

[Review] Susan Nance and Jennifer Marks, editors.

*Bellwether Histories: Animals, Humans, and*

*US Environments in Crisis.*

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Lewis Hine's cover photo of an exhausted mule on a mine rail track and his too-young human co-worker is an arresting, tragic study of human and animal resignation and servitude. Behind the mule, another stands with his head on the leader's flanks as if for comfort. Behind them, filthy men with headtorches emerge from deep darkness. As Hine's image shows, environments in crisis in the US are by no means a recent phenomenon. Nor have animal bellwethers been acknowledged globally or in North American history. This salutary collection, conceived during the Covid pandemic presaged by (unheeded) warnings of global zoonotic diseases, redresses this, lending an urgency to case studies of animal-human histories without reductive solutions.

*Bellwether Histories* documents and analyses an ongoing tragic proliferation of the destruction of land, ecologies, indigenous human and animal inhabitants since colonisation. These case studies attest to the rapaciousness of what Alfred W. Crosby termed 'ecological imperialism' along with the absolute, unquestioned assumptions of 'animal disposability' and 'human exceptionalism' (ix). To counter such tenets, each writer reaches towards embodied animal experiences in archives or images, trawling for testimonies of animal encounters, reading against the grain, analysing entanglements of human and animal bodies.

Joshua Abram Kerckmar's essay considers 'American Humanitarian Writings, ca. 1800-1850'. This detailed study of poetry and other writings by Shelley, Keats, Charlotte Smith and Harriet Beecher Stowe aims to interpret the similar experiences of animals and enslaved peoples

via ‘Interspecies Anticapitalism’. The essay asks an unanswerable question that animal activists reiterate: why, after all the writings and reforms are the same problems extant? Jennifer Marks’ lively study of ‘Chicago’s 1872 Equine Influenza Epizootic and the Evolution of Urban Transit Technology’, often via then-current news media, proffers extraordinary detail of how the city’s entertainment, medical transport, elections, food deliveries all shut down because of the epizootic. Marks ushers the reader into an appreciation of embodied horse knowledge and how their management had, strategically, to foreground horses’ intelligence and their relationships with each other. Marks makes a broader point, which echoes throughout this collection, about ‘human dependence on animal labor shap[ing] industrial landscapes and practices’ (48). Tragically, however, such dependence exacerbates widespread lack of human care owing to the inherent ‘disposability’ of animals.

Susan Nance, in ‘Cattle and Blizzards: Lessons from the Big Die-Up in 1880s Montana’, points out how Chicago’s workhorses, mine mules, Iowa’s captive hogs, and range cattle all suffered because of this lack of care. (One of the strengths of this volume is the accruing debate as writers draw connections with each other’s case studies.) Nance’s essay covers native ecologies and animals, indigenous human inhabitants, the greed and stupidity of beef investors, life practices of cattle and the vulnerabilities they shared with working class cowboys in charge of them. At this confluence of factors is the embodied suffering of the cattle themselves that Nance graphically represents.

Two essays further foreground the environment and its manipulation and destruction by capital: Jessica Wang focuses on the role of the state in ‘Animals, Infrastructure, and Empire: Insects and Birds as Biological Control Agents in early Twentieth Century Hawai’i’. At the same time, both the environment and the imported insects and birds claimed agency, with the environment itself dictating the colonial order of the US and the creatures defying state control. They either behaved themselves or not, according to human predictions and the hopes of administrators and scientists. Mary Trachsel’s ‘The Destructive Ecology of Human-Pig Relations in Iowa since 1950’ encompasses no such agency for the hogs or the prairies – the indigenous rich diversity destroyed with the concomitant ‘ecological simplification’ (184) of the prairie biome. Trachsel also reviews the growth of the pig population, meat-eating, the

obliteration of small farms by agribusiness and the widespread pollution of the Mississippi, the Missouri and the resultant dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Iowa has become a dystopia – at the expense of the environment, people’s livelihoods, workers’ health, animals’ wellbeing – as Trachsel shows in measured language.

*Bellwether Histories* includes forceful images. Stephen Nelson Leek’s photographs of elks in early twentieth century Wyoming dramatically evidence animal experience, as Vanessa Bateman shows in ‘Animal Photography and the “Elk Problem” in Modern Wyoming’. She shows, too, the hypocrisy of ‘protecting’ the elks who were instrumentalised as targets for hunters and photographers. The photograph of an incarcerated hippo in Andrea Ringer’s study of ‘Captive Breeding and the Commodification of “Surplus” Animals at the Central Park Zoo, 1886-1974’ documents the abjection of the animal’s need for natural habitat and deep water. Ringer notes the horrors for zoo hippos in their captive lives; their mismanagement, the early death of a newborn hippo, ignorance about the animals’ embodied requirements even as they were viewed as ‘living capital’ (159) with orphaned progeny sold or bartered. Another zoo case study, John M. Kinder’s “‘The Next Meal for the Lions’: The US Occupation of the Baghdad Zoo, 2003-2004’ also includes distressing photographs, here of starved and mistreated animals. Kinder notes that this mismanaged zoo ‘occupation’ gives the lie to the view that the West is more humane to its animals just as it underscores the hollowness of the US self-promotion as ‘a force of liberation and global peace’ (207). Kinder reveals the complexities of the story, with the well-being and safety of the caged animals secondary to the propaganda of the imperial rescue narrative of zoo animals.

Kinder’s essay, like most of those in *Bellwether Histories*, restores the embodied integrity of suffering and dying animals, the tragedies of their lives and deaths. Most of these case studies respond, either directly or implicitly to a key question, mocking apparent human exceptionalism, posed in the preface: ‘For how long have we imagined that we could harm animals without harming ourselves?’ (ix). Still, the reader is left with vibrant representations of revived mules, horses, hippos, elk, hogs, cattle, insects and birds, lions and tigers. Some narrative justice has to reside there.