From Anthroponormativity to Creaturely Ethics: Rethinking Animals as Comparative Literary Subjects

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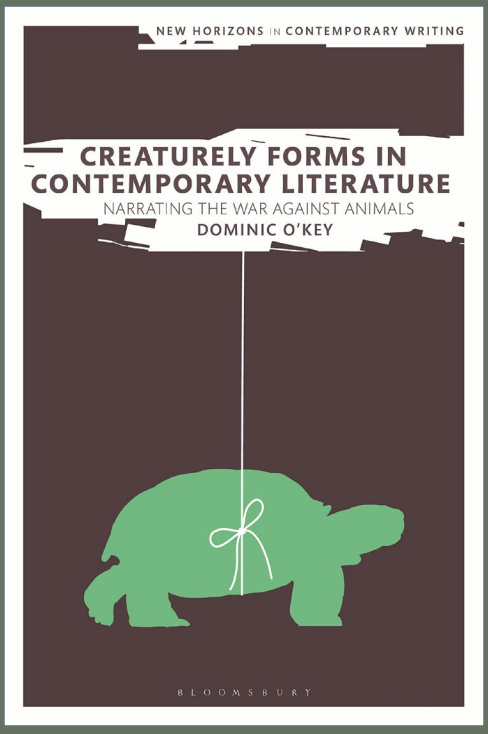

Review of:
Dominic O'Key, *Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature: Narrating the War against Animals*. New Horizons in Contemporary Writing. London: Bloomsbury, 2022. viii + 202 pp., 4 b/w illus. £85.00 (hb), £28.99 (pb).

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What are the ways in which literary comparatists might reconceive animals as veritable subjects of transcultural comparison? How are cross-linguistic literary speculations about the spectral appearance of a prehistoric pterodactyl in postcolonial India, the killing of dogs in post-apartheid South Africa, herring over-fishing in industrialized English seaside towns, and animal captivity in European zoological gardens interconnected? In *Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature: Narrating the War against Animals*, Dominic O'Key initiates a dialogue between two fields that are all too seldom brought together—comparative literature and animal studies—to determine the theoretical/methodological frameworks that might interpret animal figures, produced across literary traditions and geopolitical concerns, through a shared set of critical coordinates. *Creaturely Forms* examines the formal and thematic innovations that prose fiction written across national, cultural, and linguistic differences use to articulate modernity's "war against animals" (3). Focusing on how literature grapples with the large-scale commoditization of animal lives and anthropogenic species extinction in contemporary contexts of global climate emergency, the book interrogates the mechanisms through which anthropocentric impulses of literature can be strategically manipulated to critique human exceptionalism. Even though the idea of humanity's "war against animals" might appear "hyperbolic" and "imprecise" (9) to some readers, as the author observes, the book's central argument insists that the adoption of this phrase compels one to reconsider the multiscalar nature of the capitalist appropriation of interspecies relationships. O'Key introduces the analytic "creaturely forms" to refer to literary narratives that "push up against the very limits of a form that prioritizes and produces human subjectivity, repurposing and remaking forms in order to re-form human-animal relations" (5). Instead of invalidating the literary significance of human subjectivities or overturning anthropocentrism in favour of alternative forms of interspecies hierarchies, creaturely forms delineate the narrative strategies that represent the interconnectedness of human and animal lives. O'Key focuses on animal figures in the works of W.G. Sebald, J.M. Coetzee, and Mahasweta Devi to show that they "dramatize

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encounters with and tensions between different figurations of animality" (6). Even though all three authors accomplish this through their unique attentiveness to the questions of literary form, the common concerns resonating across their work make it possible to interrogate their writings within a comparative framework that challenges any uncritical consolidation and/or erasure of interspecies difference. In doing so, these authors not only communicate the intricacies of interspecies relationships and transspecies precarities, but also reveal "how constructed oppositions between the human and the animal are necessarily conjoined with other modalities of human marginalization" (4). O'Key's use of "creaturely" as a multivalent analytic to refer to the "aesthetic mediations of animals rather than the animal itself" (7) is attentive to the narratological construction of animal characters, the perceptions of human characters about these literary animals, the formal and thematic modifications implemented to accommodate the interactions of human and animal characters, and the manner in which these multispecies textual co-presences destabilize the anthroponormativity of literature.

Chapter 1, "The war against animals: reading for creaturely life", expands on a contextually informed understanding of creatureliness that elaborates the theoretical arguments and methodological concerns that inform the rest of the book. It critiques the conjoined operations of the mass production and mass extinction of animals through processes like factory farming, capture fisheries, and industrial developmentalism to highlight how they collectively produce a reductive understanding of humanity. O'Key maintains that a shift of focus from anthropocentrism to anthroponormativity is necessary because it shows that the widespread, multidirectional operations of human domination take place irrespective of whether humans are centrally positioned or decentred. Anthroponormativity, as an analytical optic, not only investigates the circumstances in which human centring/de-centring unfolds, but also makes evident that the sustained production of the sovereign human subject is dependent on the production of subordinated animality. In this context, paying attention to the formal developments of literary genres is crucial for understanding how they might be implicated in upholding hierarchical

differences between humans and animals. Instead of arguing that writers like Sebald, Coetzee, and Mahasweta "divest literature of its anthroponormativities" (29), O'Key contends that their articulations of creaturely forms envision a "reconciliatory horizon" (37) where the dignified restoration of agentive animality is complemented by the critique of modernity's appropriation of creaturely lives.

Chapter 2, "W.G. Sebald's creaturely melancholia", focuses on Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* to show that they foreground an ethics of creaturely awareness through interspecies encounters, exchanges of gaze, and shared suffering. O'Key argues that Sebald's writings express a "creaturely poetics of connection" (42) through the remembrance of erstwhile interspecies intimacies fractured by industrial modernity. Does the interpretation of fiction as "an ethico-aesthetic form of restitution" that develops a "creaturely melancholia" (43) accomplish anything beyond the nostalgic commemoration of threatened and exterminated animal lives? O'Key shows that Sebald's use of formal strategies like first-person narration, dialectical natural-historical prose style, slow temporality, intertextuality, use of animals as metonymic signifiers, incorporation of black-and-white photographs and taxonomic illustrations, and use of lists, hypotaxis, and parataxis collectively disclose a more-than-human ethics. Concomitantly, Sebald's attention to the themes of shared bodily vulnerabilities between humans and animals critiques Cartesian dualism's repudiation of animal vitalities.

O'Key focuses on a particular scene in *The Rings of Saturn* in which Sebald's narrator arrives at the dining-room of a hotel in an industrially declining English seaside town and orders a plate of fish and chips. Sebald provides a trenchant description of the unappealing appearance and tastelessness of the cooked fish. According to O'Key, the representations of the cooked fish as a "metonymic signifier of the disinvestment, deindustrialization and deprivation of English seaside towns" and as the "catalyst for a natural-historical narration of the North Sea fishing industries" (58) become significant narrative acts that explicate the war against animals. In the novel, Sebald supplements the natural history of herring fish with the zoological

illustration of a cod fish, which deliberately misleads readers into assuming that the latter is a herring. O'Key argues that "it is within this ambiguity of meaning, this momentary formal elision of the differences between herring and cod, that Sebald crafts a more-than-human ethics" (64). He locates possibilities for the emergence of a more-than-human ethics in the failure to recognize the difference between a herring and a cod, where the failure symptomatizes the widespread dissociation between humanity and nature. He insists that this inability to differentiate is not "an individual failing on the part of the reader but a symptom of modernity's wider instrumentalization and disregard for animal others" (64). However, O'Key's understanding of more-than-human ethics would have received greater clarity if the visual entanglement of the herring and the cod could have been explored more elaborately in terms of their entangled histories of exploitation.

In *Austerlitz*, on the other hand, creaturely ethics emerges through the gaze and other forms of embodied responses from animals. Sebald explores the significance of the zoo as a site that animates the deteriorating relationship between modernity and nature through a focus on the embodied presence of captive animal figures. Whether it is the psychopathological twitch of a racoon responding to their claustrophobic environment or the cautious stares of a fallow deer, O'Key shows that in Sebald's novels, zoo animals become mirror reflections of the melancholia, alienation, loneliness, and disillusionments of the human characters.

Chapter 3, "J.M. Coetzee's creaturely trouble", negotiates with the complexities of fictionalizing animal suffering through close readings of Coetzee's "textual experiment" in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* — "a multi-text investigation that attends simultaneously to the problem of writing fiction about animals and the problem of writing pro-animal thought into fiction" (89). In the case of *Disgrace*, O'Key pays attention to Coetzee's use of counterfocalization as a narrative strategy that recuperates the personhood of seemingly minor nonhuman characters like Katy, the bulldog, and Driepoot, the three-legged dog. Building on Gayatri Spivak's argument that Coetzee deliberately focalizes the narrative from the perspective of

its purported protagonist, David Lurie, to lure the readers into imagining the possibilities of counterfocalization, O'Key draws attention to the countervoice of Lucy, David's daughter. Lucy performs a form of "personal postcolonial creatureliness" (98) by arguing in favour of an ethically reconstituted humanity which, instead of repudiating animals or relegating them to a subordinate position, redistributes privileges equitably across interspecies boundaries. Lucy's rejection of anthroponormativity, O'Key argues, is communicated through her embrace of the similarities between her predicament and that of dogs. Instead of repudiating humanity, Lucy's creatureliness reconceptualizes it through a rejection of colonial and liberal notions of personhood. In fact, O'Key argues that her creatureliness destabilizes the anthroponormativity of the novel form through narrative speculations about human moral responsibilities associated with the euthanasia of dogs. This notion of creatureliness is significant because it shows that alongside the embodied presence of animals, whether as illustrated figures or literary characters — as was evident from the previous chapter's analysis of Sebald's writings — the presence of human characters like Lucy who negotiate with the imposed boundaries between characterization and depersonalization is also crucial for the explication of creaturely ethics.

O'Key observes that even though Coetzee undertakes an empathetic characterization of a canine figure like Driepoot, he also grapples with the fact that Driepoot is one of many unwanted dogs whose deaths are inevitable. Driepoot's death is a necessary thematic improvisation for the narrative closure of *Disgrace*: "The novel, as an anthropological machine, sacrifices the dog for its disgraced protagonist's redemption" (103). However, instead of endorsing this "plotted story of [David's] rehabilitation" (103), Coeztee questions the sacrificial structure of the novel form which sanctions the killing of animal characters for the ethical recuperation of its human characters.

In *Elizabeth Costello*, by contrast, Coetzee transforms animal characters into ideas by foregrounding the animality of the novel's eponymous human protagonist. O'Key argues that Costello's awareness of her own embodied presence, coupled with her ruminations on

the precarity of animal lives (the Dulgannon frogs, the sacrificial ram, penguins), reconciles her with her own animality. Costello critiques the abstract and instrumentalist representation of animals as "mere figures" (110), because it forecloses ethical responsibility, but insists on engaging with the embodied presence of animals. And yet, as O'Key notes, "the novel itself appears to rarely provide a 'record of an engagement' with nonhuman animals'' (111). However, instead of diminishing animal presence through their transformation from characters to ideas, Costello's reflections on animal deaths through musings on the animality of her own body subvert the sacrificial logic of the novel form. Alongside the emergence of creaturely ethics in this subversion, O'Key also locates Coetzee's critique of anthroponormativity in his articulation of Costello's "singular, idiosyncratic and tactless" vegetarianism, characterized by "a minimal ethics, a compromised and complicit position" (117, 118). Even though Costello's "troublesome vegetarianism" (114) risks reinstating the sacrificial logic by replacing the animality of the other-than-human animal with her own animality, it simultaneously "uncovers the deep structures of symbolic sacrifice that obtain within literary fiction itself" (119). Thus, instead of completely repudiating the sacrificial economy of the novel form in *Elizabeth Costello*, O'Key's reading shows that Coetzee's politics of substitution limits the novel's recourse to a creaturely ethics.

Chapter 4, "Mahasweta Devi's creaturely love", analyses how animal figures become conjoined with the political dehumanization of indigenous Adivasi communities in postcolonial India through close readings of Mahasweta Devi's short stories "Fundamental Rights and Bhikari Dusad", "Douloti, the Bountiful", "Salt", and "The Hunt", as well as the novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha". O'Key addresses the contentious existence of humanity and animality as two discrete but interconnected discourses in these texts in terms of "creaturely love" (130). As a literary-aesthetic mode that Mahasweta adopts in her writing to repudiate the environmental consequences of postcolonial developmentalism, creaturely love is "a barbed feeling, an affect which rips and scratches away, a love whose cultivation verges on the edge of catastrophe, preserving the differences between characters and social experiences while still building

solidarity" (130). Additionally, O'Key invokes the figure of the inhuman to refer to the bare humanity of disenfranchised Adivasis who are deprived of human rights and constitutional protection. In "Fundamental Rights and Bhikari Dusad", for instance, a poor goatherd named Bhikari realizes that he must forsake his political personhood and become an inhuman figure — "a creature of the forest" (133) — to survive. O'Key differentiates between dehumanization and inhumanity, between those suffering from a loss of political humanity and those who are not even in a position to claim political humanity, to argue that the gap between political humanity and subjugated subjectivity also produces animality. According to O'Key, inhumanity is "a perceived or enforced state of creaturely life" (134) and Bhikari accesses his freedom by becoming "a creature of the forest" who enters "the non-political space of the nonhuman" (134).

However, it becomes difficult to determine whether Bhikari's creaturely becoming is a consequence of his inhumanity or that of his dehumanization. O'Key's reading of Bhikari not only reveals the ambiguity surrounding the differentiation of dehumanization and inhumanity, but also suggests an erasure of the differences between inhumanity and animality. This risks producing the inhuman and the (nonhuman) animal as interchangeable categories in a way that obscures the political lives of animals who are often prioritized over the subaltern communities who cohabit with them. Even though O'Key writes that he is aware of "the danger of portraying these characters as being somehow essentially or naturally interlinked with nature, thereby tacitly countersigning their own subjugation as creatures" (137), he does not explore this conundrum any further in his reading of "Fundamental Rights of Bhikari Dusad". One way of reading the story is to pay attention to the fact that Bhikari's recourse to animality doesn't address or provide a narrative resolution to the broader discourse on the complicated entanglements of care, kinship and violence involving goats as sacrificial animals implicated in both commercial and ritualistic killing in India. Mahasweta deliberately stages this conundrum to show that the connotations of animality change depending on the caste, class, and religious dynamics of human-animal co-constitution in postcolonial India.

O'Key then explores "the contradictory valences of animality" (138) in Mahasweta Devi's story "Douloti, the Bountiful". In it, Mahasweta focuses on how the bonded labourers, who are oppressed by feudal economic structures in postcolonial India, internalize their inhumanity. If some of them identify with the degradations of animal life when their feudal lords render them as less valuable than labouring animals, others feel apprehensive about being counted like domestic farm animals for the government census. O'Key's recognition of these "conflicting notions of animality" is accurate, but it stops short of elaborating how postcolonial interspecies hierarchies are bolstered through colonial legacies of racial and/or caste-based disenfranchisement in both instances.

The notion of creaturely love that O'Key articulates at the beginning of this chapter is represented most emphatically in the novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha". Puran Sahay is a journalist who arrives in the tribal village of Pirtha in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India to report on the struggles of its resourceless inhabitants who are suffering from starvation. Puran wants to draw public attention to the ecological degradation and lack of government or state initiatives for Pirtha's indigenous population. He meets Bikhia, a boy from the village, the story of whose sightings and engravings of a prehistoric winged creature had drawn him to Pirtha in the first place. They develop an unexpected bond through their individual and collective witnessing of the pterodactyl-like creature, the living and breathing reincarnation of Pirtha's tribal ancestor. According to O'Key, Mahasweta crafts an alternative form of *Bildungsroman* in which Puran's character development is accomplished through his giving up of himself to the alterity of the pterodactyl. Puran and Bikhia's collaborative care for the dying pterodactyl exemplifies a multispecies love which preserves the differences of the contradictory worlds of Puran and Bikhia, but also transcends "the entrenched ontological divisions between human, inhuman, and nonhuman" (155).

Through the process of witnessing the corporeal vulnerability of the dying creature, Puran realizes that he must "relinquish the pterodactyl" (152). O'Key argues that by rendering the pterodactyl as "small

and minor" and by letting it die, Mahasweta "ensures that the pterodactyl remains unincorporated into the orbit of understanding" (152). O'Key's reading of the pterodactyl as a "passive and ambiguous" character who "simply crumples and deteriorates" (149) suggests that the animal must die to affirm their incomprehensible alterity. O'Key argues that unlike in *Disgrace*, where the sacrifice of the animal character is pivotal for narrative resolution, the sacrifice of the pterodactyl signifies the continuity of Puran's ethical responsibility. However, the sacrificial logic that O'Key provides doesn't necessarily elevate the pterodactyl any more than Driepoot in *Disgrace*. If we read the pterodactyl's radical alterity as something that surpasses his corporeal vulnerability, then it is possible to read how he challenges anthroponormativity of the literary form. In O'Key's reading, however, the pterodactyl's alterity is circumscribed by his corporeal vulnerability, which arguably restores the sacrificial logic of the literary form.

Creaturely Forms concludes by offering brief but precise analyses of more contemporary literary articulations of creatureliness in *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha, *Animalia* by Jean-Baptiste Del Amo, *The Wolf Border* by Sarah Hall, *Happiness* by Aminatta Forna, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy, *Nineveh* by Henrietta Rose-Innes, and *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. From foxes in the context of immigration enforcements in contemporary London to vultures in neoliberal India, from insects in post-Apartheid South Africa to trees in the contexts of environmental activism in North America, O'Key shows that critical attention to the politics of literary form reveals the diversity of multispecies relations. Focusing on wide-ranging forms and consequences of interspecies co-constitution across cultural contexts, *Creaturely Forms* delineates the continuities of capitalist appropriation across all these relations. By bringing the fields of comparative literature and animal studies into a productive dialogue with each other, *Creaturely Forms* argues convincingly in favour of acknowledging the importance of textual animals as serious, interventionist subjects of literary inquiry in the contexts of global environmental degradation.