

12-2014

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Recommended Citation

Twine, Richard, Review: Defining Critical Animal Studies - An Intersectional Social Justice Approach for Liberation, Anthony J. Nocella II, John Sorenson, Kim Socha and Atsuko Matsuoka (eds), *Animal Studies Journal*, 3(2), 2014, 30-35.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol3/iss2/6>

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Abstract

Anthony J. Nocella II, John Sorenson, Kim Socha and Atsuko Matsuoka, eds. *Defining Critical Animal Studies - An Intersectional Social Justice Approach for Liberation*. New York: Peter Lang, 2014

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This edited volume is one of several recently published or soon to be published books on critical animal studies (CAS) that consolidates and develops a field of distinctly engaged and politicised perspectives on human/animal relations. These books ask important questions of the rationale for the emergence of scholarship across (mostly) the humanities and social sciences, especially when contextualised within broader social realities of present violence and future threat toward other-than-human animals.

What is also striking about CAS and this book is that it is furthermore reflexive to modes of doing research and consciously embeds itself within critiques of the neoliberal academy. This brings us initially to two points about the format and approach of the book. Firstly, in trying to re-make the academy as relevant for urgent contemporary problems of, for example, species extinction and climate change, CAS wants to promote the practice of the academic-activist hybrid, and so the audience here is as much activists as it is scholars. This is a challenge in certain ways as there is an onus to achieve both conceptual clarity and cogent analysis whilst at the same time making that relevant to audiences not necessarily familiar with privileged forms of discourse. Secondly, CAS is critical of the notion of the heroic masculinised competitive lone scholar model of research, so the editors have consciously constructed sections and chapters via collaborative writing. In attempting to define CAS, this book and its organisation returns to a significant earlier journal article on CAS with which Nocella had been involved (2007). This outlined ten principles of CAS and we see in this volume that each of the

ten chapters corresponds more or less to further discussion of each principle. Some chapters refine and add to these principles, which is important as the field develops.

It is obvious but necessary to underline that there are no wholly sharp boundaries between different iterations of, for example, CAS, animal studies or human/animal studies. Indeed, it may at times be necessary, given the precarity of being an animal advocate in the academy, strategically to call upon the nomenclature of these other iterations. Nevertheless CAS should act as a mirror to all academics whose work somehow involves other animals, and it does offer an important set of distinct questions and perspectives not found elsewhere. These include such points as represented in the principles as a stronger commitment to intersectionality which concerted attempts to account for the shaping of human/animal relations by political economy; a suspicion of abstracted as opposed to engaged theory; a commitment to rethinking the academy; and the promotion of a relationship of mutuality between critical theory and radical politics. Due to these emphases CAS may also have different roots from for example animal studies. Speaking loosely CAS does seem to draw more clearly from a heritage in radical ecology and thus previous works of anarchist political philosophy and ecofeminism are important roots and ongoing concerns here. Perhaps unnecessarily narrowing this lineage, the volume claims an anarchist heritage for CAS which is an overstatement and not necessarily true for all contributors to the book or those working within CAS.

After a Foreword by David Nibert and a Preface by Ronnie Lee, the volume proceeds with an introductory chapter by the editors. The ten subsequent chapters are then spread across five parts: interdependency, unity, critical scholarship, radical education and taking it to the streets. The volume is completed by an Afterword written by Karen Davis.

The introductory chapter is of note for the way it raises a couple of points of tension within the internal politics of CAS and its relationship to those other iterations mentioned above. Firstly, it is claimed that animal studies (AS) is 'rooted in vivisection and animal testing in the hard sciences' (xxiii). Whilst there are undoubtedly overlaps and historical links between actual animal experimentation in the fields of psychology and animal behaviour, many AS scholars in the humanities for example, who might not fully identify with CAS, would not see themselves in this definition of AS either. Perhaps the editors are overly keen here to perform a moral dualism between CAS and AS, when instead nuances ought to be kept in play and the task

of contesting iterations of a disengaged AS should be the aim. Secondly, the editors are concerned to underline the CAS critique of aloof academic writing. On the grounds of accessibility this is a fair point; however, in taking aim at posthumanism when they speak of ‘jargon-filled, elitist theories characteristic of post-humanist approaches’ (xxiv), they arguably dispose of a useful frame and one that is not inherently abstract. Indeed, several subsequent chapters make affirmative use of posthumanism, such as Weitzenfeld and Joy’s chapter one (see e.g. also Drew and Taylor’s chapter) which includes posthumanists as amongst critical animal theory scholars (p.3). Their chapter provides a useful introduction to and overview of various concepts (such as anthropocentrism, humanism, speciesism and carnism) which have been an important part of the critical terrain over recent decades. Moreover, they reflect upon different modes of doing veganism, a theme which also recurs in later chapters.

Fitzgerald and Pellow in chapter two put work into arguably the key concept of CAS: intersectionality. They are clear about CAS’s debt to and close relationship with various feminisms as well as critical race theory. They also usefully discuss green criminology as another perspective that is helpful to understanding intersections and inconsistencies between other-than-human and intra-human relations of power. Like many of the other contributors to the volume, Fitzgerald and Pellow also devote some space to the notion of ‘total liberation’ which is sometimes used in CAS and is to the fore in this volume. It seems to be shorthand for communicating a political perspective based upon intersectionality. Whether or not it is limited by using the language of ‘total liberation’ (is it really possible to cleanse the social of all power relations?) or complicated by predation, it is useful to see further discussion and refinement of it in this volume, to ask whether it performs mainly as a strategic political rhetoric or whether it has conceptual content.

It is to such content that the next chapter by Colling, Parson and Arrigoni turns. Indeed, they argue that Steve Best’s notion of ‘total liberation’ contains a debt to late nineteenth-century French anarchist Élisée Reclus as an early theorist of intersectionality beyond the boundary of the human. The remainder of their chapter is devoted to a discussion of coalition-building as the political consequence of an intersectional or total liberation approach. In chapter four Jenkins and Stănescu intensify the discussion of veganism and offer a reflexive critique of what they term ‘boycott veganism’ for its inability to contest corporate power and its tendency to couch

political activism in individualistic terms. The alternative is to struggle collectively to create new communities, institutions and practices in what they term an ‘engaged veganism’.

In introducing part three of the book, Glasser and Roy write on bridging the gap between activism and the academy and produce one of the widest ranging and best thought-through chapters in the volume. Their section on improving how academics communicate their work beyond the academy is especially important, and they devote further space to thinking through how the aforementioned ten principles might be added to and worked upon. For Glasser and Roy the scholar should be a bridge builder, one that recognises their privileged position in working with knowledge and the responsibility that comes with that.

In chapter six Socha and Mitchell discuss interdisciplinarity, focussing upon the ways in which CAS as a field can be employed across disciplines as a novel frame. Through case studies and examples of lesson plans the authors show the reader how ‘animals’ can surface within a wide range of areas of knowledge, and that it is the artifice of disciplinarity that sometimes hides the relevance of animals to a particular area of knowledge production. In chapter seven Corman and Vandrovcová turn their attention to CAS pedagogy. An important theme to this chapter is countering the arguable over-representation of animal victimhood and stressing the need to represent animal subjectivities in theory, activism and teaching. Both authors draw upon their own personal teaching experience which is especially pertinent in the case of Corman as she teaches at Brock University in Canada, an institution that has made a considerable and rare commitment to the teaching of CAS. This chapter draws upon an impressive diversity of research and activist sources and also manages to include a discussion of the complex issue of whether to include graphic imagery of animal exploitation in teaching.

In chapter eight Australia-based authors Lara Drew and Nik Taylor take on and extend the CAS critique of distanced objectivity: the pretence of political disinterestedness. Clearly and convincingly written, this chapter furthers the CAS critique of the conservatism of the contemporary academy and underlines how the mainstream of the academy is yet to grasp a simple point from the sociology of science, namely that all knowledge production (and all methodology) is embedded within and performative of values. To recognise this would be to expose the status quo to unwelcome scrutiny. Drew and Taylor’s chapter also extends into the pedagogical, drawing specifically upon critical pedagogy with its focus on power relations, and

partnership and transformation in the research process, clearly identifying an important nexus of positioned scholarship and methodological and pedagogical reflection.

The focus upon academia builds even further in the penultimate chapter written by Grubbs and Loadenthal, which also discusses links between CAS and non-violent direct action. In exactly the sort of discussion that those writing within animal studies tend to shy away from, this chapter honestly engages with tensions between the academic location of CAS scholars and the question of radical extra-legal tactics. What is especially of interest in this chapter are the personal narratives of each author outlining the way their animal advocacy has been marginalised in the university context, as normative practices essentially act to protect the space which they dominate. Many readers will identify with their stories wherein the academy simply reflects the values of the broader society rather than some hoped-for idealised progressive space.

The final chapter is written by Richard White and Erika Cudworth. Interestingly, we see a return to a discussion of anarchism and the figure of Élisée Reclus, in particular his 1901 paper ‘On vegetarianism’ which could be seen as a forerunner of green anarchist perspectives. They then broaden their discussion into the terrain of intersectionality and political tactics, usefully listing ways in which scholars can act in relation *with* and *for* animals. Karen Davis completes the book with a short afterword reflecting upon the development of CAS from her vantage point as both a writer and experienced activist for animals.

Defining Critical Animal Studies is undoubtedly an important volume and will surely come to be seen retrospectively as a significant moment in the development of the field. It underlines CAS as an intersectional approach that, unlike so many in the academy, does not cease its labour at the boundary of the ‘human’. Whilst it contains some excellent chapters, it does not always achieve its aim of providing a clear outline of CAS. Occasionally there is repetition between chapters, and the book is not helped by its failure to discuss inconsistencies between the editors’ introduction and later contributors. A concluding chapter rather than an afterword could have made for a more rounded text. Yet in spite of these points this volume is an important contribution, and one would hope it is read widely especially by those outside (critical) animal studies, by readers of this journal and especially by those who do scholarly work related to human/animal relations while in their everyday lives continue practices that harm and exploit animals.

Works Cited

Best, S., A.J. Nocella II, R. Kahn, C. Gigliotti, and L. Kemmerer. (2007). 'Introducing Critical Animal Studies.' *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 5.1, 4–5.