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Beyond Considerability

Carol Freeman, Elizabeth Leane, and Yvette Watt, eds. *Considering Animals: Contemporary Studies in Human-Animal Relations*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. xvi +236 pp. \$64.95 hb.

On the cover of this wide-ranging and thought-provoking collection of essays is an image — courtesy of the artist and co-editor, Yvett Wa — depicting the backs of a series of toy animals who look at, and apparently consider, a display of images that includes a diagram of human and animal brains, a photo of two caged Tasmanian tigers, and a painted, still life of raw beef. It is an image that aptly illustrates a major concern of this collection — what would other animals think of what we do to them and how must they feel about us when their safety and their lives appear to lie in our hands, whether directly by what we do to them, or indirectly because of what we do to the environment and their habitats. Images affect us, as does scholarship more generally, even if, as some of the essays suggest, we humans are often adept at avoiding or manipulating their truths. The hope of these essays is that research in animal studies and advocacy for animals can work together and it is addressed especially to those who share that concern.

Divided into three sections, the collection's first section, "Images," offers analyses of penguin films, Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, photos of sacrificial bulls, and representations of possums (regarded as cute natives in Australia, but vermin immigrants in New Zealand, as Kay Milton discusses in "Possum Magic, Possum Menace: Wildlife Control and the Demonisation of Cuteness"). As her example indicates, these images depend on, even as they are sometimes undermined by, structures and circulations of narratives for their interpretation and effect. Our unconscious susceptibility to such narratives is also the focus in Undine Selbach's "The Traumatic Effort to Understand: Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*," which insightfully points out that Timothy Treadwell's very desire to escape into nature, if not to become bear, was more a product of Western cultural narratives rather than a critique of it. Elizabeth Leane and Stephanie Pfenningwerth reveal the shared plot structures of such different works as *March of the Penguins*, *Happy Feet* and classic Disney cartoons. "Marching on Thin Ice: The Politics of Penguin Films" argues that, ironically, the documentary film turns out to be the least politically charged, because it represents the penguins as timeless creatures for whom climate change posits no threat. If, however, the negative effects of human intervention

are more in evidence in *Happy Feet*, sympathy for the penguins is shown to be garnered in this animated film by the way that they “dance like humans” (39).

If anthropomorphism can thus be strategic, it also carries the risks of anthropocentrism, as we find in many of the essays in the second section entitled, “Ethics.” Anthropocentrism is the focus in “‘Room on the Ark’?: The Symbolic Nature of U.S. Pet Evacuation Statutes for Nonhuman Animals,” in which Marsha Baum examines the dependent legal status of animals in the US and how “property-driven principles” (107) negatively affected their evacuation during such disasters as Katrina. In her essay entitled, “Making Animals Matter: Why the Art World Needs to Rethink the Representation of Animals,” Yvette Watt argues for the importance of representing animals as “individual, sentient and self-interested beings” in order to promote a concern for our relations with them. This strategic anthropomorphism appears to second Wendy Woodward’s suggestion that representations of named individuals are “far more effective in engaging the reading public” than reports of “animals as species” (53). But in her “Naming the Unspeakable: Representations of Animal Deaths in Some Recent Sought African Print Media” Woodward also provocatively shows how the images of “individual deaths” have differing strategic effects depending on the particular species and their use-value to humans — which is not quite the same as their property status (companion species, we can assume, would be different in this regard). Thus, in the case of two “food animals” — a photographed bull “sacrifice” and a staged chicken slaughter — their particular lives and deaths are read as exceptional, and so do little to change attitudes towards other, similar deaths, or towards slaughter more generally. On the other hand, the reports of David the baboon, killed after attempting to escape his troop in Cape Town, and Frida the lion cub killed in a canned hunt, attest to their individual suffering and to the ways they and their species more generally have become “sacrificial beings” and the victims of “unspeakable practices” that must not continue. Use value trumps empathy when it comes to changing our practices.

A different concern linking anthropomorphism and the representation of animals as individuals arises in many of the essays in the third section, entitled “Agency.” Philip Armstrong argues for the importance of finding new ways to think of agency and of history, in terms other than those that depend on the conscious intention of an autonomous individual. He opens his essay on “Cetaceans and Sentiment” with the statement that “History is moved by emotion, no less than by ideology or economics” (169). It is a statement he illustrates with moving accounts of the impact of the visits of Opo, a bottlenosed dolphin, to Opononi Beach in New Zealand, and how these visits

became an enduring part of the local culture, told and retold in songs, children's books, photo montages and on TV shows. Armstrong suggests that these stories became "emblems for radical transformations of popular cultural affect," preparing the way for new public displays of sentiment towards cetaceans that would become commonplace in the sixties with such programs as *Flipper*. Affect becomes agency in conflicting, if not counter-productive, ways in Lucy Davis's "Zones of Contagion: The Singapore Body Politic and the Body of the Street-Cat," an account of the SARS epidemic in Singapore and the way its "fears, economic uncertainty and shame ... are displaced onto the body of the cat" (183). Artfully interweaving these accounts with a first-person narrative of street-cat feeding in Singapore by a group of "cat-women," Davis reveals the thickly entangled relations and dependencies of sex, gender, race and species. With a similar regard for agency as relational and emerging out of "interactions" (166), Carol Freeman's essay, "Extinction, Representation, Agency: The Case of the Dodo," transforms the dodo from passive, historical object to a co-subject in order to consider what role it may have played in its own demise. Such attention to non-human animals as active agents in history prepares the final, provocatively titled essay by Tim Low, "When Nature is Not?" that wants to extend such agency to plants. He focuses on the savannah grasses that rose to dominance six to eight million years ago, and promoted the use of fire — "the most powerful tool at the disposal of early humans" (200) — because they were easily burned. Flammable vegetation thus played an active role in the discovery of fire, Low argues, by making fires easy to light (201). To be sure, it should not be denied that the shape of our landscapes as of our tools is the product of much more than human activity (or intention) alone. But I would caution that the extent to which playing a role and having agency are regarded as one and the same may also determine the extent to which humans accept or shirk responsibility for their part in environmental change.

In closing with Low, who is a biologist, and beginning with a forward by the evolutionary biologist, Mark Bekoff, the collection is bookended by the voice of science. It is a distinctly empathic voice, echoed in ethologist Jonathan Balcombe's interior essay on "Pleasure's Moral Worth," and thus has a quite different inflection than the voice of science that is otherwise invoked in the volume. In their introduction, the editors emphasize the importance of including science in the volume to "deepen" its interdisciplinarity. Elsewhere they speak of the "antidisciplinarity" of animal studies, which is defined "more by the subject of its analysis" (3). Perhaps the discrepancy between the "inter" and the "anti" is related to the conflicted status of science in the collection. It is that which needs to be there, according to the editors, but for what purposes it isn't clear. Carol Freeman points out with regard to the dodo, that so-called

“scientific” illustrations were often derived from erroneous, popular illustration or hearsay from sailors (162). In “The Speech of Dumb Beasts,” Helen Tiffin demonstrates the ways in which “scientific representations of animals challenge (or ignore) the potentials of animal speech” that are so prevalent in fiction. Where most branches of science will condemn anthropomorphic interpretations of animal behavior, Tiffin points out that the 1987 Veterinary Medical Association Report acknowledges the “tacit assumption of anthropomorphism” for animal research that is used to model humans (146). Jed Mayer’s insightful and important essay, “The Nature of the Experimental Animal: Evolution, Vivisection, and the Victorian Environment,” focuses on the difficulties that both environmental and animal welfare movements in Victorian England had in “negotiating the often conflicting demands of Romantic sympathy and rational science” (93). Evolutionary theory itself fueled the conflict by offering both the theoretical foundation for using animals as models for humans, and hence for practices such as vivisection, but also for lending support to the “great link” between humans and the nonhuman world, thereby fostering a sense of moral kinship and responsibility with animals. And any “sentimentalism” towards animals in the Victorian era would, according to Philip Armstrong, come to be held in contempt with “simultaneous rise of positivist science and industrial capitalism,” which perceived compassion for animals as an obstacle to progress or profit (176).

What does science add, we might ask, echoing the question “what does art add” that Steve Baker poses in his opening essay, “Contemporary Art and Animal Rights.” What does it add to the representation of animals at all, if not to advocacy for their lives? We think that science will give us some certainty, perhaps not unlike the “expectation” that philosophy “is ‘meant to settle’ things” (27). But art, Baker argues, “generally fails ‘to settle’ things” and this, moreover, is not its failure but its strength. It invites the viewer to take note of the uncertainties of how and what we see, and of the unpredictable nature of what we feel. Art should neither propose specific forms of action nor offer precise information. Nor, according to the three artists he considers — all women: Sue Coe, Briëa Jachinski and Angela Singer —, should artists ever allow their passion for a cause to slide into a “comforting sentimentality” (27); this despite Armstrong’s arguments for the political possibility of sentimentality (the gendering of sentimentality would of course be important to consider here). Baker cites Coe’s statement that “the most political art is the art of ambiguity,” but he cautions that the politics of ambiguity is a politics of unclear outcomes.

In its insistence on the importance of uncertainty regarding what and how we know about other animals, and its inquisitive openness to research that draws from a range of disciplines to give new shape to what we do know about them, this volume makes clear the complexities and the exciting potential of animal studies today. Just as interdisciplinary work can make us see the errors and shortcomings of the individual disciplines it depends upon, so does animal studies reveal the errors and dangers of a humanism, if not an anthropocentrism, that is not always so easy to leave behind. For what other language of considerability — moral, political or aesthetic, can we humans write in than our own?