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Biocapital, Vol. I

Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*. Posthumanities Series Vol. 6. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 288 pp. \$67.50 hb, 22.50 pb.

Recently, in the midst of the H1N1 swine flu pandemic that continues as of this writing, an AP photograph of three caged pigs circulated through the digital mediascape and floored me with its ugliness. Shot from the exterior of a concrete cell, peering inwards, the image showed three cowering animals with distended bellies, glowering eyes, and hair-covered skin matching the gray-brown hues and filth of the surrounding walls and floor; a repugnant picture of zoonotic disease and its porcine culprits. The extended caption read: "Pigs huddle inside a cage after being caught as a preventative measure to check swine flu, by the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) in Hyderabad India, Wednesday, April 29, 2009. According to the official estimates there are 50,000 pigs in Hyderabad city, mostly stray."¹ Bad news, it seems, for human populations worldwide. Bad news also for the pigs of urban India, whose corporeal proximity to urban Indians calculates as a health risk, punishable by imprisonment and an unforgiving photographic eye. Locked away and made to look hideous, these swine are criminalized twice over, allowing a developing high tech city to go about its business – indeed, constituting the hostile physical and symbolic conditions of modernization itself.



My reading of what makes the AP photograph so ugly riffs off of Nicole Shukin's *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, the sixth book in the University of Minnesota Press' Posthumanities Series. *Animal Capital* is a catalytic piece of scholarship that brings animal studies into in-depth conversation with transnational cultural studies and intensifies the Marxist politics of both. In a supple set of case studies of animals in industrial and post-industrial contexts, the book offers a versatile critical framework through which to consider how animal life is enmeshed in and integral to market cultures. Historians may bristle at the "unorthodox genealogies" and philosophers may grow impatient with some unwieldy conceptualizations, but Shukin's breakthroughs overshadow these discomforts (7). The central argument that capital routinely takes the form of animals – in both fetishized figure and usable flesh – confronts animal studies' tendency to bracket off one for the sake of the other. Against her own disciplinary training as a literary scholar, Shukin insists on thinking these two dimensions of animal life together, on simultaneously foregrounding the "semiotic currency of animal signs *and* the carnal traffic in animal substances" across various sites of capitalist production and the social world more broadly; in effect, laying out a history and theory of animal-as-capital (7). In this sense, *Animal Capital* rephrases the pivotal "question of the animal," posed by Cary Wolfe and pursued by other poststructuralist critics, in a firmly materialist register, but one that also takes seriously the seductive immateriality effects of animal imagery.² What emerges is an inspired installment of what Donna Haraway has provisionally titled "*Biocapital*, volume I."³

Shukin is particularly attuned to the "bio" of her capitalist critique. The book draws strength from previous accounts of biopower, extending the work of, most notably, Michel Foucault, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and Giorgio Agamben. While each of these writers variously theorize capital's comprehensive penetration into social and biological lives, they limit their inquiry to human subjects and populations, treating animals (when they do) as metaphors for "man's" objectification and/or expressions of racial, sexual and class difference. Without abandoning the critical insight that life itself has become an object of power, and that species boundaries are historically protean, Shukin's study focuses attention on a fuller range and complexity of biopolitical relations. She approaches animals as something more (and less) than symbolic placeholders for human others; they are also the bones, hides, proteins, genes, and laboring bodies that make speciesism possible and probable.

The trope of "rendering" is central to Shukin's analysis. Introduced early in the text, rendering "signifies both the mimetic act of making a copy, that is, reproducing or interpreting an object in linguistic, painterly, musical, filmic, or other media . . . *and* the industrial boiling down and recycling of animal remains" (20). Recognizing that the faculty of mimesis and the practice of animal recycling make for an "odd couple," the

author works hard to explain the term's theoretical viability by tracing its compatibilities with capitalism's logic (45). In Chapter One, she develops rendering as a mode of aesthetic animal representation in contradistinction to Michael Taussig's mystical ideas of mimetic reenchantment, and Frankfurt School critics who conceptualized an intrinsic animality in mimesis (despite their otherwise careful attentions to historical contingency). A second line of development considers rendering as the history of processing and reprocessing animal parts, focusing on an industry that has similarly constructed animals as a universal and renewable resource, while also grappling with the stomach-turning logistics.

Under the rubric of "automobility," Chapter Two imports this two-fold vision of animal-as-capital into a fascinating account of Fordism's debt to nonhumans. Triangulating the relationship between animal slaughter, cars and cinema, Shukin's analysis is far-reaching, but never far-fetched. She examines, for example, how automotive factories and other sites of mass production found a spatial model in meat production plants, and – with more detail – how the early-twentieth-century movement of animals down disassembly lines prefigured the sense of motion, the material substance, and the affective power of "moving pictures." The chapter's discussion of slaughterhouse tourism through a reading of its promotional literature is one of several skillful visual and textual analyses that sustain the book, and a superb illustration of the visceral and symbolic species confusions underpinning cultural spectacles that are paradoxically designed to secure the human-ness of a given audience.

Chapter Three's focus on "telemobility" writes a genealogy of telecommunication in the West. Its sweep is likewise broad and convincing, connecting the electrical experiments performed on frogs in eighteenth-century Italy, to Thomas Edison's 1903 filmed display of electrocuting Topsy the elephant, and advertisements for a Canadian wireless communication company that features different animate and inanimate animal figures. Taking issue with Akira Mizuta Lippit's "profoundly idealizing" theory of the electric animal, *Animal Capital* adds some carnage to representations of animals as telecommunication's primary fetish (13). For Shukin, the historical practice of using animals to convey communication's magical quality – the sense that communication "just happens," much like animals seem to perpetually exist irrespective of their biological life and death – perpetuates the fiction of painless transmission and disavows a certain economic, physical and representational violence upon which it depends (132-139). The point crystallizes nicely in a discussion of Telus Mobility's commercial

menagerie of cute, clean and mimetically-inclined animals (monkeys and chameleons, for instance) in light of the Colton mineral ore used in the manufacture of electronic devices. Mined most cheaply in eastern Congo, Colton also helps fund militant groups in the region and has activated orientalist campaigns in the West to protect lowland gorillas at risk of becoming bushmeat for rebel forces.

A final chapter on “biomobility” tackles, with dazzling success, the biopolitical quagmire of cross-species pandemics. Shukin’s treatment foregrounds “the potential of infectious disease to rapidly travel through the social flesh of a globally connected life world,” and builds on existing studies of those biological impacts and imaginaries that irritate neoliberal fantasies of capitalism’s transcendence over nature (182). *Animal Capital* specifically deciphers the overlapping racism and speciesism present in speculative discourses of border-crossing disease. These overlaps articulate some of the deepest Western fears about economic globalization and its underbelly of “ethnic-animal alterity,” while concurrently enabling capital accumulation to accelerate as usual (187). Shukin preludes these insights with some sharp analysis of globalization’s opposite obsession with posthuman kinship. Gregory Colbert’s popular *Ashes and Snow* becomes a generative target of material and rhetorical critique; a traveling exhibition of photographs promoted as a positive antidote to late capitalism via colonial-style images of pre-modern and vaguely Eastern human-animal intimacy. From there, the chapter journeys on to a discussion of the scientific and media conjectures over the non-Western origins of mad cow disease, AIDS, SARS and the avian flu, concluding with an analysis of various manifestations of “global health security” that seek to segregate animals from humans, even while constructing the former as an emergent stakeholder in the transnational marketplace. As Shukin demonstrates, there is ample room for such contradictions in the symbolic and corporeal renderings that produce animal capital.

Given its remarkable elasticity, which the author astutely underscores in her own object choices and writing style, the joint capitalization of animals and animalization of capital keeps questions of resistance that are familiar to cultural studies alive, if not well. On what grounds or trajectories can alternative species relations be conceived, shared and sustained? To what extent do the near infinite biopolitical entanglements that are signaled in this book keep all forms of life within the jurisdiction of the market? In light of Shukin’s persuasive and intricate claims, the prospect of other lives (figurative and/or fleshy) seems strained. By the end of *Animal Capital*, the author’s worst-case scenario is bleak indeed: “Those living in the globe-mobile of market culture have to contend with the possibility that capitalism may not necessarily bump up against the limit of finite resources or unravel from its own immanent contradictions. On the contrary, it appears all to capable of infernally surviving” – namely, through the stuff and semiotic power of nonhuman beings (231). But buried in the middle of the book, Shukin whispers a

counter-scenario, a tentative best case: “Signs of animal protest awaiting counterhegemonic production are strewn all over the social texts of modernity, as yet unactivated links to repressed histories of animal capital” (130). The means by which scholars might activate those histories, however, are obscured by the author’s extensive analysis of an animal’s more certain existence as the reusable parts of capitalism. All pigs, Shukin suggests, go to market. Under these conditions, it is worth pondering how research in animal studies might amplify the ones that squeal differently en route.

Notes

1. AP photo caption, Wednesday April 29, 2009. Accessed via ABC News international. The photo can be viewed on Google Images by typing the caption as keywords.
2. Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.
3. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008: 66-67.