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The Human-Animal Construct: Social Perceptions as a Basis for Personhood in *Isle of Dogs*

Armed with the authority of a white lab coat and photographs of pet dogs, one man stands alone in a crowd of anti-dog protestors and challenges, “for a thousand years, these resilient animals have loved, served, and protected us. Now, in their time of greatest need, we forsake them again?” (00:05:31-00:05:38). This man, Professor Watanabe, addresses the populace of fictional Megasaki, Japan—a city in which the spread of canine disease has impelled the government to banish all potential carriers to a trash island, the titular Isle of Dogs. For the exiled dogs, the struggle to survive inhospitable conditions continues until Atari Kobayashi, the ward of Megasaki’s mayor, arrives to retrieve his beloved guard dog, Spots. In rapid succession, scientists, student activists, and a large cast of canines are dragged into the chaos of murder, political conspiracy, and a desperate plan to remind the people of Megasaki of their love for man’s best friend.

Wes Anderson’s stop-motion film *Isle of Dogs*—released in the United States in 2018—introduces itself as a heartwarming entry into the debate on animal ethics in the twenty-first century. A story told largely from the point of view of its canine characters—each dog fleshed out through Anderson’s signature style of intricate, uniquely individual character design—*Isle of Dogs* blurs the hierarchical boundaries traditionally imposed between humans and dogs. It takes little consideration to acknowledge that these boundaries are defined by species differences, separating humans and nonhumans with rigid exclusivity. As a result of these

boundaries, the possession and exploitation of animals can be justified in that they are not human, and therefore must not be subject to human rights, respect, or personhood. However, the film's ethical implications are not limited to its dispute against anthropocentric ethics; numerous film critics and viewers have censured *Isle of Dogs* for its exoticized, stereotyped treatment of Japanese characters. Scholarly conversations on *The Isle of Dogs* approach each contradicting act—granting personhood to dogs, stripping it from Japanese characters—as separate topics, rather than the interacting gears of one, flawed mechanism: the animal-human hierarchy, which encourages identification based on perceived division. Through its boldly individualistic humanization of dogs and its unintended dehumanization of Japanese characters, *Isle of Dogs* characterizes human-only personhood as a social construct, rather than a natural condition, and asserts the ethical necessity of socially redefining personhood through interspecies companionships, interactions, and shared experiences. That the film harmfully reflects real-world racial and ethnic prejudice in Western society, warning that humans have yet to create even a fully anthropocentric world, does not invalidate its assertions.

Emphasizing the humanlike individuality, free will, and kinship experienced by dogs, *Isle of Dogs* extends personhood beyond humanity and reveals the abusive unethicity inherent to a strict human-animal hierarchy. Traveling the Isle of Dogs in a tight-knit pack, the dogs Chief, Rex, King, Duke, and Boss are introduced as principal protagonists and drivers of the plot. For one, it is through their eyes that audiences explore the trash island, encounter its other inhabitants, and watch Atari Kobayashi pursue his quest. Furthermore, the film immediately establishes that “all barks—” referring to the canine method of communication “—have been rendered into English,” indicating that audiences not only follow these dogs, but also understand and relate to them directly, as fellow English-speaking creatures (00:02:31). However, the

personhood of these dogs cannot, and does not, depend exclusively upon their status as protagonists. Exercising unparalleled independence and individuality, each dog exhibits its own, humanly complex appearance, personality, and set of mannerisms. As a product of stop-motion animation, *Isle of Dogs* utilizes three-dimensional puppets to portray each character. Visible in figure 1, the dog puppets exist as separate, handmade pieces of art, showcasing unique detail, real texture (the “fur... of many of the dogs, was generated from alpaca and merino wool”), and a solid presence—often apparent in the strange rigidity of the puppets—that cel or computer-generated animation would struggle to replicate (Murphy).



Figure 1: (From left to right) Duke, Boss, Chief, Rex, and King (00:10:19).

Each dog exhibits remarkable physical individuality: Boss is compact, barrel-chested, and wearing a baseball uniform; Chief and Rex are lanky and athletic in appearance, with Chief’s fur showing detailed discoloration. Indeed, Director Wes Anderson’s style of filmmaking, described by scholar James MacDowell as “quirky,” celebrates “fastidious ‘artificiality’” and “sincere engagement” with the ironic or absurd (MacDowell 6). Deliberately artificial, carefully intricate, and distinctively portrayed with vivid coloring, body and face shape, and accessorization, these dogs reflect Anderson’s method of visually conveying the individual worth of each of his

characters. Through appearance alone, Chief and other dogs do not exist as mere animals, but instead become unique characters to viewers of the film.

Moreover, Anderson's quirky methods of humanization do not apply exclusively to physical appearance—the film sincerely and unapologetically crafts bold mannerisms and personalities for the dogs. Once again, the “fastidious” and “sincere” character design identified by MacDowell inspires “commitment [to characters] in spite of doubt,” including any doubt of personhood potentially caused by the perceived differences between dogs and humans (MacDowell 6). Demonstrating his own, individual personality, the taciturn Chief pointedly ignores Atari's presence in favor of digging holes; regardless, he gradually accepts the child into his pack. In contrast, Spots, Atari's pet, acts with stability, dignity, and a tendency to bond with and protect weaker dogs and humans alike. The portrayal of these behaviors also relies on the use of stop-motion puppets to create characters capable of emoting through convincingly tactile details. In figure 2, the personality variations between Chief and Spots become visibly apparent.





Figure 2: Compare the two images of Chief (top left and right) to that of Spots (bottom)

(00:53:13; 00:56:51; 00:19:27).

Staring down Atari and warning “I bite,” Chief’s instinctual wariness toward humans is compounded by his foreboding appearance: his fur appears matted and dark with filth, his eyes become too-wide, almost unhinged (00:53:13). Comparatively, Spots (pictured at Atari’s bedside, at their first meeting) maintains a brushed, pristine appearance—down to his neatly cured ears—that perfectly displays his reliable personality (00:19:27). Ultimately, Chief’s hostility gives way to acceptance of Atari, physically communicated by his cleaned fur and calm face; however, he retains his scars, ragged ears, dirty teeth, and other markers that distinguish him from Spots. In all cases, these dogs stand out, not as mindless animals, but as strikingly complex and dynamic people, with free will to behave and their own, subjective experiences of the world.

However, the limits of dogs’ entitlement to personality and individuality—in essence, personhood—are questioned by the existence of machine-dog hybrids in the film. Repeatedly, Chief’s pack comes into contact with rumors regarding a dangerous group of “cannibal-dogs.” Bionic, modified, riddled with wires—these dogs eventually reveal themselves as the victims of abusive scientific experimentation. Elaborating on the unjust victimization of animals, scholars Kanjilal and Vijayalakshmi identify anthropocentrism in “technoethics” as the reason why these

dogs suffered literal objectification “as resources for human exploitation” (Kanjilal & Vijayalakshmi 755). Although the dogs do confess to the apparently inhuman action of “resort[ing] to cannibalism,” they specify it occurred “on one occasion, as a desperate survival instinct,” and fret over the moral ambiguity of consuming a dog they describe as “already in a coma from starvation” (01:07:44-01:07:58). Additionally, they continue to exhibit personhood as they mourn, howling and shedding tears. Despite scientists’ attempts to mechanize these dogs, and in contrast to the wires and metal parts embedded within them, they have held onto their personalities and philosophical intelligence. Because of this, these dogs can visibly express a sense of deep pain mirrored by and comprehensible to human audiences (see figure 3).



Figure 3: Gondo (left) and Peppermint (right) exhibit scars from scientific experimentation.

Although difficult to notice in a static image, Peppermint’s eyes and face are wet with tears (01:07:33; 01:08:29).

Admirable altruism and non-savagery also characterize these modified dogs, as they accept Spots, Chief, and others into their ranks without question. These behaviors directly contrast a second type of machine-dog hybrid featured in the film. Despite containing technological features similar to the survivors of animal experimentation, Megasaki’s “Military Attack Pets,”

robots introduced by the government as replacements for the diseased dogs, display a total lack of thought or agency: they exist in an inert form until a press of a button transforms them into lethal weapons. Figure 4, a sequence of images depicting a fight between Chief's pack and the robots, elaborates on this transformation.



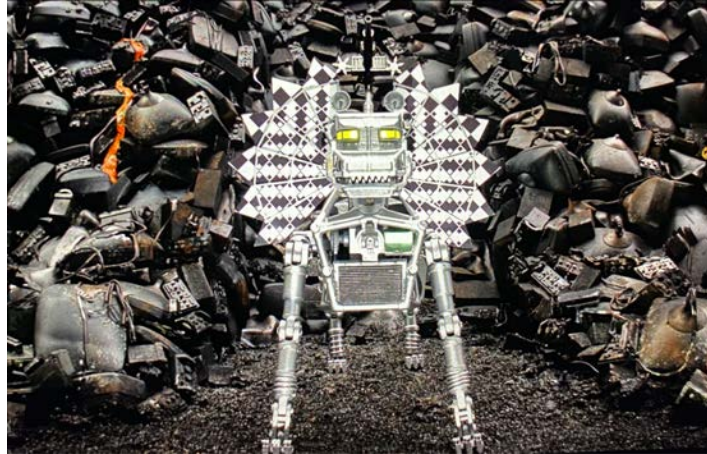


Figure 4: From top to bottom, Chief and the other dogs in his pack are attacked by Megasaki's Military Attack Pets (00:26:27, 00:27:27; 00:27:29; 00:28:07).

Many analyses of the animal-machine interactions in *Isle of Dogs*, such as the work of scholar Bianca Friedman, emphasize the human tendency to define personhood as a human property “in opposition to... non-rational beings” and objects “unable to feel emotions,” a category often understood to contain both animals and machines (Friedman 204-205). Indeed, with remote-controlled behavior, automated responses to the world, and easy disposability (which occurs after the eventual re-adoption of real dogs), the Military Attack Pets are, clearly, emotionless machines. However, the film’s modified dogs, behaving completely unlike robots and interacting boldly with the world, emphasize the moral and logical contradiction that arises when humans differentiate themselves from animals so obsessively that (as seen in philosopher René Descartes’ concept of the *bête machine*) they begin to equate true living beings to

machines. The film uses the grisly and troubling appearances of the modified dogs to condemn not only this corrupt and objectifying technoethical theory, but also what Friedman deems “socially... constructed [human] superiority” and the rejection of animal personhood used to justify it (Kanjilal & Vijayalakshmi; Friedman 217). Highlighting the fundamental difference between objects and living beings, *Isle of Dogs*’ modified dogs and Military Attack Pets assert the depravity of refusing to acknowledge a sentient kinship with, and extend personhood to, dogs.

As previously analyzed, this film advocates for the extension of personhood to dogs as unique, complex, emotional individuals; in addition to this, *Isle of Dogs* asserts a canine capacity for social interaction that rivals human communities with its lack of hatred or hostility. The dogs travel in close-knit packs and adhere to a number of loyalties, roles, and responsibilities: one pug, Oracle, acts as a sort of canine prophet; Boss clings to his former identity as a baseball mascot, dutifully wearing his team’s uniform; Spots, whether serving Atari or Spots’ own family, is a guard dog. In short, the societal diversity on the Isle of Dogs is comparable to that of human communities. Despite their differences, however, the dogs interact with this social structure quite casually, eschewing rigid division and prejudice in favor of a general sense of coexistence and concord. As shown in figure 5, Chief’s pack brawls with another group of dogs over food, but the dogs approach the fight with unusual civility and rationality— “before we attack each other... let’s just open the sack first and see what’s actually in it—” and honor the outcome without grudges or emotional baggage (00:10:18-00:10:24).



Figure 5: The dogs communicate before fighting over food (00:10:29).

Reflecting intricacies and complications recognizable as features of human society, this community of dogs surpasses humanity in its lack of hatred, belligerence, and warfare.

Socially, the canine characters of *Isle of Dogs* surpass human communities in terms of structure as well as emotion and rationality. As the film itself criticizes, humans construct societies around principles of hierarchism, rank, and power. In total contrast, the dogs present an extremely democratic society that values personal merit within the situation, rather than social status. For instance, there exists no single leader within Chief's pack, with all decisions being made through a simple voting system: "aye" or "nay" (00:27:21). When Spots transfers to Chief his prestigious tasks as the bodyguard of the mayoral ward, Spots observes "you're a stray," to which Chief replies, "so what?" (01:11:04-01:11:08). Ultimately, it becomes apparent that Chief's past as a street dog makes him no less worthy in either Spots' eyes or his own, as Chief readily accepts the responsibility "to serve and protect [Atari's] safety and welfare," with the only condition being a requirement of "courage, loyalty, and friendship" (01:17:30-01:17:35). Human characters can also receive acceptance into dogs' packs; Spots, then Chief, take on the duty of guiding and befriending Atari. Compared to human discrimination, the tolerance and

equality that characterize canine society do not simply resonate with human audiences, but resemble a superhuman ideal, through which the subjugation of dogs becomes unjustifiable. Resultantly, the film's portrayal of the human-dog dynamic suffers from the uncomfortable persistence of human mastery over pets. Chief's love interest, Nutmeg, concedes she "was bred as a show-dog," but brusquely clarifies "it wasn't my choice. I don't consider it my identity" (00:32:07-00:32:13). Chief expresses a similar frustration at humans disrespecting his independence—although his criticism of his pack for despairing "like a bunch of house-broken pets" initially seems to confute canine egalitarianism, his nervousness toward Atari reveals his cynicism as a fear of human control (00:13:13-00:13:17). However, Chief's defiant warnings of "I bite," or "don't ask me to fetch that stick," in response to Atari's demands ("Fetch-i!") evolve into Chief accepting Atari, on Spots' behalf, as his "direct master" (00:53:11; 00:53:13-00:55:20; 01:17:28-01:17:29). In light of Chief's unconstrained personality and incredible humanity, his sudden forbearance of a "master" seems quietly troubling, creating an emotional tension that underscores the ethical wrongness of treating dogs as possessions. The sociality of the film's dogs represents a shared experience between dogs and humans, while the dogs' uniquely civil, equal, and non-divisory interactions inspire human improvement: in both regards, the film dissolves traditional views of dogs as undeserving of full human companionship or personhood.

Through their individuality, their self-awareness as living non-objects, and their capacity for straightforward, benign social interaction—three defining characteristics held in common with humans—the canine characters of *Isle of Dogs* embody, and deserve the acknowledgment of, personhood. Regarding the condemnation of human-animal hierarchies, however, a crucial question remains: to what extent do the film's dogs represent and apply to dogs in the real world? Chief, Spots, and the others display compelling humanization within *Isle of Dogs*, but there

exists a risk, when human actors portray animals, of the film only promoting the humanization of fully acknowledged humans. Importantly, despite humanization, the film's dogs present a distinctly canine approach to their reality. Constantly, Chief expresses his wariness by biting, sniffing, and growling; he functions in a non-human, nose- and mouth-first manner. The "cannibal-dogs" grieve by howling. Packs of dogs wrestle over food. Even the emotional, intelligent awareness given to the dogs as main characters can be recognized in real dogs, as philosopher Tom Regan argues: "behind their eyes, [dogs] are complicated psychological creatures" whose "behavior resembles ours" (Regan 54, 55). There exists precedent for promoting an entangled, species-blurring familiarity between humans, human-acted dogs, and dogs—MacDowell's analysis of Anderson affirms the director himself recognizes this in his complex portrayal of dogs as full characters, like people. In addition, technoethical analysis (such as that of Kanjilal and Vijayalakshmi) emphasizes the immorality of defining animals as objects rather than people, corroborating the film and Regan's deontological insistences that humans "have a duty to intervene" on behalf of equal rights when animals suffer exploitation, experimentation, or other harm as "possessions" (Regan 61). Admittedly, *Isle of Dogs* initially appears to limit the extension of personhood to a benevolent master-pet dynamic, as supported by Regan's notions of human responsibility toward nonhumans; however, the emotional tension caused by this dynamic encourages a message even more post-human than Regan's. Scholar Nickie Charles defines this concept as the "displacement of the centrality of the human" in favor of acknowledging the efficacy with which animals can be "incorporated into social relations with humans" (Charles 137). Not only the intelligence and complexity of canine characters, but also the real-world tendency of people to "regard their [pet dogs] as members of their families," reinforce the film's message that social hierarchies can be smoothly replaced by true

companionships (Charles 136). Convincingly, *Isle of Dogs*' canine characters create a bridge through which perceptions of companionship and personhood may be extended from humans to dogs.

Defining personhood in terms of social companionships instead of hierarchies, *Isle of Dogs* generally creates positive connections between canines and humans—however, upon closer analysis, the personhood of dogs takes on a disturbing specification of white-personhood. Through its approach to language, its Orientalist visual aesthetic, and its moral demonization of Japan, the film pairs the humanization of dogs with the dehumanization of its large cast of Japanese characters, relegating them to the subordinate, objectifying stratum once occupied by dogs. Social hierarchies are maintained through difference, and one difference established immediately between Japanese and canine characters regards their command of language. As previously analyzed, “all barks have been rendered into English,” but Japanese characters “speak only in their native tongue” without subtitles, except when their words receive translation “via bi-lingual interpreter, foreign-exchange-student, or electronic device” (00:02:26-00:02:31). Put simply, when translation does occur, non-Japanese-speaking viewers never hear the exact words of Atari, Mayor Kobayashi, or other Japanese characters—only the versions of those words selected by white translators with American accents. Dogs also act as translators (note that every dog is voiced by a white actor), meaning that Western audiences view the most significant Japanese protagonist, Atari, through the lens of how Chief and his companions understand and interact with him. For instance, in his first encounter with Chief's pack, Atari presents the photograph of a dog, almost childishly repeating “Spots-u, Spots-u,” and Rex communicates to the audience, “we get the idea. You're looking for your lost dog, Spots” (00:16:17-00:16:25). Other uses of these one-word, pseudo-anglicized declarations (captioned as “fetch-i,”

“biscuit-o”), create a sense of rudimentary and uncultured speech that contradicts the usual depth and complexity expected of human communication (01:17:28-01:17:29; 00:55:20). The dehumanization and voicelessness caused by this Japanese-canine contrast makes itself painfully clear, through both language and demeanor, when Atari first meets Spots (see figure 6).

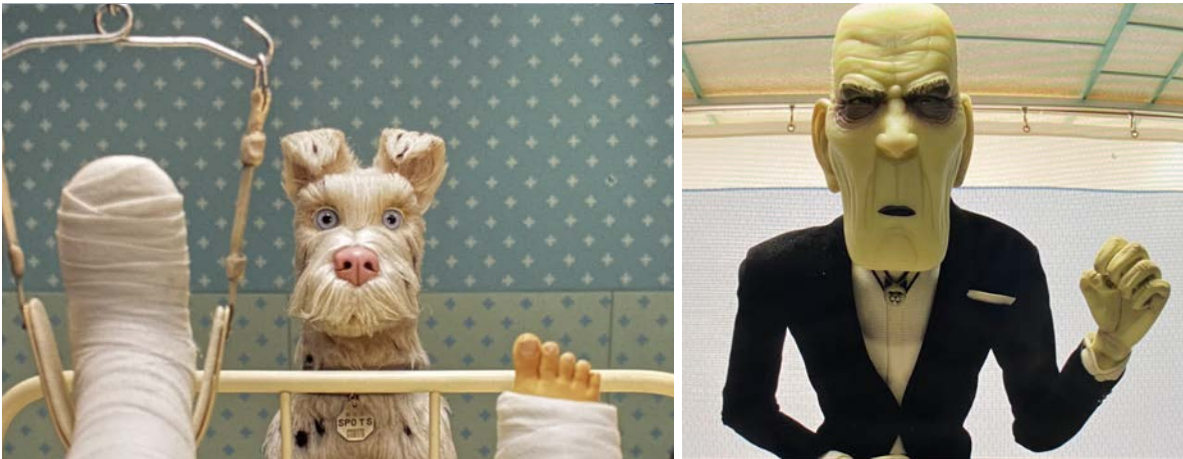


Figure 6: Compare Spots (on the left, as seen previously in figure 2) to Major Domo (00:19:27; 00:19:51).

Introducing himself, Spots formally and calmly explains, “I’ll be protecting your welfare and safety on an on-going basis;” seconds later, the Japanese Major Domo reacts to Atari petting Spots by screeching in untranslated Japanese, ultimately concluding, “bodyguard-o dog-o! Not-o pet-o!” (00:19:30-00:19:59). Contrasting the dog’s polite eloquence, Major Domo’s outburst seems simultaneously primitive and alien, and inhuman either way. Hunched shoulders, a sickly green pallor, and the uncanny, plastic appearance of the puppet’s skin magnify his otherness. Scholar Shilpa Davé remarks on these contrasting ethnic details in film, such as “language and word usage,” an “accent... an accessory or cultural characteristic,” or even, as the above images demonstrate, a set of disconcerting physical characteristics assigned to one race (Davé 142). According to Davé’s article, this “exaggeration” frequently stands in opposition to white culture—which is portrayed, like Spots, as relatively calm and dignified—allowing the white

West to become the “race neutral” norm (Davé 142-143). By granting English-speaking capabilities to dogs while linguistically highlighting Japanese characters as purely foreign, rather than familiar and human, the film equates dogs with whiteness, and establishes a barrier between white audiences and Japanese characters.

This division between white and Japanese statuses in the film progresses to the point of total otherization, as *Isle of Dogs* visually constructs an exoticized aesthetic around its Japanese characters. In light of the lack of human connection the film permits between Western audiences and Japanese main characters—even Atari and Mayor Kobayashi lack easily comprehensible voices—the background-oriented roles assigned to most Japanese characters take on significant ethical implications. Throughout the film, the mise en scène is intended to honor and stand as homage to Japan, especially in terms of aesthetic and artistic appeal. To accomplish this, as figure 7 shows, the setting frequently references Japanese stereotypes: sumo wrestling, sushi, onsen baths, taiko drums, mushroom clouds.





Figure 7: Sushi ingredients and onsen baths (top and bottom respectively), and painted backdrops (bottom), feature prominently in the film (00:48:39; 00:25:29).

“Artistic expressions borrowed from ukiyo-e, woodblock printing,” identified by scholar Soonkwan Hong, merge with Anderson’s “quirky” stop-motion designs—bold, youthfully colorful, and rigidly striking—to create scenes and settings easily recognizable to Western viewers, but that perpetuate the reductive, one-sided portrayals of Japan typical of Hollywood (Hong 3; MacDowell 1). In a number of scenes, such as in figure 8, Japanese characters and stereotypical props share color palettes, lighting, and on-screen positioning.

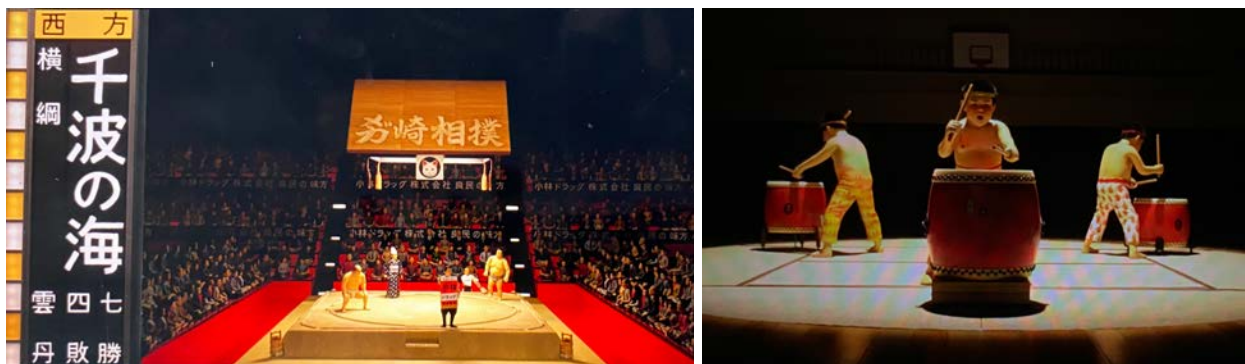


Figure 8: Sumo wrestlers (left) and taiko drummers (right) as props in the film (00:03:23; 00:16:43).

In conveying the anti-hierarchic message of sympathy despite difference, the peculiarity of stop-motion puppetry, tempered by Anderson’s detail-oriented and “sincere” approach to

personality, becomes especially relevant and meaningful (MacDowell 6). However, lacking distinct and complex personalities, the human puppets pictured above reflect only the optical, often uncanny half of Anderson's methods, causing many Japanese characters to visually blend into—and have much in common with—exotic props, set pieces, and objects. Once again, *Isle of Dogs* bases its characters around exaggerated “accessor[ies] or cultural characteristic[s]” or aesthetics, otherizing Japanese culture and objectifying Japanese characters for the sake of the visual satisfaction of Western audiences (Davé 143). Embodying Orientalist appropriation, *Isle of Dogs*' Japanese characters meet stereotype-driven expectations for what Hong refers to as “exotic Japan,” displaying an “outward incomprehensibility” that permits viewers to appreciate the film's foreign spectacle without the need for human recognition or empathy (Hong 4). The social recognition of similarity and kinship upon which personhood is based disappears. *Isle of Dogs* simultaneously dehumanizes these “props” and gives personhood to objectified, bionic dogs, molding a bizarre ethical contradiction: the logical resolution to this is that, like the objectification of dogs, the exoticization of humans and human cultures must be morally incorrect.

Even beyond assigning effective voicelessness and objectification to Japanese characters, the film portrays the populace of Megasaki as a tractable, deindividuated mass, complicit in the near-genocide of dogs—only the presence of a white savior succeeds in saving the citizens from their own, inhuman immorality. As the film progresses, the exile of Megasaki's dogs reveals itself as a convoluted political conspiracy motivated by Mayor Kobayashi's fanatical preference for cats over dogs. The government—working with Kobayashi Robotics and other corporations—manufactures canine diseases, profits from the distribution of Military Attack Pets, and assassinates scientists, all in order to banish and eventually exterminate dogs. Faced

with political corruption and murderous intent, the people of Megasaki, depicted as a mob-like audience to the Mayor's speeches, give their combined and bloodthirsty assent. In figure 9, headbands and posters enthusiastically read: "no to dog," or "students against dogs" (00:04:41-00:04:43).



Figure 9: A mob of anti-dog protestors in Megasaki (00:04:43).

Similar to the Japanese characters reduced to props, this mob also displays a use of stop-motion puppetry completely unlike the artistry used in designing the dogs. These Japanese characters share the dogs' physical absurdity and intricacy, but lack sincere individuality in animated personality and behavior: cruelty toward animals is the sole, defining characteristic of Megasaki's populace. It becomes difficult, even impossible, for Western audiences to empathize with these amoral, inhuman, Japanese puppets. A small opposition to the anti-dog craze does exist—for example, viewers hear the sorrowful voice of a white interpreter as she interprets the words of dissident Professor Watanabe: "for a thousand years, these resilient animals have loved, served, and protected us. Now, in their time of greatest need, we forsake them again? ... Whatever happened to man's best friend?" (00:05:31-00:06:06). The Japanese crowd responds by jeering and throwing shoes or other objects at Watanabe, with the stark dissimilarity between

their callousness and the interpreter’s righteous disapproval (undeniably derived from Watanabe’s, but most Western viewers must prioritize and take cues from her translations) further establishing the image of Japanese “barbarism” and inhumanity (Hong 4). As Kobayashi’s cruel scheme progresses, the ethical crisis experienced by the people of Megasaki is not solved by one of their own, but by foreigners; the most obvious example, Tracy Walker, is a white, American, activist foreign exchange student. Fitting MacDowell’s analysis of Wes Anderson’s directorial styles—just as the canine characters managed—Walker is bold, blunt, temperamental, quirky, and rounded off by the dramatic blonde afro pictured in figure 10.



Figure 10: Tracy Walker leads her classmates in a protest (00:44:50).

Introducing herself, she claims, “I speak my mind, and sometimes that ruffles some feathers,” then proceeds to express her hatred for Kobayashi’s cruelty (00:36:37-00:36:40). *Isle of Dogs* treats her absurd character with sincerity, even celebration, permitting her unique expressions and making no jokes at her expense. Her self-proclaimed purpose is to rescue not only the banished dogs, but also the Japanese citizenry from its “gullible” and “brainwashed” state (00:36:52-00:36:53). The only white student in her class, Walker rallies her Japanese peers to rebellion, is the only person in Megasaki intelligent enough to uncover Kobayashi’s plot, and acts as a pro-animal moral compass; after Watanabe’s assassination, Walker is responsible for

re-motivating his inconsolable partner, who appears too fragile to recover on her own terms. It must be asked of *Isle of Dogs*, as a film that intends to honor Japan, why Walker, and not one of her Japanese classmates, is given singular status as a leader and hero. In response to this question, Hong has noted, in agreement with numerous critics, that “it is almost impossible to ignore that [Walker’s] presence symbolizes prototypical American heroism” (Hong 2). Crucially, Tracy Walker is not the sole white savior of *Isle of Dogs*. The canine protagonists themselves—all permitted English speech, played by white characters, and given ethnically-exclusive personhood—must be acknowledged as white heroes in their own right, upon whom the Japanese depend for moral salvation. In essence, it is crucial to acknowledge the troubling fact that individuality, heroism, and white personhood are attributed to dogs, while the Japanese—portrayed as unrecognizable to Western audiences—suffer dehumanization.

Isle of Dogs elevates and extends personhood to dogs as a matter of ethical benevolence and righteousness—that the film only manages to do so in contrast to and at the expense of Japanese humanity seems to indicate not racist intent, but an accidental reflection of the insidious persistence of human hierarchism. As previously discussed, the human-animal hierarchy is a social construct (which, if ever used to justify the subordination of Asian humans, cannot claim biological legitimacy) utilized to define identities through differences and binary oppositions. According to Hong, as long as this “socio-politico-cultural practice” of “othering... to claim one’s identity” remains socially acceptable, it will continue encouraging humans to assign personhood selectively, sometimes excluding dogs and nonhuman animals, and sometimes excluding other races or communities of humans (Hong 1). *Isle of Dogs* becomes an astonishing example of the prejudice and assumed superiority that result when differentiation is the norm. Delivering the (eventually thwarted) order to exterminate all dogs on the trash island, Mayor

Kobayashi states, “the time has come to put the violent, intimidating, unsanitary bad-dogs of Trash Island humanely to sleep. For their own good; and also ours” (01:21:07-01:21:13). In a bout of dramatic irony, it seems abundantly clear that descriptors such as “violent” and “intimidating” apply not to the sympathetically portrayed dogs, but to the Japanese characters, corrupt and complicit. Subsequently, the system of poison gas aimed at the dogs is hacked, redirected, and utilized to put to sleep the Japanese enforcers guarding the dogs—this scene, portraying the murder of humans, presents itself as unquestionably preferable to the gassing of dogs. That it requires thought and a step back to notice the true cruelty of this scene stands as a testament to the efficacy with which *Isle of Dogs* strips the Japanese of their personhood, reducing them to mere props, unworthy of life. It generates an argument, furthermore, that dogs, specifically white-coded dogs, deserve personhood, but that the empty space once occupied by dogs must be filled in order to support a sense of superiority; resultantly, total egalitarianism appears impossible, and the abuse of living beings continues. While *Isle of Dogs* intends to dismantle human-animal hierarchies as the boundaries of personhood, replacing separation with kinship and empathy, the film ultimately reflects and perpetuates hierarchism.

A formidable message about the flaws of anthropocentrism and the harm caused by hierarchic perceptions of animal rights, *Isle of Dogs* challenges viewers to ask themselves sincerely, “whatever happened to man’s best friend?” (01:26:02-01:26:03). If personhood is understood as a sense of shared, human experience, mutual self-awareness, and capacity for companionship—or equal footing in the world—the film’s dogs exist as nonhuman people, equal or even superior to human characters. *Isle of Dogs* argues that a dog can be a person, if we only allow it. In troubling contradiction, however, the elevation of dogs is accompanied by the dehumanization of Japanese characters, who fill the subordinate space once occupied by dogs,

thus maintaining social hierarchies. In other words, the film pleads for the dissolution of rigid, speciesist boundaries around the category of personhood, but seems to forget that conventional understandings of personhood do not encompass all humans, much less dogs and other living beings. *Isle of Dogs* reflects a real world that lacks even anthropocentric inclusivity, much less the preparedness to expand the boundaries of personhood beyond species. Regardless, for as long as hierarchies remain the norm for human understanding and self-identification, justification will exist for the exploitation or abuse of living beings; therefore, the reorganization of these constructs is an ethical necessity. The film implies this can occur—between humans, and subsequently between man and man’s best friend—by acknowledging kinship, companionship, and shared life experience between different races, cultures, ethnicities, and species. As explorations of these ethical possibilities continue, it will become necessary to look beyond the human-dog relationships for which some traditions of friendship already exist: from Kobayashi’s cats to the maggots in the food the dogs eat, every species must be re-evaluated through a lens of living similarity, not anthropocentrism. More immediately relevant, *Isle of Dogs* shows evidence of, but does not suggest solutions for racism, cultural appropriation, and other prejudice in media. Relevant moral conversations will need to occur on a much larger scale than an analysis of *Isle of Dogs* can provide—even so, *Isle of Dogs* remains an intriguing and meaningful entry into these debates.

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