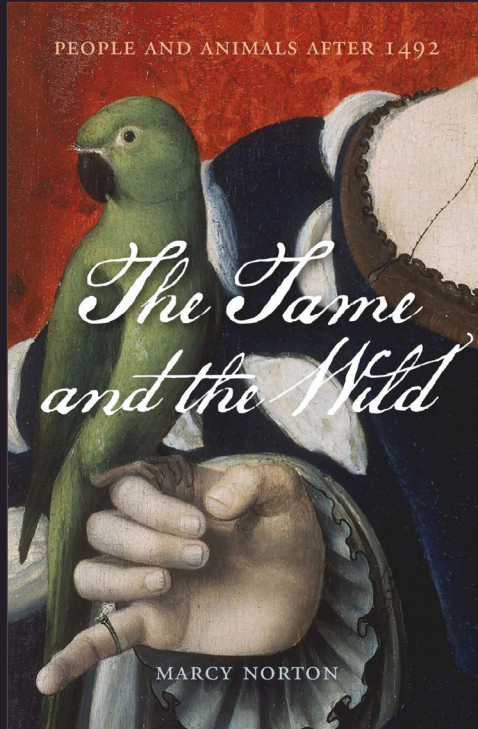


BOOK REVIEW

Unsettling the Columbian Exchange

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Review of:

Marcy Norton, *The Tame and the Wild: People and Animals after 1492*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024. 448 pp. \$37.50 (hb).

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In *The Tame and the Wild*, Marcy Norton explores how culturally distinct ways of conceptualizing and interacting with animals “help explain the ontological divide between European and Indigenous cultures” after 1492 (3). Taking creation myths as her starting point, Norton illustrates how spiritual beliefs shape divergent worldviews: in the Book of Genesis, she argues, there is a clear, hierarchical distinction between humans and animals, whereas Indigenous cultures emphasize “the permeability and interconnectedness of all beings” (2). Such differences informed institutional and symbolic structures in European and Indigenous cultures of Mesoamerica and Greater Amazonia as well as the ways individuals interacted with nonhuman animals in their daily lives. When these cultures encountered each other following Columbian contact, Norton suggests, what resulted was an intermingling of ideas and practices that profoundly transformed both groups in ways that continue to impact us on a global scale today—from the modern meat industry and climate change to the practices of zoological science and petkeeping.

Across eleven thematically focused chapters, Norton ranges across times, places, and cultures—taking in sources from the Caribbean, lowland South America, Mexico, Central America, and Europe that were produced and dispersed over the five-hundred-year history of colonization in the Americas. Her interdisciplinary approach brings together methods and concepts from history and anthropology, and the range of materials she draws on include textual and visual artefacts that anchor the broad focus of the book’s claims in specific, detailed engagements that knit together the otherwise diverse peoples that comprise “Europe”, “Greater Amazonia”, and “Mesoamerica”. By placing animals at the centre of colonial history, Norton proposes an alternative to the influential concept of Columbian Exchange as flows of “things” (conquest by guns, germs, and steel). Instead, she interrogates the entanglement of human and nonhuman subjects within the colonial contact zone. Rejecting the deeply entrenched idea that livestock husbandry is “a necessary and inevitable part of human progress” (9), she positions animal husbandry as a form of extractivism used to dispossess land, displace Indigenous peoples,

and objectify animals in contexts where they had traditionally been understood as subjects (77). Norton's approach works both to meticulously recover the ways in which pre-contact Indigenous people interacted with animals, and to shed light on the ways European and Indigenous engagements with animals profoundly reshaped the life-ways of both sides.

The Tame and the Wild is organized into three sections: the first, "Subject and Object", examines European modes of human–animal relation grounded in hunting, objectifying, and conquering; the second, "Tame and Wild", focuses on Indigenous ways of conceptualizing and interacting with animals through the intersubjective modes of absorbing, taming, hunting, and nourishing. Though these first two sections outline how culturally distinct modes of categorizing animals emerge from different forms of relational activity, hunting—an activity central to both cultures—is particularly noteworthy as a point of overlap that encapsulates divergent understandings of animal subjectivity. Among Europeans, Norton demonstrates, the practice of hunting among elites underpinned the symbolic expression of hierarchy and species difference. By contrast, among the Indigenous peoples hunting took place within a fluid "ecology" of interdependence that expressed the "universality of subjectivity and personhood" (152). The broader implications of this overlap are the focus of the final section, "Entanglements", which tracks how European and Indigenous practices and ways of knowing intermingled and were mutually transformed as a result of colonization. In charting the shifting worldviews and modes of interaction produced by contact after 1492, "Entanglements" shows how our current, deeply contradictory relationships with nonhuman animals emerged from this long history.

The book's central argument unfolds within this framework as Norton unpacks the ways designations of subjectivity were formulated differentially around questions about what, why, and how we eat. For Europeans, she argues, "vassal" animals such as dogs and horses existed as privileged, often individuated, subjects and were invested with symbolic value. These animals—who were not eaten—worked

alongside their human owners in ritualized hunts that played a central role in organizing and reproducing a human hierarchy in which man's claim to dominion was naturalized. While these privileged animal subjects helped define a vertical axis of difference, those others who were domesticated and produced as food through practices of husbandry were largely objectified, and so solidified the horizontal, binary distinction between human subject and animal object.

By contrast, the Indigenous societies Norton examines classify all animals (including human animals) in explicitly relational, subjective terms. Thus prey—the “wild” animals that one eats—were regarded as part of a web of interrelated lifeforms in which all beings both eat and are eaten. Prey were not merely stalked, killed, and consumed but also “absorbed” via practices of material culture—their pelts, bones and feathers worn and memorialized (109). The “familiar” by contrast, were wild beings found or captured in the wild and nurtured in ways quite distinct from conventional modes of domestication. Throughout the book, Norton marks this difference by using the Kilinago term “*ieque*” (an “animal one feeds”) to suggest the nurturing relationship between tamer and tamed (131). This relationship was much more than an individual bond between human and familiarized animal: in the words of a contemporary observer, “animals that come tame before them, they believe to belong to their Gods, and that they dare not kill” (131). Unlike domestic animals produced by European husbandry practices (fed in order to become food), those familiarized to become “tame” were not eaten, because—like one's human family—they were considered to be kin (132). While both societies ate animals, she argues, European husbandry alienated “animal bodies from their personhood” while Indigenous familiarization “actualized the reality of interspecies kinship” (149).

Norton's focus on culturally distinct ways of conceptualizing animal subjectivity is one of the strengths of *The Tame and the Wild*, and by bringing European and Indigenous worldviews into conversation she unsettles the binary assumptions that undergird claims to human exceptionalism. Animals were never an uncomplicated “other”

to a human self in the west, and Norton's cross-cultural approach recaptures one thread in a history that has been obscured by Enlightenment modes of categorizing and classifying. This is perhaps most effectively presented in Norton's discussion of the ways Europeans conceived of elite hunting animals and prey in terms that strained the animal/human distinction. Unlike animals produced by husbandry, "vassal" animals were individualized, conceived as unique personalities, and their comforts meticulously tended (32–34). Similarly, charismatic prey were "observed, respected, and admired": "conceived as 'enemies', as in war—destined for death but respected for their clever stratagems" (32). Such animal exceptionalism suggests not only how metaphoric connections aligned some animals with humans, but also the extent to which the eating/eaten dichotomy is rooted in cultural practices that confer subjective status through training relationships.

In the case of Indigenous societies, such dynamics played out in similar ways via human affinity for "special" animals—as when single species were captured in order to eat some and familiarize others. Yet, the implications of such moments are sometimes overshadowed by Norton's emphasis on Indigenous care and kinship. We learn, for example, that parrots were baited into live traps in order to exploit their impulse to "rescue" fellow species members, and that mother monkeys were killed with poison arrows so their young could be harvested for familiarization, but the impact of such practices on the animals involved is not addressed (138, 140). Similarly, in charting the ways that familiarized animals were commodified as the market for exotic species expanded, we learn of animal treatment in Europe, "far removed from the nurturing care given by those engaged in the taming work of familiarizing *iegue*" (282), and the ill-effects of "Europeans' involvement in increasingly colonized trade networks" (293). Such moments in the book's argument step back from delving into potentially fascinating—albeit messy—moments of human contradiction by placing them within a binary understanding of their cultural paradigms. One result of this reflex is that sharp, interesting, and useful critiques of European practices emerge alongside a much more romanticized and diffuse picture of Indigenous cultures.

Where they are teased out, the contradictions evident on both sides are, in fact, the most intriguing aspects of the deeper dives Norton takes in her readings of diverse, unexpected subject matter, including the ways animals figured in European witch hunts and discourse about cannibalism, the status of the human as animal in ritual sacrifice, and the origins of the modern abattoir in fifteenth-century Spain. Norton also excels at unpacking aspects of Indigenous representation in ways that make difficult, culturally specific forms such as the cosmogram legible to non-specialists. For some readers this extreme reach of time, place, and subject matter in *The Tame and the Wild* may frustrate the desire for a specific focus that unfolds within a tighter timeline and more specific location. Others may find that the method of using very specific examples to draw conclusions about very broad trends unduly flattens important differences — particularly in attempts to recapture the histories of diverse Indigenous peoples (including those whose practices do not square neatly with the tame/wild model Norton frames), but also in distilling a singular “European” culture. The trade-off for such losses of specificity is that *The Tame and the Wild* is a *tour de force*: noteworthy for both its rich scope and bold insights.

Indeed, the leakages and contradictions Norton is able to examine on a broad scale are ultimately the book’s most exciting contribution to the fields of colonial history, the history of science, anthropology, and animal studies. Species interactions are by their very nature messy, and Norton’s willingness to embrace this messiness in a capacious spirit allows her to ask and answer important questions in ways that are both compelling and paradigm-shifting. While making an important contribution to the scholarship of colonial history, Norton also sheds light on the ways in which our deeply paradoxical relationships with animals are an ongoing legacy of this history. For scholars and students of animal studies, *The Tame and the Wild* is particularly relevant and useful, offering deep historical context for some of the most pressing issues currently confronting humans and animals on a planetary scale.