

2021

[Review] Teya Brooks Pribac. Enter the Animal: Cross-species Perspectives on Grief and Spirituality. Sydney University Press, 2021. 262 pp

Donovan O. Schaefer
University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj>



Part of the Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons, Art and Design Commons, Art Practice Commons, Australian Studies Commons, Communication Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Digital Humanities Commons, Education Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Legal Studies Commons, Linguistics Commons, Philosophy Commons, Political Science Commons, Public Health Commons, Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons, Sociology Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Schaefer, Donovan O., [Review] Teya Brooks Pribac. Enter the Animal: Cross-species Perspectives on Grief and Spirituality. Sydney University Press, 2021. 262 pp, *Animal Studies Journal*, 10(2), 2021, 201-206.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol10/iss2/10>

[Review] Teya Brooks Pribac. Enter the Animal: Cross-species Perspectives on Grief and Spirituality. Sydney University Press, 2021. 262 pp

Abstract

Animal Studies Journal 2021 10(2): [Review] Teya Brooks Pribac. *Enter the Animal: Cross-species Perspectives on Grief and Spirituality*. Sydney University Press, 2021. 262 pp

[Review] Teya Brooks Pribac. *Enter the Animal: Cross-species Perspectives on Grief and Spirituality*. Sydney University Press, 2021. 262 pp

Donovan O. Schaefer

University of Pennsylvania

Teya Brooks Pribac's *Enter the Animal: Cross-Species Perspectives on Grief and Spirituality* is an invaluable contribution to an ongoing shift in the humanities away from the determination of our field within the coordinates of classical European humanism, what Sylvia Wynter has called 'Man as the rational self'. In this older vision of the humanities, the human is that which is defined, at a fundamental level, by its detachment from the body, the emotional, the animal, the biological, and the material. The question 'How are humans different from other animals?' will always be the most interesting and most foundational question of this version of the humanities.

Pribac's book joins a growing body of scholarship that seeks to renew and rebuild the humanities by renouncing the separation of the human and the animal. She builds her case across a series of reflections blending scientific and humanistic outlooks with her own experiences as a companion, caretaker, and advocate for animals. These vantages allow her to develop the claims that are at the heart of this book: Animals participate in the tangled lifeways that in humans we call spirituality. And animals grieve. And we humans, in turn, grieve for them, for all that is lost or stolen through the violence done to them.

In the book's introductory chapter, Pribac reviews the cult of human separatism that has come to dominate so much of the academic humanities and the sciences – not to mention street-level common sense, especially in societies steeped in the Euro-Enlightenment. This is the

ambient sensibility that sees humans as distinct and detached from the rest of the world around us, authorized to inflict violence and destruction on those we mark as our inferiors.

Chapter 1, ‘Animal Subjectivity’, contains Pribac’s overview of a range of scientific approaches to animals, from ethology to behaviorism. Pribac’s argument, in developing this history, is simple: to care for animals, we need to not just attribute minds to them, but to figure out what kinds of creatures they are. This means avoiding both mind-denial – animals portrayed as feelingless robots responding in fixed ways to their environment – and ‘mindless anthropomorphising’ (33), in which we render animals as replicas of our own psyches (humans in furry suits). Pribac insists, instead, on the need to grasp animals in their particularity, at the nexus point of species and individual. But where we *do* need to see commonality, Pribac suggests, is in recognizing that humans and our animal kin are united by a shared foundation in *feeling*, a conclusion she builds by marrying attachment theory with contemporary neuroscience.

Chapter 1 starts with an unorthodox parallel: Charles Darwin’s vexed medical biography, starting with the loss of his mother at age 8, and the unusual behavior of Chickweed, a chick at a bird sanctuary, after the death of Violet, another chick to whom he was bonded. These animals, scientist and avian, are united by a shared attribute: both, Pribac argues, exhibit an unsettled attachment style. This leads to Pribac’s introduction of one of her key theoretical tools, the attachment theory framework of psychologist John Bowlby, in which early relationships with caregivers have an overwhelming role to play in defining later attachment styles. Chapter 2 is where she shores up the foundations of her work in this area, and in particular her argument that we need to see attachment theory as a single explanatory framework enfolding a broad range of social animals, especially mammals and birds – though she also surveys evidence of attachment styles in non-avian and non-mammalian species (94).

Nonhuman animal grief comes into focus in Chapter 3, ‘Cross-Cultural Grief Matters’, as a hidden domain of animal pain that has been entirely walled off by our anthropocentric paradigms. Pribac considers how nonhuman animals who come to the attention of caregivers – sanctuary operators, for instance – are often profoundly traumatized by the sedimentation of abuse and deprivation that has marked their early life. Analyzing this through attachment theory,

Pribac concludes that these traumas are the likely drivers of the understudied phenomenon of animal suicide. She also considers and counters philosophical arguments that might be made against the possibility of animal grief, like an inadequate ‘death concept’ or the lack of direct expression of emotional distress.

Chapter 4, ‘Spiritual Animal,’ turns to Pribac’s review of the literature on animal religious/spiritual expression, again filtered through her interest in attachment theory. Her interest in the affective strata of subjectivity (for both human and nonhuman animals) again moves into the foreground with this analysis, as she marshals a compelling explanation of how spirituality (which she differentiates from ‘religion’ – see below) can cross species lines in the form of a tapping into the ‘realm of the implicit, experiential self’ (150). She characterizes this version of spirituality as a form of ‘affective *dancing with animacy*’ (151), a horizon of affective engagement with the vividly textured features of the world around us that unites humans with our animal kin. She combines this general theory of spirituality with attachment theory, which allows her to produce a novel understanding of spirituality as distinctly associated, for individual animals, with specific people, places, and objects.

In Chapter 5, ‘Grieving Animals,’ Pribac provides a richly narrated survey of ways humans grieve over animals we don’t know. This includes vigils for animals being transported for slaughter (dying in agony in overheated metal trucks or slowly starving in ocean freighters), the Open Rescue movement, in which live animals are spirited to safety directly from farms or markets, and the everyday work of running sanctuaries. She considers criticisms of some of these practices while also correlating them to the broader interest in attachment theory animating her work. She pays special attention to how both animal rescue *and* the industrialized slaughter of animals generate their own forms of trauma for humans working in these fields. The book’s concluding ‘Coda’ briefly attends to recent scholarship on something like mentation in plants and fungi as a new horizon of ethical consideration.

Enter the Animal continues a wider turn against exclusive humanism across the humanities that has been building in many corners for decades, but which has become particularly prominent in the last 10 years. The book’s virtues, however, are unique. For one

thing, it stages a truly interdisciplinary conversation, finding a common platform for the humanities and the sciences to speak together without subsuming one into the other. This is accomplished by taking science seriously as a source of fascinating and valuable knowledge about animals (human and nonhuman), while also carefully attending to the technological means by which this knowledge is produced. Her work reflects the sensitivity of STS scholars like Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway to the network of social and material elements that make scientific knowledge-production possible. For instance, she considers how dogs *experience* MRI machines – and how their difference from humans on this score refracts the kind of knowledges that are made about them (109). One could add to this data set the recent discovery of chimpanzee rock-throwing rituals, only made possible because of increased use of wilderness cameras. Effectively diagramming the successes of science also requires reflection on its limits – the interiors and locales where science has not reached (and, perhaps, cannot reach) as the necessary complement of the territory that science has already cast light on.

This same scrupulous attention to the concrete specifics of how we make knowledge about animals also leads to one of the book's most compelling features: an alert sensitivity to animals in their individuality. Just as Haraway in her *Companion Species Manifesto* and Jacques Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* call for a resolute thoughtfulness about animals in their similarities to and their differences from humans and from each other, Pribac is acutely interested in how to think about animals in their distinctive lifeways, at the level of species and individual history. Care, for Haraway, can't be an abstract wish for good things on the part of another human or nonhuman animal, nor can it be a selfish assumption that one's own conditions of flourishing are identical to those of the ones we love. Instead, to really care, we have to *know* the other, in their uniqueness, as both a member of a species and as an individual with their own biography, their own accumulation of memories, traumas, and attachments.

This sensitivity suffuses Pribac's book, underwritten by Pribac's own experiences with companion animals, many of them rescues living at sanctuaries. She describes, for instance, an interaction with a pregnant pig, Liza, rescued from a brutal backyard farming operation, having a troubled labour. Pribac uses a skin-to-skin contact method, known as 'kangaroo care', with Liza, putting her own body on the line to comfort a suffering creature. There's no effort to

fictionalize the effectiveness of this technique – Liza survives, but all 12 of her piglets are born dead – yet Pribac’s vivid description (and her account of how it shaped her own embodied sensitivity to other suffering animals) is remarkable. The personal and the academic are woven together in this book in a way that very few scholarly works manage to achieve.

This sensitivity to the textures of our lived encounters and experiences dovetails with one of the book’s major themes: the concern with how subjectivity is formed through the sedimentation of layers of feeling, rather than through a contraption of thoughts, words, and ideas. This is not to dismiss the power of ideas, of course, but Pribac’s focus on taking animality seriously means recognizing that we humans are not quite the angelic beings – lucid beams of pure intellect – we like to think we are. Instead, the way we think is itself fashioned inside the way we feel (which is, of course, partly why it’s so hard to change our minds about exactly the topics Pribac is concerned with). This also links to the way humans and other animals form spiritual relationships through our affective attachments with places, things, and other creatures: not by words alone, but through a set of connections constituted by emotion.

There are areas where the book’s focus on the experiential comes at the expense of a detailed engagement with wider conversations. For instance, I found Pribac sometimes begged the question of a difference between something called ‘spirituality’ and something called ‘religion’, with an implicit privileging of the former over the latter (172). This putative distinction has been viewed with suspicion in religious studies, which tends to reject the notion that we can see religion as including ‘implicit and explicit elements for human and nonhuman animals alike’ while spirituality is confined to an ‘implicit dimension that exists outside interpretative frameworks... a propensity of animals’ intrinsically relational, non-reflective, experiential, embodied consciousness’ (152). A binary arrangement of religion and spirituality as closed/open, structured/non-structured, explicit/implicit, cognitive/experiential, reflective/embodied sets up a polarity that inevitably collapses when we look at how ‘the spiritual’ and ‘the religious’ have played out in history.

Similarly, I wonder if there’s a risk in this approach of reiterating the kind of mind/body dualism that has led to so many conceptual dead ends in the western humanities (not

to mention the sciences and our everyday common sense). It seems to me that the real task for those who want to take animality seriously is not to valorize the nonreflective, but to show how even our thoughts and ideas are enfolded within fields of feeling. Rather than allowing the binary of thinking humans and feeling animals to stand, Pribac's own methodological tools – attachment theory and neuroscience, not to mention a more general attention to animal thoughts and feelings – actually incline us to a more nuanced picture in which we can see thinking and feeling, cognition and emotion, reason and affect as a single continuum, rather than a stratification.

Lastly, I wonder about the value of considering plant cognition in the book's Coda, especially where it mixes with Pribac's ethical upshot. There's a surge of interest in this topic at the moment, but this fixation is actually undermined by Pribac's book, particularly with its emphasis on the importance of feeling as a *sine qua non* of subjectivity. An animal that had been surgically separated from its nervous system would have no capacity to experience, feel, or think, though many physiological systems would continue to operate; plants, while exhibiting fascinating information-processing capacities, often in networks with other organisms, are in essentially the same position. What this thought experiment suggests is that the bar for 'feeling' needs to be set higher than the bar for 'thinking' – a conclusion that would shock the partisans of the Enlightenment, but that clarifies why it's so much easier to imagine a calculator 'thinking' than a calculator 'wanting'. Even the most ardent advocates of plant cognition, as I understand it, are skeptical that plants feel, and including attention to plants as part of Pribac's moral agenda seems to muddy the waters around what she's asking for.

In the long run, though, the value of *Enter the Animal* will be its capacity to kindle exactly these conversations. It's the species of scholarship the humanities needs much more of right now. Not only a well-crafted study of animals, humans, and their many channels of emotional attachment, it's a powerful intervention within the humanities more broadly – the dramatic unveiling, promised by the title, of the urgent necessity of taking the animal perspective seriously for understanding both nonhuman and human lifeways.