Uneven Evolutions

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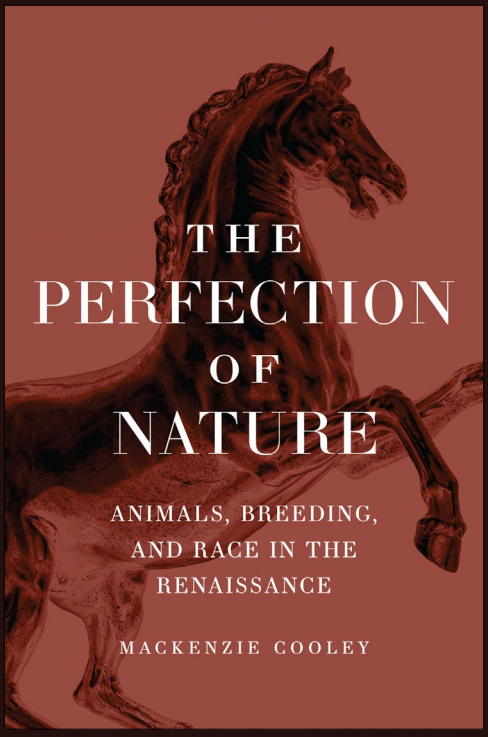

Review of:
Mackenzie Cooley. *The Perfection of Nature: Animals, Breeding, and Race in the Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. xvi + 353 pp., 30 halftones. $37.50 (pb), $112.50 (hb), $36.99 (PDF).

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Mackenzie Cooley's *The Perfection of Nature* offers an important contribution to our understanding of the ways philosophies of selective breeding emerged, converged, and changed over the course of the long sixteenth century. Taking in the networks of empire that connected Renaissance Spain to both the Courts of Italy and the New World, this study explores the diverse ways in which people "lived in an animal world, and how their understanding of animals shaped their vision of human and nonhuman natural diversity" (227). In taking up this focus, Cooley not only deepens our understanding of the diverse philosophies that informed breeding practice, but also highlights continuities with the present that take in, among other things, the idea of eugenics, a breeding philosophy "seized upon cyclically across the ages as a means of shaping the future to meet the interests of the present" (5). Elucidating the complex forces that shaped breeding philosophy and practice in early modern Spanish cultures of the Old and New Worlds, Cooley thus prompts us to reflect on the ways our current understanding of breed and race as categories of identity sit within a long history of human attempts to shape the nonhuman world.

Knitting together this impressive, wide-ranging, and nuanced study is the core theme of *razza*—a concept of lineage that takes in heredity and environment as shaping influences. A complex and much-debated concept in medieval and early modern scholarship, *razza* links early notions of race and breed across human and nonhuman species. This conceptual fluidity allows Cooley both to engage across subjectivities—from plant to animal to human life forms—and to demonstrate the very different ways in which principles of selective breeding were applied and understood in local contexts. *Razza* is not merely an expression of the interrelationship of blood, kind, and conditions, then, but rather—as Cooley makes clear—a category that complicates notions of a straightforward equivalence between race and breed. Grounding these ideas related to categories of identity is Cooley's truly impressive trans-Atlantic archival research. Through meticulous close readings of rich, often unlikely written and visual sources Cooley outlines the ways in which breed

Humanimalia 13, no. 2 (2023): 189–194. DOI: 10.52537/humanimalia.13832

and breeding were deeply implicated in textual practices of writing, record-keeping, and branding that cumulatively consolidated the idea of *razza* "as a nameable, visible, and legible reality" (3).

The Perfection of Nature is divided into four sections: "Knowing and Controlling Animal Generation", "A Divergence in Breeding", "A Brave New Natural World", and "Difference in European Thought". Adopting what she characterizes as a "contrapuntal" method, Cooley deliberately juxtaposes human and nonhuman animal or plant case studies that contrast European and New World contexts and perspectives. These case studies of selective breeding draw together a fascinating range of subjects: from the selective breeding of horses and dogs in the Old and New Worlds to the application of *razza* to the breeding of humans in Renaissance court culture, the interconnection of livestock branding and human branding of slaves, the selective breeding of maize in Mexico and categorization of camelids in Peru.

The two chapters in section one establish the conceptual foundation for what follows. Chapter one explores the diverse range of belief systems that had already informed selective breeding by the sixteenth century. Cooley employs a deliberately expansive view of both "breeders" and "philosophy" to take in the range of formal and informal practices and ideologies that shaped breeding practice. This approach allows her to position more widely known and circulated ideas about breeding alongside the more ephemeral, "artisanal", approaches to breeding that were transmitted informally via localized knowledge networks. By tracing the history of ideas related to breeding, Cooley complicates our understanding of the influence of Galenian and geohumoral theories of generation focused, respectively, on a balance of humours within the body and the effect of climate/environment on the body in the early modern period—placing these alongside alternative approaches focusing on natural magic and animal imagination in Renaissance breeding practice.

The privileging of *razza* in the court cultures of Spain and Italy informed an interest in producing the most "noble" or "perfect" versions of animals through careful selection and control of the breeding environment. In turn, Cooley tells us in the second chapter,

breeding for discrete forms of *razze* generated anxieties about decline associated with the movement of animals away from their place of origin. Thus the brand, a method for indicating quality associated with breeder identity, emerged as a way to address the problem of declining *razze* as animals circulated across Europe and the New World. "Through brands and the bureaucracy surrounding such marks", Cooley argues, breeders made "difference legible even as the effects of breeding alone waned generationally" (15). The expanded practice of branding evolved alongside other forms of textual record-keeping in European courts as noble families commissioned illustrated manuscript books of brands and catalogues of their prized animals. The quintessential modernity and impact of this shift is highlighted at the end of the chapter, which touches on the parallel practice of branding slaves in the New World. This extension of branding as a practice from animals to humans not only pinpoints a pivotal moment in the co-evolution of categories such as breed and race, but also offers insight into our current concept of commercial brand as a way of identifying recognizable, reproducible product. By historicizing branding as a way of indicating the origin and ownership of commodities, in effect, Cooley opens a path for further examination of the way that breed informed the operations of economic modernity as a global force.

The Perfection of Nature then turns to case studies about the practices of court breeding and differing views of hybridity. The chapters included in section two examine animal and human collections in the Italian court of the Gonzaga family. The Gonzagas were renowned horse breeders who rose to a position of power in Renaissance Europe. Alongside their equine breeding programs, however, their *razze* also included cats, dogs, and collections of human curiosities — such as dwarves — created by selective breeding. Horses of the Gonzaga *razze* were circulated as gifts to courts across Europe, including the stables of Charles V, but also (and more shockingly), were carefully crafted "human curiosities". Cooley unpacks one example involving a two-year-old girl bred from what Isabella D'Este described as "my race of little dwarves" (82). The exercise of power implicit in the case of this child extended upward, Cooley suggests,

since everyone in the court (including the Duke) "would have their partners chosen for them with an eye to the resulting offspring" (86). This insight from the archives significantly complicates our understanding of the operations of power, for while practices of selective reproduction are exercised from above, the mutual implication of plant, animal, and human lifeforms in court culture draws attention to the ideological, immersive power of breeding to shape life that would be extended to the New World.

Cooley then looks at Moteuczoma's zoo and human menagerie, in doing so showing how superficial similarities belied deeper issues of cultural difference between European and Mexican courts. Moteuczoma's exercise of royal power to shape nature coincided with the practice of European courts such as that of the Gonzaga and was immediately recognizable to Cortés. Similarly, the metaphor of seeding was used to describe both European and Nahuatl practices of selective breeding. Following the murder of Monteuczoma and the consolidation of Spanish power, however, Nahuatl metaphors were reworked within the changing power structure of colonization. To trace this shift, Cooley draws on successive Nahuatl/Spanish dictionaries to map the ways Spanish vocabulary and agricultural concepts reconceived of existing Nahua notions of selective breeding. Their shift to the alternative metaphor of grafting worked, Cooley suggests, to supplant indigenous concepts of heritability with European agricultural traditions.

In section three Cooley turns from the shaping of nature to instances of hybridity in New World encounters. Chapters five and six address the ways both the categorization of species and the unanticipated consequences of breeding between Old and New World populations crystallized Spanish anxieties related to blood and purity. Chapter five focuses on the unintended outcome of merging two highly developed but different traditions of dog breeding following the conquest of Mexico. Unlike many forms of New and Old World species, dogs interbred easily and reproduced quickly, transforming distinct domestic breeds from both sides into in a recognizably *mestizo* (mixed) dog that mirrored the parallel rise of a mestizo class of people. In chapter six,

Cooley examines how the Spanish misrecognized Peruvian camelids such as alpacas and llamas as "safe, Christian sheep" rather than as camels associated with the-still troubling Islamic / Moorish "Other" (17). Such moments in this study alert readers to the ways Spanish anxieties underpinned and informed how engagements with New World populations played out in broader contexts.

The two chapters that comprise the final section of the book explore the ways that animals provided models for understanding issues related to heredity in human beings. Here, Cooley contrasts the scholarship of Jesuit naturalist José de Acosta with Italian Giovanni Battista della Porta's study of physiognomy. Both scholars' engagements with ideas about shaping animals raise questions that troubled core concerns of the Spanish empire—Acosta by relating questions about species to those about the religious conversion of New World peoples, and Porta by suggesting that physiognomy not only explained patterns of behaviour in animals and humans but also raised questions about free will. These capstone chapters thus underline a theme that recurs throughout the book as a whole: that the idea of free will became increasingly difficult to navigate as new ideas emerged during the sixteenth century which extended breeding practices and theories across nonhuman and human species.

Taken together, Cooley's wide-ranging case studies offer a new and valuable demonstration of the ways that a desire to "improve" nature figured in belief systems and interspecies encounters over the long sixteenth century. Her exploration of how specific instances of selective breeding were represented, thought, and practiced sheds light on the complex, uneven evolution of breed and race as categories of identity, and suggestively connects Renaissance thought to concepts such as eugenics or branding that are typically associated with the post-Enlightenment era. Beyond its clear relevance for transatlantic scholarship on Renaissance Spain, then, this book will also be an invaluable resource for animal studies scholars interested in questions about the entangled histories of breed and race that we continue to grapple with today.