (Kymlicka, 2017); and prioritising animal protection in disaster preparedness and response planning (Fraser et al., 2021). That said, the aim of this paper has not been to propose a comprehensive framework for disaster mitigation and response but, rather, to highlight the critical need to interrogate the dominant worldviews and systemic forms of oppression that underpin both human and nonhuman harms. While practical and urgent responses are undoubtedly necessary, without addressing these deeper issues, practical interventions risk inadvertently reinforcing the very harms they seek to address.

As this paper has revealed, speciesism is one such framework that legitimises and perpetuates the exploitation of nonhuman animals, with disastrous consequences for both humans and the more-than-human world. While speciesism specifically targets nonhuman animals, ecofeminists, critical race theorists, and critical animal scholars have long shown that systems of oppression are deeply entangled—subjugating not only animals but also women, Black people, people of colour, First Nations peoples, working-class people, and disabled people. An anti-speciesist rural criminology must therefore be situated within a broader project of collective liberation: one that confronts enmeshed structures of domination that sustain violence and inequality across species lines. Within this context, disasters—though profoundly harmful and often intensifying existing injustices—can also serve as moments that expose the fragility of these dominant systems and briefly disrupt their hold. In these ruptures lie possibilities for reimagining relationships among humans and the more-than-human world, and for embracing more relational, reciprocal, and just ways of being.

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