

Animals and/or Humans. Ethnography and Mediation of ‘Glocal’ Conflicts in the Carresi of Southern Molise (Italy)

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Abstract The paper focuses around a particular legal controversy between a ceremonial system in a South-Central area of Italy, including oxen charts races with horses associated to the ritual competitions and animal rights movements’ issues about suspected violence against animals involved in these ceremonials. Ethnographers have been deeply involved in this dispute resolution as experts on community practices and knowledge as well as other scholars in veterinary and animal genetics. The focus of the quarrel has been the ambivalence between local and ‘global hierarchies of value’.

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1 Animal Studies and Multispecies Ethnography

Many scholars in anthropology have recognized that animals, and the relationship maintained with them by the cultures and groups we study, offer an excellent means of understanding some of the most central aspects of these groups’ cultural dynamics (Pitt-Rivers 1954; Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1953; Leach 2007; Lévi-Strauss 1962a, 1962b; Douglas 1966; Harris 1974, 1979; Bateson 1972, 1979; Ingold 2000), especially when the populations in question are hunters and gatherers or rural pastoral groups (Botta, Padiglione 2005). Many have argued that human/animal relationships also represent a valuable lens for conducting across-the-board explorations of the urban and metropolitan cultures of late modernity (Singer 1975; Regan 1983; Mingley 1983; Noske 1997; Digard 2009). Other authors anticipatory move toward the ‘post-human’ dimension (Haraway 2003, 2008) that

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some critical scholars see as more respectful of habitats and biodiversity and more inclusive at a local and 'supra-local scale'.

There is also a highly interesting strand of philosophical reflection triggered by the work of Derrida (Vialardi 2016). On the basis of these insights, several authors have begun to posit "multispecies ethnography" as an emerging element of anthropological debate (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010). This emerging field has given rise to efforts to deconstruct conventional human/animal hierarchies and reflect on the alliances, symbiotic relationships, forms of mixing and creative aspects of these multi-faceted relationships. This body of work stems in large part from an anti-species rethinking of Deleuze and Guattari's *Milles Plateaux* (1987) mediated by a postmodern reinterpretation of Donna Haraway's species turn (2008) and the call to "become with" animals launched by Agamben (1998, 2002) and fruitfully taken up by other thinkers.

This approach is interesting in that it allows us to rethink anthropological research by engaging with its two fundamental dimensions – the physical and the cultural – and to productively re-consider the 'anthropology of life' so that the issues of domestication, anthropocentric hierarchies and the complex relationships between man, nature and other living beings are brought to interrogate research that touches on these kinds of relationships and the controversies that often characterise them in this moment of late modernity. This move clearly transcends the classical anthropological paradigm. Specifically, by proposing a critical analysis of practices such as hunting, domestication and animal husbandry as well as the human management of natural resources more generally, this approach urges us to be cautious in new ways and helps us engage with Gregory Bateson's pioneering suggestion of a "cybernetic framework for understanding human/animal interactions" (Bateson 1972).

New forms of genetic knowledge and theories about the origins and development of various animal species together with anti-specism, radical feminist and anti-racist thought have thus enriched a series of recent studies that succeed in addressing the issue of animal subjectivity in a powerful and effective way; this work proposes a focus on the protection and representation of animals as well as the equally important issue of non-human subjects' emotions and passions, an issue that is at the foundation of all 'discourses' about respecting and ensuring animal welfare.

Living with animals (the "living with" that is so central to Haraway's thinking) therefore takes on a wide variety of forms: it can be understood as "companion species" (Haraway 2003) or "unloved others" (Rose, van Dooren 2011), as a special kind of involvement with certain animals in particular (Riley 2006) or as "interpatience" (Candea 2010). Indeed, there are so many forms that we might join in arguing that "human nature is an interspecies relationship" (Haraway 2008, 19).

In light of the theoretical and legal disputes raised by animal rights

movements, a central element of this critical reconsideration is the issue of representation in what Rabinow (1992) has termed the “bio-social” and Foucault “bio-politics” (Helmreich 2009). There is also the equally radical question of ‘voice’ that Appadurai raises (1988, 17) in terms of “being spoken” and “speaking for”.

Reconsidered and reformulated in light of these contributions, anthropological thought ends up developing a new aim, neatly summarised by Kohn (2007, 5):

The goal in multispecies ethnography should not just be to give voice, agency or subjectivity to the non-human to recognize them as others, visible in their difference – but to force us to radically rethink these categories of our analysis as they pertain to all beings.

This approach calls for a hybrid methodology that involves deconstructing humankind’s constant activity of constructing our own objects in order to facilitate the development of more equal relationship with animals. Indeed, animals should no longer be understood as products of human social practice, but rather as autonomous subjects capable of interacting with human societies. In so doing, we can escape from visions of human-human and human/animal relationships as essentially characterized by an anthropocentric and science-oriented metanarrative, by a paradigm of domination that revolves around hierarchies, control and exploitation and fails to consider intersubjective exchanges or forms of cooperation (Balcombe 2009).

Drawing on extensive ethnographic research, we seek to avoid the many pitfalls present in this field in which the starring role of human actors is played out alongside a significant yet ambivalent role played by animals within a larger heritage-oriented framework that serves to cast this close human/animal relationship as habitual and basically ‘natural.’ At the same time, however, animal rights movements have voiced critiques and concerns about these practices, perceiving them as a threat to the wellbeing of animals and raising legal issues surrounding the protection of this fundamental right and the defence of animal subjectivity.

2 Towards an Archeology of Research on Ceremonies Involving Bovines

The approach modelled by Evans-Pritchard and Pitt-Rivers appears to have focused on the symbolic dimension of the human/animal relationship and the metaphorical significance that animals, and especially oxen, in their ethnographies, take on in diverse moments and elements of the collective lives of the populations they studied. However, this aspect converges and

interweaves with the functional role these categories of animals play in traditional societies as an indispensable assistance with subsistence activities (work, food production, clothing and coverings, etc.).

In relation to this basic division between oxen's functional and symbolic value in agro-pastoral societies in Africa and Asia as well as many other rural and pastoral societies in Mediterranean Europe (Duclos 1991; Spitilli 2011), Edmund Leach, in his essay "Anthropological aspects of language" (2007), identifies an interesting set of categories. For example, in terms of taboos and the way various communities organise their thinking about animal species, he finds that oxen are categorised as warm-blooded animals and sometimes (under specific conditions) as edible and domesticated. From this scheme, it appears that they end up in the category of livestock usually considered edible only when castrated (for instance, oxen are eaten whereas bulls are generally not) and grouped together with pigs and sheep on this basis.

In Leach's categorisation, this category of animal shares the most features with pets, animals living inside the domestic space that are not considered edible under any circumstances. Indeed, their defining feature is that the idea of eating them provokes the same disgust as the idea of abusing or eating human beings. They are thus close to 'ego' in terms of both interpersonal relations and symbolic register (for instance, in Leach's essay this category of close and highly domesticated animals comprises 'ego' - who the English anthropologist explicitly includes in his list - as well as dogs, cats, horses - although, interestingly, Leach includes a telling question mark next to this animal - and finally donkeys and goats). Leach's diagram appears to be useful for analysing the complex set of relations at play in the *Carresi* of southern Molise that constitutes the ethnographic basis for the observations on human/animal interactions, specifically men-oxen, that we present here.

In Leach's categorisation, the group of domesticated animals - in their dual role as pets and livestock - stands opposite the group of inanimate creatures, cold-blooded animals, ambiguous and aquatic creatures, game, non-edible wild animals and even zoo animals.

In the case of *Carresi*, the carting communities appear to categorise oxen somewhere between pets, animals with whom they maintain affectionate relationships and intense interactions, and livestock, with whom they maintain relationships that are highly familiar albeit limited to cooperation in agricultural and pastoral activities. These animals are considered edible only under certain circumstances, that is only if they have been castrated (Grasseni 2003). Leach also notes that many languages have a particularly large number of terms for indicating bovines - beginning with English, not to mention the languages of many African and Asian tribes whose lives revolves around herding. All these names indicate not only the sex, age, race, etc. of the animals but also nuances about the way they are used in

agro-pastoral activities as well as the affection-based human/animal relationships that also develop in farming. Indeed, this long list even includes the kind of personalised names – individual names – that are often seen in the carting sphere as well.

3 The Carresi Community of Practice

Preparations for the ritual race involve many local families throughout the year, eliciting interest, emotions and a range of activities including small-scale, creative entrepreneurial initiatives. Participants gather together with the animals and celebrate themselves on an annual basis by reaffirming the bond of involvement, cooperation and intimacy that ties humans, oxen and horses together around the foundational ceremonial act. Each group, with its individual and intimately specific cart, becomes a community unto itself beginning from and around the participants' shared knowledge about the practice of the feast (Lave, Wenger 1991).

By extending our ethnographic observation – only briefly mentioned here – beyond the specific moments of collective tradition, we were able to document the ways the communities involved in the Carresi maintained relationships of affection and constant care with their animals as well as a broader human/animal familiarity (going beyond oxen and horses) that children in these communities learn from a very young age.¹ Although these ceremonies are presented as and are in fact largely populated by men, this familiarity with the animal world symbolically extends to women and children as well, comprising these communities' entire system of meaning-making. At the same time however, on an everyday level the spaces used by men, in particular the stables, remain distinct and separate from the spaces managed and inhabited by women. In addition, the people who belong to these communities frequently extend the metaphors associated with the world of carting and with the habits and shapes of the animals to other meaning domains outside of the specific sphere of the Carresi. Humans engage in constant interactions with animals and unavoidably develop deep harmony and intimacy with the oxen and horses that are not limited to the moment of the race itself but rather unfold throughout the year in the life of the stables, in the course of their regular and continuous training sessions, and during more institutionalised trials.

¹ Although by now these communities are deeply modernised and de-ruralised, they continue to manage pets in a collective manner, such as the case of 'village dogs', that is more typical of rural societies than late modern ones. This practice, together with other elements, reveals aspects of ambivalence on the edge between 'traditional' life and new styles of social and collective life that are more in keeping with post-modern urban standards. See also Digard 2009.

Employing behavioural and relational frameworks based on human/animal relationship theories, many authors posit a relationship of engagement (Davis, Maurstad, Cowles 2008, 2013) characterised by intense emotions (for instance, the relationships between humans and pets in the domestic sphere, where the relationship is deeply personalised and affectionate) or “interpatience” (Candea 2010) (when interactions are frequent and intense yet characterised by cooperation for a specific purpose, not detached but involving less caring and anthropomorphisation of the animals involved). In light of the insights offered by recent research in animal studies, we would argue that the Carresi case involves both types of human/animal relationship. Furthermore, attentive observation reveals that the animals may return and respond to the human’s overtures, for instance by playing or by moving in response to certain calls, words, voices or gestures that are more familiar to them.

It is not easy to grasp this universe of differentiated relationships that are layered both over time and according to the type and intensity of relationship by carrying out a superficial observation of the carting performance as it manifests in the peak moments of the race days and subsequent religious procession. It is only by observing the various moments in which the human-oxen or rider-horse relationship is structured and consolidated that it is possible to fully understand the intense interaction required to engage in this competitive endeavour in pursuit of its reward, involving both ceremonial recognition and prestige in the social community.

In recent decades animal rights activists have asserted that “oxen are not born to run”, but in reality, since the traditional agricultural system came to an end, the oxen used in the Carresi races have been genetically selected and raised specifically for the purpose of running in the races. It is only if they turn out to be unsuitable that they are sent to be butchered or used in the more extended circuit of other traditional ceremonial practices, such as the procession of Larino, that uses oxen and cows for purposes other than racing. These oxen are a specific strain of the Podolica breed that is particularly physically lean and rangy, with joints and bones that facilitate the act of running;² indeed, it is known in the science of animal husbandry as one of the strains that more easily adapts to a specific environment and the various tasks it has been raised to perform in various periods.

2 According to various studies carried out since the mid-1900s, the Podolica line of bovines were brought to Italy from central Europe around the fifth century to then spread throughout the peninsula. This kind of bovine continued to be used and bred throughout the Italian peninsula thanks to a specific build that made it particularly well-suited to labour and possessed of a remarkable degree of adaptability. In the first decades of the 1900s, the system of animal husbandry began developing the various ‘races,’ bred for meat and milk production in the North, meat production and work in central Italy, and mainly work in the South. See the following for an overview of the development of different Podolica strains: Bettini 1962; Albertario 1941; Matassino 1983, 1996; Matassino, Ciani 2009.

Furthermore, these animals, chosen from among a population already selected and raised for this specific purpose, are trained and prepared for racing from an early age through a complex system of feeding, cleaning, hydration, grooming, walks, interval training and regular trials leading up to the actual races. These practices are effective in preparing the animals in terms of respiration and musculature and familiarising them with the route they will need to follow.

In short, there is a set of knowledge forms and expert practices (Ingold 2000; Grasseni 2009) aimed at ensuring the animals maintain a constant state of good health and well-being. At the same time, they regularly interact with and gain familiarity with men and horses (usually housed in the same stables) as well as the specific racing equipment, namely the carts, reins, shafts or poles and whips that are usually used to urge the animals on and, especially, direct them along the route. The humans and animals must get to know each other, interact harmoniously and be in excellent health in order to act as a single unit during the course of the race.

During the hectic competitive performance of the Carresi as well as the long months of preparing for and awaiting the main event, humans and animals essentially interact on three levels. Through physical contact (stroking, grooming, massages, feeding, hugs and even kisses, as mentioned above); through sight (careful examinations to ascertain the state of the animals' health and their 'moods', expert scrutiny to understand at a glance whether or not the animal suffers from lameness, disease or other health issues, intense 'sympathetic' exchanges) and, last but not least, the voice - as the carters say, all the animals are capable of recognising tone of voice, including degree of nervousness or calmness. In the Arbëreshë communities, the men often speak to the animals in Albanian because that is what the oxen became accustomed to over the months and years of taming and training. This is a register of familiar tones and words established over time during the various phases of interaction: selecting the animal, bringing it into the stable, accustoming it to the environment and other animals, gentling, clipping, familiarising it with the race track, informal training, interval training and the official races, all leading up to the moment of the actual race. In the same way, the children who live in more constant contact with life in the stables are accustomed to and familiarised with this communicational register from a young age as well, with a part of the stable set aside for them.

Generally speaking, despite the fact that most people in these towns engage in an urban and trans-local lifestyle, these communities display a familiarity with animals that is based on deep understanding and widespread proximity among humans, oxen and horses. The animals wander down the streets of the town, are decorated, walk through the common spaces of the community followed and celebrated by the local population, are blessed in front of the main church, and are observed and recorded in

every thing they do by countless private and professional or semiprofessional videocameras, thereby producing images that will be watched and re-watched throughout the year in every significant moment of collective life. All of this seems to generate absolute familiarity, a kind of true intimacy between humans and animals that one rarely sees in contemporary life, an intimacy based more on care than exploitation – as our ethnographic observation to date has found – that is powerfully shaped by the idea of cooperation among all the components of the ‘cart’ (oxen, horses, and the men and women who support them). This intimate relationship bears no resemblance to the reified and biased representations provided by certain animal rights activists’ intense media attacks; rather, it is characterised by a form of compassion and interaction that deserves to be more fully investigated and promoted in light of the most recent insights of animal studies and zoo-anthropology as a privileged laboratory for developing a new vision of this relationship.

4 The Carresi Legal Case

Although there is a deep solidarity and sense of collaboration and closeness between the people and animals involved in the ceremonial system within local communities, outside these communities animal rights organisations began to launch numerous attacks against the more competition-driven component of the Carresi as early as the late 1980s, claiming that the races involve possible instances of animal abuse and mistreatment. The people involved in these feasts often perceive animal rights groups’ attack and the subsequent intervention and censorship by public authorities (the police, Prosecutor’s Office, NAS, Carabinieri) as invasive and violent, especially in the hectic moments that precede or follow the competitions. During the *Carrese* of San Martino in Pensilis on 30 April 2014, a large group of police unexpectedly intervened during the frantic ritual phase of changing out the oxen and blocked the pairs of animals that had just been unchained in order to carry out on-the-spot tests to ensure that they had not been dosed with illegal drugs in any way, even though regular blood tests had been carried out on the oxen and horses listed by the various associations in the days immediately preceding the event. Faced with what appeared to be a veritable blitz, the men of the cart and numerous bystanders vigorously expressed their objections, accusing the police of mistreating people who were trying honestly and with devotion to preserve their traditions, instead of going after real criminals. This was a moment of extreme tension – talked about and discussed throughout the villages of the Carresi area – that clearly illustrated the clash between the newly consolidated sentiments of animal rights activists, the state-based system of law and order, and local tradition: a sort of emblematic synthesis of the ongoing conflict.

For their part, on several occasions public authorities spoke via their local representatives to insist that they had no intention of deconstructing or dismantling this tradition; rather, they claimed, they sought only to enforce compliance with the rules in a way that would allow everyone to fully and safely enjoy the celebrations, with no harm or detriment to the animals involved, as established by a law passed a few years before.³ A few days later, a similar situation also occurred in Ururi, where the Carrese was celebrated on 3 May. The municipal square, where the carts pulled up at the end of the race and the jubilant population could finally celebrate the success of the winners, was literally militarised. Everyone immediately noted and commented on this development with disapproval, highlighting that this made both the people involved in the Carresi associations as well as simple supporters feel like criminals. The overall state of tension and threat perceived at the local level, exacerbated by the local press, gradually undermined the stability and internal balance of the Carresi associations, somewhat weakening community ties. Especially in Ururi, the fact that the NAS tests on three carts' oxen and horses showed different results led to a dangerous rift between one of the associations – which claimed to have run “a clean race” – and the others which, on the basis of these results, had evidently continued to use illegal substances despite repeated warnings of random checks and the previous episodes that had occurred in San Martino. Furthermore, one of the associations raised objections about the start of the race, which was allegedly moved up and therefore should have been invalid.

While there had already been some signs of conflict and tension between these two spheres in 2014, the ethnographic research conducted in 2015 found, if possible, a field even more densely filled with significant events and the basis for important insights both theoretical and methodological. After an entire year of heated controversy surrounding the cart races in which the Region proposed a special law to protect these races by exempting them from strict compliance with the rules imposed by the Martini ministerial decree, in April 2015 the controversy reached a dra-

³ Police authorities made these statements on various public occasions and reiterated them informally, also during the local celebrations in 2014 in the face of the public unrest that had erupted around the episodes described above. In the meantime, some locally and regionally prominent political figures continued to reassert the importance of law and order and the carting associations' compliance with legal regulations as the only true solution for protecting and safeguarding the rituals, and invited these communities to regulate themselves in agreement with ASREM veterinarians and state institutions in order to ensure these ceremonies take place in accordance with current regulations. In this case as well, the 'dominant discourse' supported more severity in national and international regulatory frameworks in an effort to push the local festival communities in the same direction and convince them that this was the only possible way to protect the ceremonies that represent the core of local identity.

matic peak on 25 April (five days after the first Carrese celebration in San Martino in Pensilis) when the Public Prosecutor's Office of Larino issued a warrant to seize the stables of all three of the teams and their relative associations. The seizure of the stables cast three communities into frenzy and confusion and gave rise to a complex process that involved appeals to revoke and reconsider the proceedings, both of which were immediately rejected through a document of recusal. This recusal listed out the elements of the traditional race practices that would need to be changed in order to comply with national regulations and, more generally, adhere to requirements for protecting the welfare of the animals involved. In the place of the traditional races that were not carried out in any of the three municipalities, a number of activities took place between April and May, all very peaceful and civil. These included protests (torchlight processions, symbolic marches along the course of the race, etc.) as well as expressions of these communities' will to defend their ancient ceremonial practices. A local lawyer, formerly president of the regional bar, was tasked with supervising and supporting the drafting of new policy guidelines that would enable the Prosecutor to reconsider the seizure of the stables and allow the races to take place.

As anthropologists, we were brought in as experts (along with a veterinarian and livestock technician) and hence involved in the proceedings. Our technical report focused on both the heritage value of the traditions and the daily practices of caring for and training the oxen and horses involved, as well as ways of potentially resolving the thorniest issues of the case, associated with technical aspects, the terrain of the race track, shoeing and the use of prods. Throughout the proceedings, we also played provided consultation and mediation between the communities and the judicial agencies they were required to interact with (Ballacchino, Bindi 2015; Ballacchino, Bindi 2013/14). The proceedings were brought to a close and the stables subsequently released by the authorities on 22 December 2015, on the basis of the expert reports and new policy guidelines drafted by the Larino Prosecutor's Office. This entire process proved to be extremely interesting in two ways. First, this ethnography involved new ways of resolving conflict and mediating between national and international regulatory frameworks and the practices of local festive communities. Secondly, it offered an opportunity to reflect about the engagement that anthropologists inescapably end up practicing in relation to the heritage communities they work with in the context of efforts to safeguard and valorise these CH actors. Our reflection on this point is still ongoing and we plan to develop more complex considerations in the monograph we are preparing about the overall ethnographic research carried out in the four communities. Beforehand however, we plan to investigate the tangible ways that these communities are adapting and organising a result of the regulations agreed on with the Public Prosecutor in 2015 and any possible

reactions on the part of animal rights movements.

The three Carresi were celebrated again in 2016 and we have continued to monitor and track every stage of their development, identifying critical issues and debates as the Carresi groups sought to adapt to the new, shared regulatory framework, the way the races were actually run, the debates surrounding the work of the Unified Supervisory Commission established by the new regulations and the new issues that emerged following the results of the clinical tests and special audiovisual surveillance the police forces set up during the races.

However, we would also like to put forward an entirely new argument, noting how this case study not only illustrates the vitality and contemporaneity of controversies at the intersection of heritage processes and global hierarchies of value. At the same time, as mentioned above, the process of resolving this court case, with the direct involvement of anthropologists as expert witnesses for the Prosecutor's Office, and providing consultation and mediation with the claims raised by the carting communities, also raises a number of highly interesting questions. On one hand, there is the issue of ethnographers' engagement in the fields and the communities they work with and their grassroots participation in processes of both safeguarding and valorising the CH of heritage communities. These communities see ethnographers as key intermediaries between different levels of decision-making and governance, with all of the problematic implications that this naturally involves on both theoretical and methodological levels. Indeed, social scientists in these spheres are faced with a series of ethical dilemmas about the stance they ought to assume in the field, specifically the relationship of simultaneously studying and collaborating with these communities in safeguarding and valorising their heritage as well as process of preservation and self-documentation and, in some cases, in translating local discourses and practices into a language and rhetoric that can be understood outside the local context to enable dialogue with new sentiments about and representations of the human/animal relationship.

The case we have explored here, involving new regulatory frameworks,⁴ heritage claims that manifest and articulate on various levels (local, regional, national and supranational) and a powerful impact by the media that both represents and distorts the phenomena in question,⁵ shows how feasts involving animals represent one of the most heated and controver-

4 See the Ministerial decree "Ordinanza contingibile ed urgente che sostituisce l'ordinanza 21 luglio 2009 concernente la disciplina di manifestazioni popolari pubbliche o private nelle quali vengono impiegati equidi, al di fuori degli impianti e dei percorsi ufficialmente autorizzati" (11A12008) (Official Gazette, general series, no. 210, 9 September 2011).

5 Specifically, images of the feasts were used in the past to make police reports and launch criticisms of this ceremonial heritage or, on the other hand, to valorise and promote these practices.

sial sites of the clash between global hierarchies of value and HC that currently constitutes the dialectical terrain of all CH rhetoric and practices.

Indeed, animal welfare organisations view animals as a good that should be preserved and protected from traditional practices, which they consider backward and blind to the new, more reasonable and compassionate awareness of animal rights that is spreading on a global level (with all the ambivalences involved in this idea, as we have noted).

On the other side, the communities that have shared and replicated ritual races for centuries consider the oxen and horses a form of heritage and seek to defend their role as collaborators in the shared ritual goal of celebrating the town's patron saint and community bonds, thereby framing these animals within a broader concept of shared CH that must be defended and protected.

In view of the specific, complex ceremonial context only briefly mentioned here, southern Molise represents a privileged site that is 'good to think with' especially in relation to the life of contemporary humans alongside the world of animals and within their landscape, in terms of both rituals and the enactment of identity-producing, economic and touristic systems as well as processes that promote socialising within the community. As Clifford Geertz has noted, seeing heaven in a grain of sand is not a trick only poets can accomplish, and anthropologists, constantly navigating back and forth between the particular and the universal, can seek to explore global claims and demands for human and animal rights in a grain of sand, represented in this case by the Carresi. Perhaps this effort might lead to a useful deconstruction of misleading media rhetoric and a reflection on effective ways of thinking about intimate local values and cultural diversity, subjects that we believe deserve to be explored with greater meticulousness and scientific accuracy.

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