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[Review] After Coetzee: An Anthology of Animal Fictions. Edited by A. Marie Houser, Faunary Press, 2017. 189 pp

Wendy Woodward
University of Western Cape

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Abstract

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A. Marie Houser introduces this collection with reference to J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace*. Houser identifies Elizabeth Costello as 'a kind of ur-animal-studies-scholar' (xii) with her 'restless agnosticism, [her] radical openness' (xiii) is an inspiration for this volume. Although Costello may theorise extensively about 'The Philosophers and the Animals' and 'The Poets and the Animals' she is not represented in an embodied 'encounter' with a nonhuman animal. David Lurie in *Disgrace* may have been 'adopted' by Driepoot, the lame dog at the veterinary clinic which subjects dogs from the township to euthanasia, but any potential relationship is foreclosed when Lurie consigns Driepoot to a lethal injection. The fictions in this collection follow after Coetzee even as they compensate for such lacks and implicitly engage with Costello's figuring of nonhuman animals in philosophy and poetry.

Costello is adamant that '[a]n animal – and we are all animals – is an embodied soul' (33). In the disturbing 'Cures and Superstitions' by Michael X. Wang, which narrates the karmic blurring of human and animal bodies and souls, two gullible Xinchun village boys are deprived of their rights. Like animals they are caged, their organs harvested, their bones marketed as tiger bones. In the dystopian 'Galaxies beyond Violet', migrants attempt to cross the desert, succumb to heat and thirst, return to their ancestral language. A rattlesnake is granted lyrical sensibilities and sensations as Melanie Rae Thon 'asks us to imagine our way into [the snake's] way of moving' as she figures his awareness as kinetic to paraphrase Costello on Ted Hughes' jaguar (51).

For Costello, because Ted Hughes' poem captures the kineticism of a jaguar 'we are for a brief while the jaguar' (53). The stories entice us into animal ways of being. 'Encomium: Sun' borders on the shamanic, with its poetic and disjunctive syntax, its fluid point of view. Gabriel Gudding has the narrator as a shape shifter who protests about the 'control' of animals whose bodies the visionary eye inhabits: 'We are as much passengers as the animals are' (136) is an interconnection which recurs in this volume. Such intersubjectivities recur in the list of behaviours which includes 'Those who are cows ... Those who are swine, Those who are horses' (131). Justin Maxwell's 'A Blinded Horse Dreams of Hippocampi' is a short play about inner seeing, about embodied hippocampi, sea horses, sea-monsters, a horse who riffs on structures of the brain a Homeric singer in an epic.

In 'How to Kill Butterflies' by Laura Madeline Wiseman, the killing and torture of small creatures contributes to a 'colony of memories' (150) for an abused child as though she too is insect. By the end of the story she is as trapped as the butterflies who cannot survive confinement in a box as the reader, to use Costello's words 'inhabit[s] another body' (51). Jonathan Balcombe's 'Red Admiral' also extends compassion to insects with the first person narrator, an entomology professor, finally admitting to himself that his lifelong career turned on the perception that insects were killable.

Taking an animal's point of view and voice is a brave strategy. Donna Haraway, in *When Species Meet*, praises Derrida for 'not fall[ing] into the trap of making the subaltern speak' (20). The writers of two 'realistic' stories, 'Her Man' and 'Who is this Dimaggio?' flout this dictum. The former story by Amy Cicchino takes a dog's point of view as she observes the man catching and gutting a mangrove red snapper, whose death she mourns as she refuses to eat the fish's head. A cat who tells J.T. Townley's story also judges humans negatively. In the denouement she claims the agency to choose her own future, although the ending is uncertain.

In 'The Philosophers and the Animals', discussed by Elizabeth Costello, the ape Sultan's bemusement and logic is pitted against the limitations of Wolfgang Kohler's behaviourist experiments. A number of stories in *After Coetzee* foreground animal incarceration and their experiences in contrast to their keepers' lack of 'sympathetic imagination'. The lyricism of

Ariana-Sophia Kartsonis' 'Procyon Lotor' renders the narrative of vulnerable animals who have escaped from a laboratory even more tragic. The embodied experience of these animals seems channelled (perhaps realism does not persuade the reader of the credibility of an animal's point of view). 'One of Your Number' by Diane Josefowicz is told by an imprisoned striped-face capuchin monkey who has been wrongly classified. Like Kafka's Hunger Artist, all he can do is starve himself in an attempt to be seen for the creature he is.

Costello's assertion that 'we treat animals like prisoners of war' (58) is thematised in 'Our Fathers, which Aren't in Heaven'. W.P. Osborn's untrustworthy narrator boasts about a shadowy white elephant who is a star attraction at his zoo. The animal is the epicentre of the story but he is never figured as a complete animal, as though he can never truly be 'seen', so fragmented is he by the human gaze. No possibility of escape exists for this elephant but, when he is shackled and tormented in a travelling circus, horrors follow in his wake. His mysterious agency contradicts Costello's sense that 'animals don't fight back' (58) – a reason she gives for why we 'despise' them.

Ways of being seen affect women as well as animals, as 'Truth be Told' and 'The End of the Line' illustrate. The focaliser in David Armstrong's 'Truth be Told' shifts between a man who is blinded by desire, a deer who is killed by his car and Jeanine who is in danger of dying from her injury because the man cannot 'see' her as she is, just as the deer was not seen. In 'The End of the Line', Olga Kotnowska also aligns the vulnerabilities of nonhuman animals with those of women – in this case Senor Alejandro's mare 'that shines' (174) and his wife who disappeared. Both stories critique (explicitly or implicitly) their characters' failure to discriminate 'female' from 'animal' with the central character's putative epiphany dependent on a realisation of this difference. (A quibble: horses do not have a 'snout' (168)).

The fictions in *After Coetzee* acknowledge both human and animal suffering and woundedness. The opening 'Number 2 Pencils for the White Cat' by Kyoko Yoshido explores an animal's right to his own story, but the white cat dies because the writer who appropriated his narrative cannot interpret his request for sustenance. Some hope of trans-species compassion manifest in the collection in 'The Goat', by David Brooks. The life of the abandoned Molly

reaches a positive closure as she, with her new hosting human, ‘high-step[s] through the grass’ (42). In the final story ‘The Sky Above Chairs’, by Gary Barwin, chairs are animate, animalised – they are birds congregating in flocks, they look back, but they carry ‘an underground of blood’ (179). As we bid them ‘Goodbye’ we are left with a sky that is empty.

Works Cited

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