

[Review] Rosemary-Claire Collard, *Animal Traffic*.  
 Duke University Press, 2020, xv + 181pp.

---

**John Simons**  
**Macquarie University**

This book is sub-titled ‘Lively Capital in the Global Exotic Pet Trade’ and is a study of the trade in exotic animals as pets and curiosities. This is a timely and important topic and any book which seeks to expose this cruel and irresponsible trade is to be welcomed. Having said that, this book has both strengths and weaknesses especially as a study of the ‘global’ trade (where its range of reference is limited) and as an analysis of the process of commodification which animals undergo to establish that trade.

The book concentrates almost exclusively on Central and North America and although that is a strength as it enables a deep and detailed account of various manifestations of the trade in those regions, it is also a weakness as nowhere in the book will one find a similar analysis of the trade in Africa, the Middle East or Asia, especially China, which I would have thought were far more significant centres of the ‘global’ trade than the Americas. There is some mention of the shipping of animals, especially birds, from Africa to the USA but nothing of the market in artificial big game hunting (which is surely an aspect of the commodification of exotic animals) nor of the keeping of exotic animals as status symbols by the powerful men in the Middle East and Asia, nor of the enormity of the exotic animal trade as it feeds traditional Chinese medicine. In fact, China isn’t mentioned in the index.

However, it is unfair to criticize a book for what is not in it, so I will now look at what is in it, starting with methodology and then moving on to theory.

The author adopts a kind of participant observer (known as ‘spectator observation’) approach to her study and writes at length of her time attending exotic animal auctions in the

USA. There can be no doubt of the integrity and courage required to enter these potentially violent events and nobody could doubt the author's personal commitment to this research. Her accounts of the auctions make fascinating if depressing reading and remind us, if nothing else, of the urgent need for proper legislative frameworks to protect animals from being projected into these inhumane commercial settings. The price list of exotic animals given for one auction also makes fascinating reading especially when placed against similar lists for the exotic animal dealers in Victorian London, Liverpool, Antwerp or Hamburg. If we are really serious about writing history which gives presence and agency to animals then this kind of detail is essential.

The descriptions of what it is like to be at an exotic animal auction are lively and compelling and the analysis of what is actually going on is convincing. Having said that I think that while some readers will respond very positively to this approach, others may find that they would prefer a less personalized approach. This goes to the heart of what I see as an important debate in animal rights and animal studies scholarship and this concerns the relationship between personal commitment and belief and activism and scholarship. How does one balance belief and the academic expression of that belief? I like to see the traces of the person behind the words but, at the same time, participant observation often seems to lead one into a zone which is half-way between journalism and academic writing. For many readers this will be a good thing; others might wish for less local colour and more argument. This book seems to me to be on the very edge of a good balance between the two – which are not so much alternatives as positions on a spectrum.

The account of the author's stay in a wildlife reclamation centre in Guatemala also moves between a journalistic-confessional approach articulated through a journal of what she did while working at the centre and a consideration of the ways and means by which the wild nature of formerly captive animals may be reclaimed. In this section the balance may tilt too far towards journalism, as while it is interesting to read about daily life in such a facility (and the author captures the texture of the experience very well) the passages on the methods and success rates for the rehabilitation of formerly captive animals are too brief and whet the appetite for more which simply isn't forthcoming. This is a pity because the thoughts sketched out are fascinating.

Methodologically the book approaches the exotic animal trade through theories of commodification and commodity fetishism conducted through an engagement with Marx and commentators on Marx. Of course, it must be true that animals are commodified when they become goods or products in a specific market. At the same time, the trade in exotic animals has been going on for a long time and is not specifically a feature of Western modernity. What the author describes is a pretty kind of Marxism espoused one imagines only by those who know they will never actually have to live in a society run along Marxist lines. I hasten to say that I am not attributing any specific views to the author, just revealing my increasing lack of patience with theorising about culture and society in the face of the need for real understanding of real rights and welfare issues and the belief, increasingly attenuated (in part due to the unhelpful and wildly inflated influence of Derrida on animal studies), that animals really exist and have personhood. The point is that animals are turned into things in pretty much every human society which has gone beyond (if that is the right term) subsistence economics, hunter gathering or hunting and it doesn't matter to the animals whether these are capitalist or socialist societies (except that currently capitalist societies tend to have better welfare laws). I'd recommend Judith Shapiro's excellent *Mao's War against Nature*, Komarov's *The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union* or Diaz-Briquets's and Pérez-López's *The Environmental Legacy of Socialism in Cuba* as bracing antidotes to any belief that the plight of animals and the trashing of their habitat is the result of their implication in the machinations of the military-industrial complex as it expresses itself in consumer capitalism.

To sum up. I think that the strengths of this book are considerable and outweigh what are to me (but would not be to every reader) its weaknesses. I think there is still a space for a book which addresses the global traffic in exotic animals and perhaps Professor Collard is the person to write it. I also think there is need for an urgent address to the global implications of thinking about animals. Professor Zhao Nanyuan of Tsinghua University has described the kind of research and ethical thinking which goes into a journal like the one you are reading now as 'foreign trash' and I have personally come across the critique that animal welfare is for rich countries when lecturing on animal rights in various former Soviet bloc countries in the 1990s. This not a trivial criticism and it is incumbent on us to find ways to counter them in a productive way. I suspect that counting the angels dancing on the head of the pin of neo-Marxist commodity theory is not likely to be one of them.