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## Critical terms for animal studies [Book review]

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***Critical Terms for Animal Studies***, edited by Lori Gruen, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018, 472 pp., \$32.50 (paperback), ISBN 9780226355429

“Critical terms” books are a distinctive genre. If this volume is representative, they are not typical edited collections; *Critical Terms for Animal Studies* is not a venue for original research. Though arranged in alphabetical order, this volume is not a dictionary or an encyclopaedia; it aims neither for neutrality nor completeness. Nor is it a handbook: for the most part, it is not introductory, and does not aim primarily to review relevant literature.

A comparison could be made, perhaps, with a book of essays on methodology. Like a methodological text, this feels like a guide for the advanced student or established scholar – perhaps the scholar wishing to push her animal-focussed work out of her own discipline and into the interdisciplinary world of animal studies (AS). Though I can envision many chapters on undergraduate reading lists, this is not a book for beginners.

Gruen establishes AS’s ‘critical terms’ as ‘tools to help solve the conceptual problems’ of AS: ‘[T]hey provide a framework for helping us think more methodically about animals as subjects’, and ‘are resources for analyzing our relationships with other animals’ (p.12). Thus, there are not chapters called ‘Dogs’, ‘Zoos’, or ‘Animals in Literature’. Instead, among the 29 contributions, there are excellent chapters on ‘Biopolitics’ (Dinesh Wadiwel), ‘Sanctuary’ (Timothy Pachirat), and ‘Postcolonial’ (Maneesha Deckha). Authors were encouraged to bring their ‘own distinctive voices’ to their chapters – and some (a real *Who’s Who* of AS) have very distinctive voices. As a result, with a few exceptions, the chapters read like neither (typical) introductions nor simple how-tos.

This makes for some very compelling reading. In ‘Abolition’, Claire Jean Kim reflects upon comparisons between the abolition of animal exploitation and the abolition of human slavery. In ‘Ethics’, Alice Cray contrasts the traditional face of animal ethics (among others, Peter Singer) with a non-traditional face (among others, Cora Diamond), producing an introduction to animal ethics unlike any I have read before. These chapters could not easily be written by anyone else; their inclusion indicates deliberate – effective – editorial choices. They are undoubtedly worth reading, but they may leave heads spinning if readers seek simple outlines.

In an interdisciplinary volume of this length, there are always going to be some contributions that connect with individual readers more than others. I found Kari Weil’s chapter on ‘Difference’ unclear, and noted (what looked like) a textbook case of denying the antecedent (a

formal fallacy) in Alexandra Horowitz's 'Behavior' (p.69). Readers are welcome to dismiss these concerns as the anxieties of an analytic philosopher: Derridean literary theory does not come easily, while valid argumentation is a fixation.

My concerns about Eduardo Kohn's 'Life' go deeper. On Kohn's second page, we are told that we 'can think of a wing as a growing thought about the world'. Wings, apparently, 'are an idea of [air] that has helped birds learn something about what air is' (p.211), an idea "to be interpreted by a future bird as that future bird builds its body" (p.215). Things do not get easier. Kohn is soon asserting that plants have 'minds' and are 'perhaps persons' (p.215), and, seeking to be 'provocative', that 'life creates not only kinds, but also souls, spirits, and even gods' (p.217). Maybe Kohn is doing something that escaped me, or perhaps understanding this chapter requires familiarity with his other work. However, on first reading, his ideas about 'sylvan thinking' (p.220) sound closer to the claims found in those 'spiritual' books shelved next to tarot decks than to the scholarly work in the rest of the volume. At the very least, Kohn could have done more to separate his approach from pseudoscience and mysticism. This is a particular responsibility in a book like this; critics would no doubt love the opportunity to dismiss AS as unscientific.

Gruen resists the temptation to narrowly define animal studies, but an image of what the discipline is (or could be) emerges from the pages. This book presents animal studies as strongly grounded in philosophy (including ethics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of biology in the analytic tradition, along with phenomenology, post-structuralism, and literary theory in the continental tradition) and the biological sciences. Both Thom van Dooren's chapter on 'Extinction' and Harriet Ritvo's chapter on 'Species' are illustrative of this: they are very strong, resting firmly on the science while addressing conceptual questions with philosophical acuity.

Perhaps it is appropriate to push into biology and philosophy to understand 'critical terms', even while those critical terms can be employed meaningfully and effectively by those in other disciplines. The idea of animal studies as interdisciplinary is evident throughout. Sometimes, this presents challenges. 'Representation', for example, means very different things to those in different disciplines, as explored by Bob McKay. 'Rationality' is another term used in quite different ways; Christine Korsgaard's philosophical approach in this volume might not resonate with all readers. It is a chapter, to return to Gruen's words, very much in Korsgaard's distinctive voice.

One of the big questions about animal studies is its relationship to animal activism. This question is addressed in, among other chapters, Gruen's introduction and Annie Potts and Philip Armstrong's 'Vegan'. For a reader new to AS, this volume would give the impression that AS is very 'pro-animal'. This is a book closer to the engaged, activist, 'critical' end of AS than the more

detached or politically neutral end. But the AS that emerges is not simply engaged in anti-speciesism, but feminism, anti-racism, and liberatory politics more broadly.

I found some chapters difficult, and some provocative but, crucially, I found several very useful. This is an exciting book, filled with original, interesting, and valuable contributions. As a whole, the volume presents AS as interdisciplinary, but grounded in philosophy and biology; practical and political, but not concerned ‘merely’ with animals. This vision should be embraced.

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