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## **Thinking Otherwise about Animals**

**Nik Taylor and Tania Signal (Eds.), *Theorizing Animals: Re-thinking Humanimal Relations*. Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, 2011. 293 pp. \$121.00.**

As I write this review, the need to “re-think humanimal relations” seems to be staring me in the face. On one side of my computer monitor sits a stack of books with animal-studies titles; on the other rests a stray cat I am attempting to rehome. In a community with a significant stray and feral cat problem and a recently closed animal shelter, I felt strangely exhilarated to cross paths with a cat I could unambiguously help. Young, cute, and gregarious, he seemed, in the rescuer’s lingo, “highly adoptable.” But his positive result on an FIV test has complicated matters. Unwilling to have him destroyed or re-release him into the free-roaming population, I am left contemplating the ethical ambiguities of interspecies life as I post fliers with endearing photos undercut by that loaded trio of letters. Why save this cat when so many of his more adoptable brethren remain homeless? At what point is his confinement in my spare room (away from my own disgruntled cats) an unacceptable trade-off for a future I may not be able to secure? And even if I succeed in finding that elusive “good home,” what of the animals whose suffering produces the commercial pet food he would almost certainly be fed? Can I justify my commitment to *this* animal as anything more than an attempt to avoid dirtying my hands with the messy consequences of companion-species entanglements?

It is with such questions in mind that I approached *Theorizing Animals*, the 11<sup>th</sup> volume in Brill’s Human-Animal Studies series. The purpose of this volume, according to series editor Kenneth Shapiro of the Animals and Society Institute, is to tackle “one of the important challenges facing the emerging field of Human-Animal Studies: the development of theory” (ix). In pursuit of this goal, editors Nik Taylor and Tania Signal have compiled ten chapters from contributors representing a range of social science and humanities disciplines (although the social scientists outnumber the humanities contributors by an approximately two-to-one margin). The result is a wide-ranging and useful, if somewhat uneven, volume that productively highlights some of the central tensions in the vibrant and polymorphous field of human-animal studies—in particular, the relationship between theory and practice and the related friction between posthumanist and liberationist/abolitionist approaches. Despite these tensions, “the imperative that theory be coupled to action” echoes throughout the collection, from

Lynda Birke's preface and Taylor's introduction to Jonathan Balcombe's concluding remarks (286).

*Theorizing Animals* is divided into four parts. Part One brings sociological and philosophical perspectives to bear on the "meta-theoretical question" embedded in its title, "Knotty Problems: To Theorize or Not?" (ix). Peter Beatson undertakes the daunting task of "contribut[ing] clarity and order to the myriad forms that human-animal interactions can take, to the wide diversity of academic disciplines involved in the study of those interactions, and to the many sites where active intervention on behalf of abused animals occurs" (22). To this end, he maps seven overlapping spheres that surround and inflect all human/animal relations: nature, demography, economy, politics, community, welfare, and culture. The result is not a theory per se but a "heuristic check list" to aid theorists in recognizing the complex and "mutually determine[d]" forces at play in all cross-species entanglements (22). Lisa Kemmerer makes the case against theory, pointing to humans' "track record" of generating theories about human and nonhuman "others" that serve only to legitimize oppression (74). Convinced that theory is a "luxury of the elite" that inevitably enshrines our anthropocentric worldview, she urges her readers to "quit talking and writing" and instead turn our attention to "the critical task of animal liberation" (82).

I found this section to be the most disappointing of the four because the authors' near-exclusive focus on animal victimhood precludes serious consideration of nonhuman agency. Certainly, as Beatson observes, "Human domination of animals is the most deeply entrenched and widespread form of oppression and exploitation" (51). Yet despite his insistence on the "mutual determination" of human and nonhuman lives, his view of culture as an exclusively human "invent[ion]" (a claim Balcombe refutes with evidence from his own discipline of ethology) limits Beatson to theorizing animal agency as a mere byproduct of human endeavors: "only through becoming the objects of human conscious activity" do animals play a role in determining the shape of cultures that remain fundamentally human (23-24). Similarly, Kemmerer's insistence that we never theorize about animals except by attempting to "see ourselves in [their] reflective eyes" leaves little room for recognizing agency in the countless nonhuman beings who are radically and compellingly *unlike* us (82). Her oversimplification of human/animal relations—coupled with her reliance on sources of the sort frowned upon even in undergraduate work—left me disappointed precisely *because* I share her frustration with some animal studies scholars' failure (or refusal) to act in ways that reflect their ostensibly posthumanist convictions. Ironically, her chapter left me convinced that, without necessarily equating posthumanism with veganism, we need

theory to keep us honest as we strive to become more just in our relations with other animals.

Happily, the remaining chapters offer more satisfying considerations of interspecies agency (and implicitly illustrate the useful aspects of Beatson's model). Part Two, "Animals and Modernity," opens with Mary Murray's critique of the erasure of nonhuman agency from Marxist accounts of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. She argues that the "speciesist social relationships" that underwrite modern agribusiness and other animal enterprises "have actually been *constitutive* of modern capitalism, rather than simply an effect of capitalism" (88). In Murray's formulation, exploited animals, though dismissed by Marxist theory as mere "instruments of production," come to resemble the proletariat *par excellence* (103). Claire Molloy analyzes the social and cultural conditions surrounding the UK's Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 as a potent manifestation of the construction and management of risk within reflexive modernity (110). She maps the constellation of "public anxieties" that has informed the cultural construction of "dangerous dogs" since the 1970s, including "discourses of antisocial behavior, masculinity, violence, the erosion of national identity, social responsibility and drug culture" (107). In particular, she traces the legal and social disenfranchisement of pit bulls and pit bull owners by a society eager to reaffirm "hierarchical divisions" within and between species (127). Gavin Kendall likewise addresses the management of animal bodies within rationalized modernity, yet he proposes that the view of modernity as marked by a "draining of the 'heat' from our relationships with animals" is only part of the story (136). Companion species relationships, he notes, have in some ways become "hotter," with pets "mov[ing] from the outside kennel into the house" (136). Moreover, the growing popularity of whale watching and other forms of ecotourism signal a persistent desire and capacity for "hot" encounters, reminding us "that the coldness of rationalization was always somewhat warmed by tradition and ritual" (144).

Part Three, "Animal Performers," offers two approaches to conceptualizing such encounters. Gregory S. Szarycz applies theories of performance and performativity to animal performances. While acknowledging that such acts are human-scripted and thus reflect human assumptions about animals, he notes that the concept of "the performative" destabilizes "distinction[s] between appearances and facts, surfaces and depths, illusions and substances," making it difficult to dismiss animal performers as mere props or proxies (153). Discussing performances ranging from the highly scripted movements of Lipizzaner Stallions to the "unscripted behaviors" that attract whale-

watchers, Szarycz concludes that “the most important factor” in animal performances is their capacity to underscore nonhuman agency: “In performance, animals reveal something we did not know of them” (169, 171). Philip Armstrong reaches similar conclusions in his examination of the ever-generative subject of the animal gaze. Drawing a parallel between Derrida’s famous encounter with the cat and his own unease while gazing at a tiger in London’s Regent’s Park Zoo, he proposes that such encounters problematize John Berger’s oft-cited theory of the disappearance of “real” animals in modernity. Tracing a history of the animal gaze beginning with ancient accounts of its “physical” and even prehensile powers, he points to 17<sup>th</sup>-century geometrical theories of vision as a turning point whereby “visual agency” shifted to humans, supporting Berger’s thesis (178, 182). However, the renewed fascination with the animal gaze in postmodern literature and in ethological studies that position (or rather expose) the human observer within “the visual field” reveals its power to undercut the primacy of the human gaze and to challenge us “to learn from animals as well as about them” (196-197).

The contributors to Part Four, “Forward Thinking,” test the potential of actor-network theory (ANT) to help us think otherwise about our interactions with nonhuman animals. Nik Taylor takes her own discipline of sociology to task for restricting its understanding of “the social” to “the human” (205). Sociology, she argues, cannot adequately address “the animal question” until it radically rethinks “the social question” (204, 203). To this end, she presents an admirably lucid overview of ANT as a promising alternative to anthropocentric social theory. Acknowledging that “ANT is an analytical approach, not a moral one”—a fact that is “not unproblematic for human-animal scholars”—she nevertheless views ANT’s abandonment of hierarchical thinking as “a starting point for the generation of knowledge which aims to emancipate animals” (215-216). While a discussion of “[h]ow this emancipation might look” might be too much to ask (and Taylor brackets it as “beyond the scope” of her chapter), her analysis, like Kemmerer’s, left me with doubts about whether the goal of emancipation is compatible with a properly posthumanist understanding of humanimal relations (215). Without discounting the very real and terrible suffering to which humans routinely subject other animals, if we are all part of a vast, entangled network, what are they to be emancipated from?

The remaining chapters suggest alternatives to the well-meaning but perhaps simplistic rhetoric of liberation by exploring two dramatically different modes of be(com)ing with other animals. Kirrilly Thompson examines “the transformative and generative potential of human-horse riding relationships” through the lens of “the centaur

metaphor" (222). She contrasts two forms of the rider-horse relationship in the Spanish bullfight to show how riding methods and technologies can both enhance and impair the relationship's "inherent centaurability" (221). While Thompson acknowledges that "it is the rider who is ultimately the instigator of the riding relationship," she maintains that approaches and equipment that foster "mutual attunement" enable the rider-horse relation to become more than the sum of its relators (230, 243). Eva Hayward uses her own response to a jellyfish exhibit at the Monterey Bay Aquarium to illustrate how "aquarium-goers [might be] shaped and reshaped by the immersive space of the displays, the movements and corporealities of the non-humans, and the architecture of animal capitalisms" (259). Building on Donna Haraway's trope of diffraction and Karen Barad's related theory of intra-action, she coins the term "ciliated sense" to describe the experience of "sensually cohabit[ing] with illuminated jellies," sensing with and through these invertebrates via the display apparatus (274, 267). While Hayward acknowledges the jellies' captivity, she insists that "there needs to be some recognition of [their] participation in worldhood" (275). By underscoring the jellies' agency rather than their victimhood, she intimates that any theorizing about our ethical relations with nonhuman animals must begin by acknowledging the mutually constitutive effects of our material interactions.

Through such contributions, *Theorizing Animals* makes good on its promise to serve not just as "an academic exercise" but as "the beginning of a prescription for change" (17). Its daunting price tag means that this paperback volume is best suited for academic library collections. This is unfortunate because it runs counter to the spirit of the editors' laudable aim of bridging the gap between theory and activism/advocacy—or, in the respective words of Birke and Balcombe, between the "ivory towers" into which "nonhuman animals are (slowly) creeping" and the "'real world' environments...where we may wonder if people are getting the message" (xvii, 286). Nevertheless, this is a useful and accessible collection that will be of interest to seasoned human-animal studies scholars and can also serve to introduce relative newcomers to the field.