

DOMINIK OHREM, ed., *American Beasts: Perspectives on Animals, Animality and U.S. Culture, 1776-1920* (Berlin: Neofelis, 2017), 303 pp.

This collection of ten original articles plus introduction (an article on historiography in its own right) builds on and expands recent research in the field of Animal Studies or Human Animal Studies within American Studies in multiple and productive ways. Written by five literary scholars, four historians, and a community sustainability scholar, the essays address a wide range of topics located in the time frame of the long nineteenth century. And although some of the essays employ a rich theoretical base and range over a wide array of issues whereas others have a more narrow focus and forego references to the saints of Animal Studies (i.e. Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway), there is not a single article that does not yield a rich harvest. This is because all authors present often little known and fascinating material and they do so valuing its inherent complexity and contradictions. The volume as a whole “understands itself as a contribution to a postanthropocentric reappraisal of the genesis of the modern United States” (38), as editor Dominik Ohrem phrases it in his introduction titled “A Declaration of Interdependence” (10). It goes without saying that there remains much work to be done on the history of the more-than-human past in the U.S. and elsewhere but the book is certainly a welcome part of this project.

The volume is subdivided into three parts. The first, “Animal Lives and the Contours of American Modernity” contains four articles that discuss human-animal relations relevant for and significant to the development of American modernity. Katherine Grier (author of *Pets in America*, 2006), discusses the birth of the American pet industry and the trade in songbirds. Roman Bartosch considers literary animals and the specific role of fictional imaginings of wild animality that was beyond the authors’ or audience’s urban reality and because of that could function as markers of affect and desire. His interesting case studies on Melville’s *Moby Dick* and London’s *Call of the Wild* might have been extended to better balance out the lengthy introduction to his argument. Olaf Stieglitz, discussing turn-of-the-century photography of famous race horses, argues that the medium of photography helped establish a particular

human gaze that portrayed these animals as exceptional and made them into almost-human athletes. In the final essay in this section, Michael Malay offers a fascinating “animal reading” of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and uses the novel to point out the developments that Sinclair’s novel explores—the rise of factory farming and its effect on human and non-human animals as well as the more general changes that this development set in motion. The stockyards and slaughterhouses that Sinclair so vividly describes profoundly changed the ways animals were treated and understood by Americans. These transformations of human-animal relations can be identified as expressions of modernity because they are unthinkable without industrialization, urbanization, and consumer culture.

The second section explores “The Politics of Human-Animal Relations” with a view towards human categories such as race, gender, and class that were co-constituted by ideas of ‘the animal.’ Brigitte Fielder’s reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other abolitionist or else proslavery works insightfully analyzes the intersections of race and species, in this case of slaves and dogs, in order to work out “the contradictions inherent in the comparisons of enslaved African Americans to dogs and their various relationships to and with them” (155). Aimee Swenson’s contribution tracks the role of sheep in Navajo history and culture in contrast to and conflict with an expanding settler society. This particular history is still too little known. A thought-provoking essay by Keridiana Chez analyzes “the gendering of the nonhuman” (200) in changing ideas about the character of dogs and cats and their relations to humans. Though dogs were considered ‘male’ and cats ‘female,’ these notions did not merely reflect human constructions of these animals but by the animals’ own agency also influenced them, “displacing narratives inscribed unto them back on human bodies” (200). The intersection of gender and species reveals the complex dynamics of the production of gender across species—a fascinating subject recently also explored by biologist Zuleyma Tang-Martinez in an article where she shows how Victorian gender norms shaped the way scientists (and we) used to think about animal sex.¹ This section clearly shows that it is not merely an oppositional concept of

¹ “Data should smash the biological myth of promiscuous males and sexually coy fe-

‘animality’ that is used to define a notion of ‘humanity,’ but also that such human notions are really cross-species constructions in which perception, projection, and reflection mutually invade each other just as much as they do in our separate concepts of gender, race, and species themselves.

The final section is devoted to literary and non-textual animals in the context of Westward expansion and Manifest Destiny. Neill Matheson discusses naturalist William Bartram’s accounts of his travels in the American Southeast in the late eighteenth century. Although Bartram subscribed to the hegemonic belief of his age in human superiority over animals, Matheson shows that the text simultaneously complicates and qualifies this hierarchy. In particular, Bartram objected to the casual violence against animals that prevailed in his day but at the same time felt helpless to prevent it and, indeed, sometimes even took part in it. Dominik Ohrem’s excellent essay juxtaposes readings of better and lesser known writers such as, among others, Estwick Evans, Henry David Thoreau, Francis Parkman, Charles Webber, John Robert Forsyth, to explore the “zooanthropological imaginary” of nineteenth-century American culture. By the term “zooanthropological” he wants to indicate “the way in which the irresistible figure of the animal inhabits every conception of anthropological difference and human uniqueness” (250). He argues that antebellum Americans perceived and experienced the trans-Mississippi West as a region characterized by an enormous animal presence that encouraged or necessitated human-animal relations very different from those in the East. To some, their Western experience embodied a pre-Darwinian idea of a relentless struggle for existence with white “civilized” man carry-

ing the victory over land, animals, and Native Americans. But the West also posed the danger of men becoming animals, of undergoing a process of decivilization in Western frontier environments that would leave them suspended in a state of “liminal humanimity” (277). Thus “[t]he ambiguous role assumed by the figure of the white westerner complicated discursive strategies through which human animality became almost exclusively associated with racialized otherness” (277). The final essay of the volume focuses on the Passenger Pigeon or rather its demise in the process of Western expansion. Andrew Howe describes this casualty of Manifest Destiny and discusses early responses to and attempts at explaining the permanent disappearance of a species (the last Passenger Pigeon died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914) that had numbered in the billions around 1800. That a species could go extinct was not yet an accepted theory. Americans were slow to recognize the man-made causes of the pigeon’s extinction (i.e. deforestation, killing “just for fun,” overuse as a cheap food source for immigrants and others etc.). Eventually it was acknowledged that the relentless “winning of the West” also had produced irremediable losses—of animals and humans—and devastated societies and ecologies.

The volume is an essential contribution to American Studies adding a much needed more-than-human dimension to the discipline; hence it should be a welcome addition to any American Studies library. Another point worth mentioning is the very reasonable price of the book—quite unusual in the realm of scholarly publishing. So all is well? Not quite—the small font size makes for hard reading.

Susanne Opfermann (Frankfurt am Main)

males,” *The Conversation* 20 January 2017. Web.