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“I Want Meat!”: Gendered Eating and Anthropocentric Fighting in *One Piece*

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[OP]¹: Pla(c/t)e setting with a multispecies cast

When Monkey D. Luffy is hungry, he yells for meat. This is a key trait of the main character of the *manga* turned *anime*² series known as *One Piece* (Oda, 1997)³. The series title refers to a legendary treasure that will make whoever finds it the future King of Pirates in an oceanic world filled with outlaws and marines. The story centres around ‘Straw Hat’ Luffy and his crew as they undergo adventures, trials, and tribulations in search for the titular treasure. The captain’s appetite for the flesh of animal-others appears as a comic relief in instances such as fight scenes and in the brief snippets of everyday life on the ship. However, it also implies that his great strength and ability to recover quickly after battles is somehow connected to his copious meat consumption. Although this character feature does contribute to humorous breaks, it also provides an opening to examine broader themes contained in this globally popular title from a Critical Animal Studies (CAS) perspective. *One Piece* is an epic fantasy story that is known for its character diversity, its exploration of concepts such as justice and freedom, and for highlighting issues of power and corruption. It also features a multispecies cast, involving humans as

1 The abbreviation ‘OP’ refers to an anime series’ opening credits and theme song. It serves to introduce the characters, providing plot hints, and setting the tone for the story.

2 Manga refers to Japanese comics or graphic novels, anime refers to Japanese animation.

3 There is now also a highly popular Netflix live-action adaptation, released on August 31, 2023.

well as anthropomorphic animals, humanoid-animal hybrid characters, and animal shapeshifters throughout the series. As such, the depictions of animals in *One Piece* are fluid, yet subject to the limitations of a highly gendered and anthropocentric medium. This is best illustrated by zooming into the story's depictions of gender and multispecies relations through food and fighting.

This chapter will begin by outlining the geo-political project behind the global popularity of manga and anime, and then bring in a CAS perspective into the discussion surrounding these media. It will then proceed to briefly introduce the main characters involved in the storyline to bring attention to its more-than-human cast, followed by a brief commentary on *One Piece's* mixed record with gender and nonhuman animal depictions. After this, the issue of gendered eating in the series will be put in focus in order to proceed to foreground the animal as food, as a training tool, and as a source of 'fighting power'. This chapter will conclude by highlighting a few examples of the aspects of multispecies entanglements involved in cultural consumption. Last, and important to disclaim: spoilers ahead.

Globalising coolness

One Piece is a Japanese manga series created by Eiichiro Oda (1997). Its chapters were first published in *Shōnen Jump*, a weekly anthology magazine that has hosted other internationally popular titles such as *Naruto* and *Dragon Ball*. The globalisation of Japanese media such as manga and anime owe its success to various forces. Among such, the early international diffusion of manga and anime has been greatly facilitated by fan-produced unofficial translations known as 'fansubbing' that began in the mid-1970s and continues to this day (Lee, 2011; Leonard, 2005). On the other hand, titles like *One Piece* are also among the franchises that have come to enjoy official global reach in the past decades under the Japanese Government's *Cool Japan Initiative* (Cabinet Office, 2020). This initiative is a nation branding project that has resulted in one of the most successful cultural diplomacy efforts of our time, and where manga and anime have played a leading role in policy considerations (Tamaki, 2019, p. 115). Not only in terms of these media products' appeal as cultural exports, but also in successfully influencing inflows such as in the case of 'anime pilgrimages' (Okamoto, 2015) which bring fans from all over the world to Japan (Liu et al., 2022).

The global reach of *One Piece* is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics athletes such as shot putter Payton Otterdahl from the United States and Greek long jump gold medallist Miltiadis Tentoglou made references to the series by imitating famous ‘poses’ from two of its characters (Morrissey, 2021). In another instance, the 2022 US National Football League (NFL) schedule release video by the Los Angeles Chargers went viral by featuring as an anime series opening credit sequence referencing titles such as *One Piece*, *Demon Slayer*, and *Naruto* (Clarke, 2022).

Along these lines, a significant link between events where physical prowess is at the centre stage and anime can be noted. This is particularly the case for the titles listed above which belong in the *Shōnen* genre. That is, manga and anime that primarily caters to teenage males, as opposed to the *Shōjo* genre that is aimed at teenage female readers (Unser-Schutz, 2015, pp. 135–136). *Shōnen* genre tropes tend to highlight values such as friendship and cooperation while also advancing specific conceptions of masculinity (Dahlberg-Dodd, 2018; Sigley, 2022, pp. 79–80). Although in practice this constructed binary is not rigid as both genres enjoy a wide readership, it does determine the direction of the plot, character features, and choice of publication platforms (Unser-Schutz, 2015, pp. 135–136). Nevertheless, in following its genre tropes, *One Piece* embodies a ‘man’s romanticism’ as set by the very first storyline known as the ‘Romance Dawn’ arc (Oda, 1997). It is a specifically gendered story. One that despite its sometimes-progressive tones such as the inclusion of strong female pirates, queer⁴ characters, species diversity, and subversive messages against institutions, it is ultimately meant to appeal to young boys’ and men’s fantasies. As such media now permeates popular culture and its reach is global, it has in turn deeper implications in the further diffusion of values and imaginaries that ultimately involve humans and nonhuman entanglements in various ways.

Manga, anime, and nonhuman animals

Critical Animal Studies (CAS) is a highly interdisciplinary advocate-scholarship project that seeks to critically challenge anthropocentrism and systems of nonhuman animal exploitation without neglecting the interrelated issues of gender, race, and class that continue to permeate our socio-political paradigms (See; Nocella et al.,

4 The series’ portrayal of queerness is also mixed and subject to considerable debate online.

2014, p. xxxi). Media and cultural industries play a key role in the production and reproduction of such paradigms, and as such constitute an area of special interest in CAS. This focus is sometimes conceptualised as a distinct sub-field known as Critical Animal and Media Studies (CAMS) (Almiron & Cole, 2015). A relevant section of scholarship at the intersection between CAS and Media Studies involves a closer scrutiny of nonhuman representations in pop culture such as the case of comics and superheroes (Schatz & Parson, 2018). Yet, an important caveat is that despite growing engagement with novel and popular media, most analyses have so far largely focused on the Western context (Almiron & Cole, 2015, p. 4). There is a significant case for a closer CAS engagement outside the Western and anglophone world. In line with the discussion of nonhuman representation of superheroes, Asian popular culture products can provide an ideal point to begin such exploration. Here, Knighton's (2018, pp. 140–142) discussion of the influence of the Japanese tradition of 'insect literature' and the role of insects and gender in the multispecies storytelling of Osamu Tezuka is particularly relevant. In a nutshell, as the 'Father of Manga', Tezuka's incorporation of his young self's fascination with insects, his scientific and medical training, and upbringing watching local all-female musical theatre that featured gender-bending roles had long lasting thematic legacy in the hybridity of characters that continue to be featured in manga and anime today (Knighton, 2018, pp. 140–141). Indeed, the rise of modern manga and anime presented new aesthetics, technologies, and storytelling. Yet it also remained riddled with value-laden human and nonhuman animal representations. Here, Lamarre's (2008, 2010, 2011) extensive three part discussion of the interweaved history of speciesism, war, and empire in Japanese animation is illustrative. As he succinctly states: "manga and manga films do not simply represent actual people in animal form in order to sugarcoat the exploitation of the weak by the strong. They transform a field of social and political relations into biopolitical theatre" (Lamarre, 2011, p. 118).

Contemporary manga and anime works are certainly being produced in a different socio-political setting from wartime and post-war Japan. However, animals and animalized characters have consistently remained among character repertoires, almost always in subaltern positions. An obvious case that may come to mind here is the global multi-billion franchise *Pokémon* (Tajiri, 1996). In the *Pokémon* world, human 'trainers' seek to catch all species of 'animal-like' beings and use them to battle each other to become a 'master trainer'. Such depictions of Pikachu, Bulbasaur, or Charmander involved in human-sanctioned fights has certainly not gone

unnoticed. As Quijano (2013) has noted, critics have pointed out the clear issue of nonhuman animal abuse, while supporters have highlighted the series' themes of interspecies cooperation and friendship. Yet, what is more significant from these debates is the fact that they confirm that series like Pokémon do have a persuasive potential in terms of ethical and moral messaging that we should remain aware of from a CAS standpoint (Quijano, 2013). From here, it is the purpose of this chapter to further encourage the discussion on nonhuman animal representations in contemporary and mainstream manga and anime, starting with *One Piece*.

Meet the 'Straw Hats'

The story of *One Piece* is filled with a wide cast of characters involving diverse humans and nonhumans. In part, because it has an interesting plot device. In this universe those who have consumed a 'Devil Fruit' will gain fantastic abilities which in some cases involve shapeshifting into animals and mythical beings. As such, many of its characters also defy boundaries between human/nonhuman animal, as well as animal-human/machine, and physical/non-physical in a Harawayian sense (1985). Yet despite a character count reaching over one thousand (Leung, 2021), the story is primarily centred on ten crew members at the time of writing. The 'Straw Hat' crew can be divided into three groups: human males, human females, and human/nonhuman hybrid characters.

There are four human males which include the Captain 'Straw Hat' Luffy, a boy that ate the mysterious 'Devil Fruit' that gave him the powers to become a rubber man. He sets on to adventuring the sea to fulfil his dream of becoming the King of Pirates. Luffy is a classic shōnen lead character who is strong, earnest, and seeking to fulfil a seemingly impossible dream (Drummond-Mathews, 2010, p. 65; Sigley, 2022, p. 79). The ship's first mate is 'Pirate Hunter' Roronoa Zoro. A swordsman who aims to be the strongest in his trade and who embodies the epitome of stoic masculinity. 'Black Foot' Vinsmoke Sanji is the crew's cook. He is an incurable womaniser who wants to find the 'All Blue', a mythical ocean that contains all the fish from across the seas. Luffy, Zoro, and Sanji constitute the so-called 'Monster Trio', the strongest fighters in the crew as well as its de-facto leadership. Lastly, 'God' Usopp is the ship's sniper. Although he is a cowardly man, he always overcomes his fears and finds his strength to save his friends. As such, each male character embodies a different ideal of masculinity and physical prowess that is

central to the shōnen genre (Dahlberg-Dodd, 2018). The crew also features two human females. ‘Cat Burglar’ Nami, the ship’s cartographer and navigator who wants to chart the first complete map of the world. She is joined by ‘Devil Child’ Nico Robin who is an archaeologist trying to uncover the censored history of the world. She ate the Flower-Flower fruit which allows her to clone herself and parts of her body. Although both Nami and Robin are active crew members with distinct personalities and goals, their character development has been limited by gender politics further discussed below.

To complete this roll call, there are four human/nonhuman hybrid crew members. The first one of these to be introduced is ‘Candy Eater’ Tony Tony Chopper who joins as the ship’s doctor. Chopper is an anthropomorphic reindeer who gained ‘human-like’ sentience due to consuming the Human-Human fruit. Next is ‘Cyborg’ Franky, a half-machine man who builds the Straw Hats Pirates’ second ship and becomes their shipwright. Soon after this, ‘Soul King’ Brook is introduced to be the ship’s musician and second swordsman. He is a skeleton-man due to eating the Revive-Revive fruit. The last member to officially join the crew is former pirate captain ‘Knight of the Sea’ Jimbe, now the helmsman. He is a whale shark Fish-Man, one of the two marine races that inhabit the deep ocean.

Based on this ship’s manifest, the series inclusion of not exactly human nor exactly animal characters follows the legacy of hybrid and multispecies storytelling in manga and anime (Knighton, 2018). There are human/nonhuman animals in the cases of Chopper and Jimbe, animal-human/machine such as Franky, and physical/non-physical as embodied by Brooks. What is more, following *One Piece’s* imaginary of social and institutional freedom struggles, the characters could very much embody Haraway’s (1985) all boundary-defying cyborgs. However, rather than realising the potential that abolishing such structures could bring, the story of *One Piece* always remains loyal to the premise contained in a ‘man’s romanticism’ as discussed next.

Challenging (only some) institutions

The story of *One Piece* is deeply infused with the concept of challenging institutions and realising freedom. This is clearly marked by the pirate theme and the Straw Hat’s battles against the despotic World Government. However, for all its subversive messages, the series also has a mixed record in other areas such as its gender depictions. For example, Nami has a tragic backstory of growing up under

the rule of ruthless pirates which highlights her resilience and resourcefulness. In the case of Robin, as the sole survivor of a group of scholars capable of uncovering the censored history of the world she has been persecuted her entire life. The story of both women is marked by survival, not victimhood, and was initially very well received by fans. However, the later development of their characters has also been greatly affected and sometimes even reversed by Oda's 'vindictiveness' against any criticism from female fans who want better representation as Lillian King (2022) from 'Anime Feminist' has noted. In a nutshell, the inclusion of strong female characters in *One Piece* is eclipsed by their hyper-sexualization and constant reminders of gendered limitations (King, 2022).

The diversity and fluidity of nonhuman animal characters in *One Piece* follow a similar pattern. On the one hand, the more human-like anthropomorphic and humanoid-animal hybrid characters play the most active roles in the story. Yet, their otherness is often a salient point. As a reindeer-human, Chopper's backstory is illustrative here. Gaining human-like 'sentience' turns him into an outcast from both reindeer and human society. He lives in isolation until he joins the Straw Hats as a pirate equal. However, his nonhuman status is constantly asserted by the World Government which considers him a 'pet' and sets the lowest bounty of all for him. The lesser status of humanoid-animal groups is even more pronounced with the Fish-Men and the Minks, a race of humanoid mammals. Both groups are subject to fear, persecution, and enslavement in this oceanic world. The story arcs involving Fish-Men and Minks clearly serve to highlight issues of discrimination, prejudice, and authoritarianism, while their alliances with the Straw Hats indicate the first steps towards multispecies resistance and justice. On the other hand, the treatment of these more human-like anthropomorphic and humanoid-animals is also markedly different from that of the fully nonhuman animal characters. Although nonhuman animals are not explicitly depicted in mass exploitative situations such as factory farming or commercial fishing, their presence in the storyline often lead to their ultimate fate as food, or else they are shown as mere beasts, and foes to be tamed or slain.

To (m)eat or be (b)eaten

From the very beginning in the story of *One Piece* it is established that life at sea is a matter of survival of the strongest. The acts of eating and fighting are central

elements in the series both in terms of world-building and as plot devices. They are also presented in highly gendered and *speciesist* terms. A 'sexual politics of meat' (Adams, 2010) is often evident in the brief snippets of the everyday life of the ship. The crew's romantic subsistence at sea depends on hunting and fishing. Luffy, Zoro, and Sanji are shown as the main food providers when slaying giant nonhuman animals and procuring the crew's next banquet. In contrast, Nami and Robin are mostly seen as taking small bites of the special meals and desserts prepared by Sanji, the flirtatious ship's cook. Such scenes of strong men slaying nonhuman animals, handling their corpses, and consuming their meat, while women are barely involved capture the key points of Adams (2010, pp. 50–52) arguments on the gendered dimensions of eating and cooking meat. What is more, here the captain's large appetite for meat serves as more than just a comical prop, it reaffirms his role as a masculine hero. Strong characters with ferocious appetites are another common trope in Shōnen manga and anime. Here, the connection between masculinity, gluttony, and meat is better illustrated by a special crossover episode between *One Piece*, *Dragon Ball*, and *Toriko* in which all three main characters compete in a tournament for a highly prized cut of special meat (Nakashima, 2013). Even when women are depicted as big eaters and physically strong, there are reminders of their primarily gendered roles. A key example is the case of Charlotte Linlin. As one of the 'Four Emperors of the Sea', she is one of the strongest pirates that rule the ocean. Yet, she has two characterising features. First, she is known as Big Mom, the matriarch and captain of her family-crew consisting of her 85 children. Her crew's size and strength are directly connected to her reproductive prowess. What is more, a main point in her story arc is centred around her use of political marriages to expand her family's size and power. Second, Linlin is obsessed with any type of sweets and desserts, not meat. She demands sweets as tribute for her protection and even goes on rampages from sweet-craving hysteria. Thus, despite being one of the few females that displays big strength and appetite, her character remains informed by gendered eating (Adams, 2010, pp. 50–52).

Although *One Piece* does include nonhumans in diverse and fluid roles, a large group of these characters ultimately become *absent referents* (Adams, 2010, p. 66). Carol J. Adams employs this concept to capture the disappearance of the living beings such as cows, pigs, and chickens, and the cognitive distance created by their linguistic and conceptual replacement that takes effect as they become beef, bacon, or hot wings. As such, the concept of the absent referent has been largely applied

to discussions of animals as food. However, it is possible to extend the concept to other aspects in which the nonhuman animal disappears to become something else of human use. Thus, as *absent referents*, animals in *One Piece* are reified in three main ways: as meat, as training tools, and as sources of fighting power. The first case where the animal disappears by becoming meat is the most obvious. In the series, almost any animal can be Luffy's next meal, from common land mammals to fantastic ones such as giant sea monsters and dragons. As animals become food, Luffy yells for meat and declares that he shall be the 'King of Pirates'. Ultimately implying that their flesh is the protein behind the captain's superhuman fighting capabilities as he defeats enemy after enemy. This again illustrates another issue discussed by Adams (2010, pp. 55–56). That is, that meat is often conceived as the fuel behind masculine strength and power, and thus 'Meat is King'. Next is the case of animals as training tools. This can be explored by zooming into Luffy's and Zoro's training regimens during the crew's two-year hiatus from piracy. The Straw Hat captain not only consumes but also tames and wrestles the biggest predators of a remote island while he masters new combat skills. Meanwhile, his right-hand man Zoro trains against and defeats an army of warrior primates on another island. In these instances, animals such as lions, crocodiles, and large primates become the bodies and subjects against which the heroes test their strength. Even though the animals in these scenes display some sentience, they are not equal sparring partners. Rather, their inclusion serves to highlight Luffy's and Zoro's masculinity, dominance in a hostile environment, and determination for self-improvement. Such features are often found in classic shōnen manga and anime that highlight martial discipline and which ultimately inform larger cultural and even nation building imaginaries (Sigley, 2022, pp. 79–80). The last case involves the figure of the nonhuman animal as a beastly source of power. In the world of *One Piece*, consuming a 'Devil Fruit' might result in the ability to turn into a specific animal. There are various characters introduced throughout the series that can shapeshift into common species of animals such as a bull as well as, in rare instances, ancient or mythical creatures such as a phoenix. Although in theory such ability could help blur the boundary between the human and nonhuman, the opposite happens. Rather, the animal as a source of fighting power is essentialized based upon popularly held views about animal qualities. In other words, socially constructed stereotypes about animals (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016). Here, the character of Rob Lucci is illustrative. Lucci is introduced as an operative of the 'Cipher Pol', the World Government's intelligence agency.

He can shapeshift into a Leopard due to eating the ‘Leopard model’ of the Cat-Cat Fruit and is shown as a ruthless leopard-man that embraces the image of an apex predator. He lives and fights under the creed that ‘weakness is a sin’ and talks in terms of devouring his enemies. Thus, what is ultimately foregrounded when a ‘Devil Fruit’ user shapeshifts into an animal is the physicality and power of the wild beast, erasing the animal as a sentient living being that is part of a wider and complex ecosystem.

[ED]⁵: Rethinking anime/al entanglements

The above discussed themes of gendered (m)eating and anthropocentric fighting in *One Piece* are clearly dependent on the very specific type of medium that is shōnen manga and anime. However, it is important to critically watch these mediums as their consumption translates into material and behavioural influence in the world. Here, manga and anime conventions constitute a key space where such entanglements take place as fans engage in costume play ‘cosplay’, produce fan or self-produced works ‘doujinshi’, and participate in the process of cultural diffusion (Lamerichs, 2013). From a CAS standpoint, the most significant aspect of these entanglements dwell in the ways in which manga and anime materializations further influence human-animal entanglements by contributing to the exploitation of animals. This is the case of meat and nonhuman animal products featured in anime as foods. Iconic anime foods from a variety of manga and anime series not only capture the public’s interests in new foods, but they also inspire fan’s palates and willingness to consume such foods (Basaran & Sunnetcioglu, 2021). At this point it is worth reiterating *One Piece*’s record of portraying animals as food, not only by way of the captain’s meat obsession but also illustrated by Sanji’s cooking. The chef of the Straw Hat crew is behind many of the foods featured in the series, and his recipes are now officially published in a cookbook to be recreated by fans (Elfring, 2021; S. King, 2021). Along these lines, it is important to note that such recreations are not isolated to dishes from *One Piece*. Anime food recreations occupy a considerably popular space of the internet where a flagship example is the *Anime with Alvin* series produced under the *Cooking with Babish Universe* (Rea,

⁵ In contrast to ‘OP’, ‘ED’ refers to a series’ ending credits, employing ‘wrap-up’ themes that vary from reflexive to playful.

2021). Most of these anime foods utilise the flesh of nonhuman animals or their products, such as milk and eggs, in their preparation. Consequently, it is not a far stretch to point out that the consumption of animal-based anime foods and the series that inspire this consumption are entangled with the broader issue of *carnism* – a term coined by Melanie Joy (2011, p.19) which captures the socio-cultural system of belief in which meat consumption has remained normal, accepted, and expected without further scrutiny or challenge.

The consumption of nonhuman animals as food is not the only way in which fictional multispecies entanglements transfer into the material world and vice versa. A next point here is that of the conspicuous presence and use of nonhuman animal imagery in human affairs that involve physicality and violence. Wrestling and hunting wild animals was commonplace in the Roman arena, known as *venationes*. As Lindstrøm (2010) highlights, the history of such spectacles uncover human's complex relationship with animals involving appreciation, instrumentalization, popular psychologies and politics. Beyond the ancient gladiatorial arena, nonhuman animals have also been present in the war theatre throughout history. Trained by humans to aid in military operations, weaponized, and often forgotten among the list of casualties (Nocella II et al., 2013; also see Schreier in this volume). Figuratively, the presence of nonhuman animals in other fields is thematically related. In the sports field, nonhuman animals become mascots, anthropomorphized and marketed for their perceived qualities. In many cases, live animals themselves are held in captivity by the teams and fans supposed to honour them (Atkinson & Nothen, 2016). Within the world of martial arts, nonhuman animals have for a long time been evoked and embodied in disciplinary forms, most notably in the ancient Chinese Martial Arts and its 'animal imitative systems', which continue to influence present day practices in the form of 'animal exercises' (Henning, 2001). Taking these different instances into account, it is possible to make the case that whether literally or figuratively, popular culture influences and is influenced by atemporal human-nonhuman entanglements. As such and considering the CAS project of animal liberation, it is important to expand our frame of reference when it comes to popular media in a globalised world where such entanglements are further spun through trans-national media markets and consumption cultures.

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