

# Queering Animal Acts

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Una Chaudhuri and Holly Hughes, eds. *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*. University of Michigan Press, 2014. 246 pp.

“**A**nimal Acts” writes Una Chaudhuri, “are a powerful way to change the world” (1). Performance arts, in particular, create room for political discussion, as well as forging alternative spaces, places, time, and creatures. Indeed, “[t]here is no doubt that we need to think unheard-of thoughts about animals, that we need new languages, new artworks, new histories, even new sciences and philosophies” (6), writes Matthew Calarco as he encourages interdisciplinary scholars to take new directions in unconventionally constructing research on the other : nonhuman animals. It is for this very reason that readers should be excited about Una Chaudhuri and Holly Hughes’ edited collection *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*, as it offers a fascinating and playful alternative to what has yet to be imagined for animal studies scholarship and animal rights activism. Through its critical praxis, *Animal Acts* performs multispecies perspectives (both as animal and human). These perspectives are acted out through lighthearted humor and wild imagery, while seeking to represent the position of various animals in their troubled relationships to human domination. While some of the performances within *Animal Acts* take up the subjective position of particular animals, other performances acknowledge the ways in which animals coexist with and co-produce human cultural worldviews.

Una Chaudhuri, a leading scholar in performance studies involving animal imagery and environmental impact, provides a rich and comprehensive introduction that fuses together the philosophical and the practical and encompasses various aspects of animals in human life. From dogs and cats to monkeys and insects, the editors and authors in the anthology analyze several fascinating animal performances. Each chapter begins with a performance written by distinguished performance artists (Holly Hughes, Rachel Rosenthal, Deke Weaver) and are followed by an analysis of that performance by some of the most renowned scholars in the fields of animal studies (Donna Haraway, Nigel Rothfels, Cary Wolfe) and critical performance studies (Jane Desmond, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes); these authors are a few among the many to contribute to this important text that engages in a political, philosophical, and theatrical commentary about the current position animals have in the twenty-first century. *Animal Acts* portrays a number of partial perspectives, some of which are fantastical, autobiographical, erotic, and historical. In response to practices and

ideologies that dominate, sublimate, and destroy the animal, *Animal Acts* radically reinterprets oppressive discourses, in order to propose other animals as (borrowing from Judith Butler) both intelligible and grievable.

*Animal Acts* teases, blends, and – in its own creative ways – queers our current ideological beliefs that posit humans as fundamentally distinct from other animals. Following from Sara Ahmed’s use of ‘queer,’ the animal characters, actors, and animal acts distort what is comfortably acceptable for other animals. In her text *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Ahmed explains queer in a doubling sense, not just an (anti-)identity that involves sexual orientation toward the ‘wrong’ object, but also an aesthetic and affective principle that disrupts normative or ‘straight’ perception (161). From this perspective, *Animal Acts* is queer not only in the ways readers engage with the text, but also the ways in which sexual acts are re-interpreted involving animal characters. The text’s queer imaginings draw attention to the many ways in which animals permeate our everyday lives and, in doing so, calls into question the common assumption that it is our language, rationality, or worldliness that separates us from animals. This is significant because although current cultural understandings of the animal – sewn together by various philosophical, scientific, aesthetic, and social discourses – often configure the animal as that which exists to entertain and give pleasure to the human, and may seem to be of little consequence to humans’ capacity to access resources to ensure their survival, these beliefs have powerful consequences for the bodies of other animals. Chaudhuri explains these discourses through ‘zoöēsis,’ a term used to describe “actual and [...] imaginative interactions with non-human animals” (“Animal Geographies” 647), fundamentally the “vast field of cultural animal discourse and representations” (*Animal Acts* 6). These multiple discourses are found in a number of cultural sources such as literature, art, media, and theatre, but also social practices such as meat-eating, pet owning, circus shows, dog-shows, and bullfighting (Chaudhuri, “Animal Geographies”; “Bug Bytes”; “Performance and Animal Life”). Put simply, the animal is everywhere in human experience; “Animals mean all sorts of contradictory things to different people” (Chaudhuri, *Animal Acts* 8). Building on this argument, Chaudhuri and Hughes’ text performs fractured representations tied to specific animals. In this way, the text itself seeks to disrupt the categorization of ‘animal’ as a restrictive and fixed category.

The task to both represent animals, while simultaneously disrupting this restrictive category, is by no means an easy task. At times, the performances present heteronormativity, westernized conceptions of animal subjectivity and neoliberal ways of perceiving the world; however, these norms were met with a critical unpacking by the subsidiary essays. While *Animal Acts* is about animals, it also presents animal oppression alongside various forms of human *othering*. Through this juggling act, Chaudhuri and Hughes take responsibility in staging intersectional reflexivity that

is required by any politically informed text. This responsibility is not only owed to other animals but to human groups that face daily oppression, marginalization, and trauma in the face of patriarchal, capitalist, and heterosexual norms that privilege some over others. Resisting the urge to stack chapters in an instrumental or systemic method, Chaudhuri and Hughes further honor this responsibility by producing a text that itself performs the fractures that they seek to expose (3).

The eleven performances in *Animal Acts* are stand-alone transcriptions. In other words, readers are not subject to reading each individual chapter in linear order. As a result, readers may be oriented toward certain chapters, titles or specific animals based on their own experiences and perspectives. Because the pieces are transcribed from live performances, readers are called forth to imagine the performances as they play out in their minds. Excerpts of the live performances, however, are posted for viewing on the book's website. This gesture allows for a number of bodily acts to unravel as readers move between textual to visual presentation. Readers perform acts to acquire textual and visual knowledge; readers are invited to move, while being moved; readers might even move alongside their animal companions. By means of accessing current information about animals in a society ran by global technologies, Chaudhuri writes that “[t]he ‘scientific facts’ about animals now commingle promiscuously with mythological remnants, old wives tales’, superstitions, rumors, saws, and Internet hoaxes. Do elephants really never forget (as Weaver’s elephant asserts)?” (8). The interconnections between visual and textual, performance and autobiography, truth and fact add to the blurring effect of the text. Other animals, through this blurring effect, are misplaced, found, and sought out in ways that are strange or off-kilter, hyperactive or digitized.

In the eleven performances included in the book, only one performance includes live animals on stage. This chapter is Rachael Rosenthal’s powerful full-length performance, *The Others*. Though the inclusion of animals in entertainment arts is nothing ‘new’ and has involved extreme forms of exploitation, Rosenthal’s *The Others* responds to the “immoral use of animals in art” (5). Influenced by a performance piece involving an actor and her pet rat, Rosenthal sought to ethically incorporate animals in performance art and to see these animals as agential subjects. From this position, the animals on stage were left to roam and act as they please. This inclusion of animals on stage was met with a finale adoption of the local shelter animals (all of whom have been abused and subsequently rescued by humans) into the homes of the audience members. Though the discussion of staging animals in performance is left open to the reader (most especially given that this performance concludes the text), we can still engage in the ways in which “[Animals] transform theatre’s relationship with representation by appearing as a real presence on stage; they challenge its meaning-making processes and invite a reassessment of the ways in which theatre is

produced, received and disseminated” (Orozco 3).

*Animal Acts* is rife with queer politics and imaginings that celebrate the ways in which other animals slip outside of categorical restrictions. Animal subjects are queer as they – like queer subjects – throw off the yoke of their biological determinations (i.e. taxonomy, sexuality, husbandry). Throughout the performances, animal characters engage in cross-species sexual desires. This is not only accentuated by the text’s cover that stages Stacy Makishi exposing her genitals to a wall of taxidermy mounts, but is evident throughout the text’s chapters. Personal stories of growing up queer in American society are shared in Holly Hughes’ *The Dog and Pony Show*, as well as Kim Marra’s *Horseback Views*, while Vicky Ryder, Lisa Asagi, and Stacy Makishi’s performance blurs the film noir genre with lesbian BDSM sex acts in *Stay!* Queer relationships are blended with fetishism and multispecies sexual desire. Queer animals are embellished in Carmelita Tropicana’s *With What Ass does the Cockroach Sit*, where a flirtatious parrot approaches orgasm with her male owner, and in Jess Dobkin’s *Everything I’ve Got*, which poetically enacts the drowning of the unicorn who refuses to couple-up on Noah’s Ark.

Species ontology is queered through the actor’s performances of animal subjectivity, while perception is distorted by the various acts that these animal-human-performers assemble. The multiple assemblages of subjectivity (whether it animal or human) queers perception even further in Tropicana’s *With What Ass*, an excerpt from *Queer Tales of a Transnational Cuban Cockroach*. Tropicana, who acts out all of the animal characters in her performance, stages multi-species desires as a metaphor for the desire of bodies across geographical borders. Discussions of race, transnational borders, and immigration are paramount to the piece; “Having animals and humans represent these contemporary social tensions on stage attempts to bridge an almost unsurpassable gap between divided communities” (85), responds Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes. Similarly, Kestutis Nakas’ *No Bees for Bridgeport* portrays bees as ethnic immigrants that move into a suburb, enacting the anxieties of the human (white, middle class) neighborhood. In this sense, animals are born as fables and become, as Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson writes in his analysis, “a screen upon which we—the readers and writers of fables—can project the exigencies of human political and social being” (106).

The book’s expression of queer animality—save for Tropicana’s queer Cuban cockroach—however, is, for the most part, limited to that of white, middle class subjectivities. This does not necessarily downgrade the political potential of the book; however, as the performances and subsequent essays show that any interaction with animals already involves, and cannot be separated from, hierarchies that produce certain types of human exceptionalism and privilege. Other animals are used to vali-

date and defend larger systemic ideologies of difference and oppression, such as racist and speciesist discourses that inform colonialism and imperialism. Nonetheless, even simple pet owning (and their breeding practices) are to a certain extent policed by norms of sex and race. In her performance *The Dog and Pony Show*, Hughes enacts the following:

And you will practice your tolerance, too. When you go to the party and the word gets out you have purebred dogs. And the jokes start in about ‘eugenics,’ then about ‘mutants,’ and ‘racism,’ ending with the ‘holocaust.’ You’ll laugh along. Otherwise you will have no friends, and you will be tempted to get even more poodles. (27)

In other words, even Hughes’ conventional practice of pet-owning a purebred dog highlights that quotidian experiences are informed by social and cultural norms. Notably, *Animal Acts* centers the often erased animal as the nucleus of the socially, geographically, and institutionally oppressed; it is through this centering of other animals in performance that the book’s political potential is reached.

*Animal Acts* is the first collection of its kind and invites future collections to embrace theatrical arts in animal studies scholarship. Through its intersectional blendings, *Animal Acts* evokes a queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-speciesist political framework. While readers might be oriented toward certain kinds of animal discourses, a sharp disorientation effect arises as each chapter disrupts our traditional and normative view of animality, humanity and the numerous dichotomies that create inequalities in the world at large. While some chapters address the pressing concerns and anxieties involving specific animal species at risk of extinction, such as bees and elephants, other performances engage in actors *speaking for* animals through characterization. Alas, each performance shows – in separate and unique ways – that animals never fully bend to human will. Whether it is the unexpected ejaculation of Holly Hughes’ dog ‘Presto,’ a runaway circus elephant, or a unicorn that refuses the ark of what Lee Edelman has coined “reproductive futurism,” each animal in *Animal Acts* reminds its readers that animals never truly embody the norms placed on them; instead, like humans, they continue to slip outside the discourses imposed upon them.

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