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Animal Meaning

Linda Kalof and Georgina M. Montgomery (Eds.), *Making Animal Meaning*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2011. 212 pp. \$44.95 hb, 32.95 pb.

A striking black & white photograph of a Beluga whale in captivity appears on the front cover of this book. This image, taken by Britta Jaschinski, is repeated in the opening pages, just prior to the table of contents. The repetition and prominent placement of the image underscores its significance for the collection. The caption beneath the photograph inside the book's cover reads:

Born in the wild waters of Churchill River, Manitoba, Canada, and caught shortly after, this Beluga whale came to New York Aquarium in Coney Island in 1974. For 30 years she circled monotonously, silently in a small chlorine-treated, water-filled concrete tank, till she died in April 2004. This was her home but she didn't live there! The photo is dedicated to her and all Beluga whales in captivity.

The decision to open an academic book with this image and these words serves as a poignant reminder that through our academic work in the fields of Human-Animal studies and/or Critical Animal Studies there are real lives at stake. How we think about, represent, and theorize animals have very real consequences for living, breathing beings, and there is an increasing sense of urgency to our task.

This connection between scholarly work and activism was reinforced for me this summer as I was reading *Making Animal Meaning*. Like many summers before, protests were regularly held at a marine animal theme park near my hometown. Marineland in Niagara Falls, ON, has been the target of animal rights activists for many years. There was an increased intensity to these protests this year as several former trainers at the Park quit their jobs and brought attention to animal cruelty issues at Marineland by telling their stories to reporters at the *Toronto Star*. Marineland became a hot-button news item in Ontario and beyond, and the protests at the Park increased in size and intensity. I attended many of these protests and then, upon returning home, would sit at my desk and see the photograph of the Beluga whale on the cover of *Making Animal Meaning*. Her story seemed even more significant each time I returned from a Marineland protest.

How can we bridge academia and activism in meaningful ways? What roles can something like a photograph or a written text play in this process? I have grappled with these questions a lot in recent months, and appreciate books like *Making Animal Meaning* for providing a forum for thinking through some of the important ways in which representations of nonhuman animals collide with the physical, lived realities of the species we share the planet with.

This book rejects the notion that animal meaning derived through representations is always dependent upon human modes of understanding: “while we have been busily sorting out the meaning of animals, they have been leaving their own traces and signs – thus actively creating their own meaning ” (ix). The combination of theoretical and observational essays attempt to make sense of this multiplicity of meanings and, for the most part, does so with an eye to what kinds of consequences these layered meanings might hold for living, breathing animals (including humans).

I found Etienne Benson’s contribution to this volume, an essay entitled “Animal Writes: Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace,” to be an especially insightful account of the ways in which even the most anthropocentric forms of representation can be examined for traces of the nonhuman animal, lingering evidence about lives lived for those who stop and look for it. As Benson argues, “everything we do, including writing, is shaped by our long evolutionary history of interactions with other animals and our present lived interdependence with them.” Texts, photographs, and other objects created by humans about humans can, even unintentionally, shed light on the histories of nonhuman animals, histories that are not only framed through human points of reference. Benson acknowledges that this can be challenging work, particularly when dealing with historical sources; however, he argues that we need to be prepared to think differently about what counts as a “primary source” for our research. This call to look beyond “human intentionality” (11) presents an especially important framework for scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Attention to language as a framing device is addressed in a number of essays. Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga’s essay, “Mobility and the Making of Animal Meaning: The Kinetics of ‘Vermin’ and ‘Wildlife’ in Southern Africa,” is an incredibly thoughtful account of how terms such as “pest,” “wild,” and “Nature” are culturally determined categories that shift according to social, economic, political, technological, and cultural ideologies. Likewise, Analia Villagra’s essay, “Cannibalism, Consumption, and Kinship in Animal Studies,” focuses on the important differences that exist between

words like “murdered” and “poached,” questioning how differences in understandings of species are shaped depending on how and where these kinds of terminologies are used. Villagra’s essay opens with a description of a “murder,” the body of a gorilla being reverently removed from a forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As Villagra points out, the “unexpected application of human terms to the death of a gorilla” (45) has far-reaching consequences in terms of thinking about relationships between species. While I find Villagra’s conclusion — that we can experience a sense of kinship with other species by consuming their flesh — troubling, this essay does succeed in challenging readers to think beyond assumed and inherited perspectives about the places occupied by specific species in our contemporary global culture.

Jane Desmond’s essay, “Animal Deaths and the Written Record of History: The Politics of Pet Obituaries,” is among the strongest chapters in *Making Animal Meaning*. Desmond carefully and critically considers the cultural meanings — both for human and nonhuman animals — associated with the process of memorializing through “pet obituaries.” Desmond outlines the history of this form of writing, including the negative reactions that many people have had when a beloved dog or cat has been memorialized on pages of the newspaper typically reserved for notices of human death. The central argument of this chapter, that “pet obituaries are seen as dangerous by some precisely because they are a political act signaling the need for far-reaching ethical change” (99), underscores the complexities that characterize our contemporary relationships with nonhuman animals. As Desmond rightly points out, only certain categories of animals are thought to be appropriate subjects for an obituary and, as she reminds us, not all humans have been permitted to be honored in this manner either. In other words, who gets to be the subject of an obituary is deeply political and historically contingent. It may be increasingly common (but certainly not yet uncontested!) for a cat or a dog to be memorialized in such a way; however, many significant social and cultural shifts would have to take place before our society would be ready for obituaries for animals killed as part of scientific research or slaughtered in the name of food production. At the heart of this chapter is the question of “social worth.” Desmond argues that “the real threat of obits for animals is that they are a wedge into the epistemological boundary of the ‘worthy/not worthy’” (107). The inclusion of companion animals on the obituary pages of a newspaper troubles the boundaries of who gets included in definitions of family — not unlike the inclusion of same-sex partners in obituaries, Desmond notes — and in so doing raises important questions about how individuals of all species are valued in our society.

Chapters such as Meisha Rosenberg's analysis of certain kinds of dog breeds in contemporary popular culture, and Benjamin Arbel's exploration of Renaissance writing, underscore one of the central premises of this book: that understandings of the relationships between human and nonhuman animals is always historically and culturally contingent. Further, Rosenberg and Arbel both highlight the ways in which systems of cultural representation — whether television advertisements or written texts — play in to the ways in which humans make sense of nonhuman species. Both chapters offer detailed readings of select case studies to move beyond generalized patterns of thinking around complex topics such as race, gender, and religion, and how these, in turn, relate to dominant patterns of thinking about and interacting with nonhuman animals.

Likewise, Sharon Wilcox Adams's chapter, "On the Trail of the Devil Cat: Hunting for the Jaguar in the United States and Mexico," carefully examines representations of this animal at different points in history. While she is interested in the specificity of the lived reality of the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), she turns to patterns of its representation in her analysis. Accordingly, she reminds readers that "while representation is a necessary and vital part of human communication, it must be considered critically," that "through the process of representation jaguars are removed from their own animality, or jaguar-selves, and enter cultural discourse as objects" (82). For Adams this is not a negative thing *per se*. However, her research underscores the ways in which representations have, at times, come to stand in for the actual lived reality of the animal, often with troubling consequences.

Collectively, the essays in this book urge us to pay closer attention to the multiplicity of ways in which "animal meaning" (in all senses of the phrase) is both made and contested. *Making Animal Meaning* is a thought-provoking, interdisciplinary collection and will have a broad appeal among scholars and students working in the fields of Human-Animal Studies and Critical Animal Studies.