

[Review] Penny Johnson.

*Companions in Conflict: Animals in Occupied Palestine.*

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**Esther Alloun**

**University of Wollongong**

**ea863@uowmail.edu.au**

Penny Johnson's book *Companions in Conflict* is the first monograph to date to focus on the 'histories and intertwined fates' (ix) of animals who live between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, a region otherwise known as Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). It is an informative, well-written and well-researched book which makes an important and valuable contribution to Animal Studies scholarship. From the outset, Johnson posits that 'animal lives can illuminate human hopes, fears, and absurdities in a small land scarred by conflict and occupation' (xiii). At the same time, she aims to move beyond an anthropocentric account where animals are used as a foil for stories we, humans, tell about ourselves. Indeed, she writes that 'animals are more than passive reactors to human action. Equally important are the *shared* lives of humans and animals on the ground today and over many centuries' (xiii). As such, she asks what the conditions for this shared flourishing might be, ultimately calling for more response-ability (in the vein of Donna Haraway and Cora Diamond) towards animals who are 'our fellows in mortality, in life and on earth' (xvi). The introduction chapter sets the scene for the book's 'multi-optic' approach (to use Claire Jean Kim's term, 18), one that takes different forms of animal and human oppression and injustice seriously as they collide in the war zone of Palestine/Israel. This is a particularly difficult line to tow – my own research into human and animal rights activism in the region has taught me as much – and Johnson, through her evocative prose and illuminating examples, struggles with this as well. Before exploring this issue in more detail, I first give a brief chapter summary of the book.

Set in the Occupied West Bank where Johnson has lived for 30 years, each chapter moves to a different animal species and draws on historical accounts, folklore, media, observations, interviews, and encounters. Camels are the main characters of Chapter 1 which is particularly rich and takes us through dramatic transformations and history stretching from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century till the present day; here, camels emerge as companions in conflict (sometimes in the literal sense as with their conscription as combatants in WWI) whose plight mirror those of displaced Palestinians. In chapter 2, we meet ‘mammals behaving badly’ (27) and learn about the much-feared striped hyena purportedly roaming the Palestinian countryside. Chapter 3 turns to Palestinian shepherds and their flocks confronted with mounting socio-ecological and political challenges which create conditions of deep insecurity and exhausting precariousness. Chapter 4 takes human-donkey relationships as its focus and the role of working animals among marginalised communities. Chapter 5 follows cows and how they have become ‘a binational obsession’ (155) at ‘the centre of the Palestinian/Israeli economic warfare’ (117) in the context of competing dairy industries on either side of the Green Line. Chapter 6 examines another human-wildlife conflict in the growing number of wild boars in the OPT. Johnson convincingly argues that the kind of environmental racism and colonialism which underpins Israeli authorities treating the West Bank as ‘sewage and garbage dumps’ (149) enables and sustains the conditions for wild boars to thrive and attack Palestinians and their crops. The figure of the jackal takes centre stage in chapter 7 mostly through a historical and literary analysis; as for their impact on the ground, Johnson notes that ‘jackals are equal-opportunity raiders’ damaging both Israeli and Palestinian farm infrastructures (152). Chapter 8 surveys the plight of other wild animals including gazelles, ibexes, and wolves, delving deep into ‘the lives and prospects of wild creatures in a land that is crisscrossed with human barriers, both physical and ideological’ (182-183); even naming animals becomes tangled in competing politics of (human) sovereignty and nationalisms.

Johnson does a very good job of showing how human oppression and survival can easily override other concerns like animals and the environment in the OPT. In the context of immense suffering, occupation, human rights’ violations, ongoing colonisation and dispossession, and violence through slow death and disposability (as Jasbir Puar powerfully

demonstrates), this is not surprising. Forced into humiliating and dehumanising interactions with Israeli authorities, Palestinians feel they are not seen as *fully human* themselves. As such, Johnson exposes the ways Palestinian animal and environmental activists pit what she calls their ‘radical hope’ (210) against this tragic reality. For example, the Palestinian Wildlife Society wrestles with very negative public perceptions of the endangered striped hyena accused of terrorising people and killing livestock (with little to no evidence). By their own account, this long-held fear and loathing is very difficult to shift and often results in lethal outcomes for the scavenging animal (this is not unlike the treatment and tragic fate of many stray dogs in the OPT, see Alloun). More broadly, the Society’s lobbying for environmental and wildlife protection is thwarted by more pressing concerns for development (as well as occupation and conflict, see chapter 3 and 6). Members of the Palestinian Animal League that Johnson meets in Chapter 4 come up against similar obstacles in their campaigns for working animals: Palestinians in the Jordan Valley are deeply impoverished and under the constant threat of eviction and home demolition from Israeli authorities and as such, the welfare of their working donkeys can appear as a luxury they cannot afford.

These and other examples in the book highlight that human politics is difficult to set aside, even while focusing on animals: hyenas’ habitat has shrunk and become more fragmented because of the Israeli-built Separation Wall, forcing more human contact (41). It is illegal to build any structure or plant trees to protect donkeys (and humans for that matter) from the heat in Wadi Qelt since this region of the Jordan Valley was declared a nature reserve and turned into an Israeli-controlled ‘Area C’ (96). Cows in the burgeoning Palestinian dairy industry have no pasture to graze because these have been colonised and ‘cows, like humans, must respect Area C’ (122).

Johnson further contextualises animal welfare and environmental concerns in the country’s history, revealing how and why the social meaning attached to animals and landscapes is steeped in histories and ongoing realities of imperialism and colonisation, from the British Mandate to today’s state of Israel. For me, this is another very important contribution of the book. For instance, we learn that in a move to ‘civilize’ and ‘tame’ Palestine, British authorities targeted working camels deemed responsible for over-grazing (18-19) while declaring a war on

Palestine's native black goats who had 'bad habits' (59) and lower milk yields (58-61). This colonial politics of containment (camels) and eradication (goats) continued under Israeli rule. In addition, British anti-cruelty legislation and its 'civilisational' underpinning primarily affected Palestinian Bedouins and *fellaheen* (farmers) who perceived it as yet another tax they could not afford. Johnson also shows that today, animal welfare and environmental sustainability are weaponised by Israeli colonial authorities to extend control over Palestinians and their lands and/or to cast them as barbaric and savage.

Against this complex and violent backdrop, I was struck by the recurrence of madness as a theme that traverses the book. It is as if madness is a symptom of what could be called the twinned maladies of human-animal relationships (or anthropocentrism) and settler colonialism. Page after page, we get a sense that there is something mad and maddening about colonial domination, oppression, arbitrary restrictions and violence, and how this affects both humans and animals (albeit in different and uneven ways). This affective and structural dimension of settler colonial control haunts the narrative. Take the example of camels again. They are a species that for, better or worse, is associated with Palestine. As a prominent symbol of orientalism evoking 'primitive mode of life and countless stereotypes of Arabs in Western media' (Johnson 13), some Palestinians prefer to forget they ever had such an important role in their livelihood and economy (what Johnson calls 'the repressed camel memory syndrome', 13). Interestingly, we learn that as early as the 1940s the grey camels of Palestine are described as a little mad by British travellers: they are prone to 'sudden fits of temper or temporary madness' (7), one of them observes; they are, in other words, enraged and irrational. And the camels' 'odd features' (6) are transferred onto their Palestinian Bedouin owners as they refuse to comply with British rules. Indeed, for the Mandate government and in the newly formed state of Israel, 'the unsettled Bedouin' (19) who disregard borders and whose? authorities are unstable (geographically, mentally) and irascible like their flock of camels. As a result, these mad camels and humans are forcefully relegated to liminal spaces and the margins of society, in the desert. For the camels who remain in cities against the odds like the charismatic Kojac whom we meet in chapter 1, life continues to be challenging. When in 2011 the camel-raising Abu Hawa family is unable to obtain a permit for camel rides from the Jerusalem (Israeli-controlled) municipality,

Kojac is confiscated from them and imprisoned alone in a shack on the outskirts of Jerusalem. When he is released, the traumatised Kojac tries to attack his owner: ‘Kojac had become *majnun* (crazed) during his incarceration’, his human companion concluded (Johnson 26). *Majnun*. Crazed and angered from insane human and colonial domination.

These long-term effects of carceral politics and Israeli repression are felt across the book and across species: as Johnson reminds us, ‘over the half century of military occupation, about one quarter of the Palestinian population, overwhelmingly but not exclusively male, has spent time in prison’ (45). Is it a surprise then, she asks, that young men resort to violence against animals they fear and do not understand in a (misguided) attempt to protect their communities? Not unlike Kojac the camel, have these men also gone a little *majnun* from being behind bars and returning to a place that is likewise imprisoned behind a wall? This resonates with what Palestinian animal activists call ‘the cycle of violence’ (see Alloun) particularly as we see it intersect here with masculinity. As Johnson also concludes, human and nonhuman animals in Occupied Palestine exist ‘inside a matrix of control’ and a politics of fear (48).

*Companions in Conflict* also particularly stands out in its capacity to portray the *diversity* of people, landscapes, and social and political organisations in the OPT. In scholarship on Israel and Palestine, the complexity and difference of Palestinians’ identities, living conditions and positionalities often gets lost beneath the overwhelming and homogenising national narratives of an oppressed Palestinian nation. This tendency is often driven by good intentions but perhaps also reflects an unhelpful legacy of colonial and orientalist mindsets. Yet, and as Johnson describes, besides the multi-layered regime of Israeli law and administration that governs Areas A, B and C, there are significant divides between urban centres and rural areas, Bedouin Palestinians, *fellaheen* and landowners, and also Palestinian refugees displaced from territories in Historic Mandate Palestine in 1948 and relocated in refugee camps in the West Bank, creating shifting hierarchies, tensions and complex intracommunal relations. These dynamics also shape human relationships to animals and the environment. Johnson takes us to a variety of locations in the Occupied West Bank, in declining small villages, among flocks of sheep, in nature reserves, military courts, refugee camps, the bustling cafés of Ramallah and its middle-class, university campuses, and even in an élite horse-riding school to illustrate the many worlds that exist within

the OPT where ‘interaction is rare’ despite their ‘close proximity to each other’ (77).

Relatedly, not all Palestinians feel the effects of colonisation and occupation in the same way, nor do they always and necessarily see it as their main problem. We are able to see this with the ways that some NGOs work with Israelis on the other side of the Green Line (to rehome animals in zoos for example) while others refuse.

Overall, ‘the question of whose lives are valued and how human and animal rights and welfare might be intertwined looms large’ (95) in the book. As mentioned at the start, this raises significant and recurring dilemmas for many Animal Studies scholars and advocates committed to a multi-optic approach to justice. At times, Johnson seems to sidestep the question by resorting to ideas of ‘intertwined’ welfare (43), ‘shared lives’ (xiii), and the ‘common lives’ of humans and animals that ‘come in strange shapes’ (49). As other Animal Studies scholars have pointed out (see for example Arcari; Giraud; Probyn-Rapsey), the problem with these notions of ‘entangled’ or ‘multispecies’ lives is that they risk papering over the very unequal power relationships and distinct positionalities between humans and animals that are drawn together in these phrases. What comes after entanglement (to borrow the title of Eva Haifa Giraud’s brilliant book) and Johnson’s self-confessed romanticism of looking into the eyes of a working donkey and seeing a ‘moment of contentment’ (99)?

It is all the more difficult to answer this question in the book because consideration for animals’ viewpoints, especially farm animals, is sometimes patchy: it is absent from chapter 3 on goats and sheep (the use of their bodies and by-products is not given pause) who are said to have ‘simple problems compared to the problems of men and women’ (78); and when animals’ perspective surfaces, it is quite late in the analysis. Towards the end of chapter 5, Johnson switches to the optic of the dairy cow as she concludes the visit of a large dairy farm near Hebron which, she emphasises, provides livelihood and jobs for Palestinian women, and some independence from Israeli dairy products. There, she finally stops to ask the tough questions: ‘can we afford to worry about the restricted and unhappy lives of these bovine animals who have nurtured our human journey for so long?’ (122) Can economic development under occupation be balanced with animal rights? She leaves the question open, concluding instead with the idea of ‘think[ing] small’ and reframing farming as ‘mutual work’ (124).

The book ends with Johnson noting that ‘common lives [...] must mean a common struggle both against Israel’s occupation and for the future of land that both people inhabit along with all its living creatures’ (203). This is in line with ideas/ideals of intersectional justice and liberation popular in Critical Animal Studies, and it is hard to disagree with such an agenda. Yet, I was a little surprised to find this at the end of a book that painstakingly reveals the contradictions and complexities that inhere precisely from taking human and animal life seriously. These questions cannot simply be wished away (as Johnson is no doubt aware); they are lived and felt in the everyday experiences and embodied engagement with the settler colonial state, including in the affective dimension and diversity highlighted earlier. Activists working on the ground remind us of this, and for me this is a particularly important point that deserves further consideration alongside Johnson’s call for listening and imagining otherwise.

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