

[Review] Tomaž Grušovnik, Reingard Spannring and Karen Lykke Syse, editors. *Environmental and Animal Abuse Denial: Averting Our Gaze*. Lexington Books 2021. 242 pp.

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Every day, in the late afternoon, the rescued sheep I live with take me for a walk. We cross the swamp and settle in a little arboretum on the other side, which is close to a road but concealed enough so that most people walking past don't see us. Occasionally, however, someone does. The sheep interrupt their grazing. I notice the absence of that gentle and consistent sound their mouths make as they feast on the grass. I look up from the book I'm reading, and there they stand, still, gazing in the same direction. I turn around and there'll be a human, unaware of me, taking photos of the sheep. Recently it was a woman on her way to a choir practice. She'd arrived too early and decided to wander for a while. She couldn't believe how lucky she was. *Sheep!* It made her day, she said. It was an endearing encounter, though somehow odd. While it's true that sheep are rather uncommon in urban and semi-urban areas, the Australian countryside is populated with 104 million sheep. Most of them have neither a good life nor a good death, thanks largely to denial practiced by a substantial part of the human population, including most 'animal lovers'. Having sheep in the family also means that we come in contact with animal agriculture workers of various kinds. One soon learns that it's not uncommon for a 'farmer' to keep a few sheep (or other animals) as 'pets' and then several thousands of other individuals of the same species for other uses and eventual slaughter.

Intersections of worlds are interesting. Different experiences breed different views; what we all have in common is the need to make sense of our worlds in a way that would enable

us to resolve dissonance and retain internal consistency. Sometimes, for the onlooker, denialism is so overt that it hurts. Other times denialism is more disguised, inviting humility and making one wonder: to what extent am I engaging in it myself?

In *Environmental and Animal Abuse Denial*, subtitled *Averting Our Gaze*, the editors Tomaž Grušovnik, Reingard Spannring and Karen Lykke Syse gather eleven chapters in which authors attend to various aspects of practiced denial and its possible sources in the areas of animal abuse and environmental devastation. Before opening the book, the reader may (or perhaps should) choose to spend a little bit of time with the cover image. If they do so they will notice cows in a barren lot – probably a feedlot. There is some vegetation in the background but it's out of reach of the cows, as are the mountains and, naturally, the sky. What is left, for now, is each other. A closer look at the picture reveals pairs communicating, lying close together, small groups gathering together, all of which is indicative of meaningful interactions and relationships. There is little randomness in this image, and in the other-than-human animal world generally, even if this often escapes us.

The introduction to the book provides a useful overview of the literature of denialism as well as of the chapters in the book itself. Denialism, in this collection, is used as 'an umbrella term for social, cultural, and psychological mechanisms that help individuals and societies continue with their lifestyles despite facts and figures that point to detrimental consequences of their actions for both the environment as well as lives of animals' (2). The elephant in the room may be a 20th century phrase, but, as we learn from the introduction, its conceptual and practical referent has preoccupied thinkers at least since antiquity. Playing with the elephant metaphor, in the chapter 'The Horse in the Room', Reingard Spannring and José De Giorgio-Schoorl look for the horse in social science research on human-horse relationships, but fail to find the horse. They can find a silhouette of a horse, some behavioural responses that could be elicited by pressing certain buttons, etc., but generally speaking, the horse – that psychologically, cognitively and socially complex individual – is absent. When the horse protests and the horse's agency and desire for self-determination become hard to ignore, such protest – resistance – is viewed 'as a problem to be solved by more training and better management' (192). Indeed, as the authors note in relation to horses – but it also applies to other species, such

as dogs – even the more intimate, loving relationships ultimately tend to operate ‘within the confines of the speciesist and anthropocentric conviction that humans can legitimately use nonhuman animals for their purposes and desires’ (188).

Human arrogance and the ensuing anthropodenial (a term introduced by Frans de Waal to describe blindness to humanlike characteristics of other animals) are taken up by Adam See in the fourth chapter ‘Human Uniqueness, Animal Minds and Anthropodenial’. It’s perfectly fine for humans to claim that a particular characteristic is unique to humans without going to great lengths and examining the rest of the animal realm for some confirmation of the validity of such claim. However, when we challenge assumptions of human uniqueness we run into all sorts of conceptual and technical barriers. In this chapter, See discusses, in relation to animal cognition, some of the problems and potential traps that warrant attention in order to avoid settling for a ‘well-intentioned agnosticism’ which ultimately manifests as denialism (75). If other-than-human animals have a mind – and many humans would agree they do – it is a ‘simple’ one at best, most would argue. The categories of simple and complex, however, are less simple and more complex than we used to believe. A great deal of ‘complex’ and ‘intelligent’ human behaviour, perhaps most of it in our daily life, See points out, ‘is the product of mechanisms once thought to be ‘simple’’ (77).

Simplicity and complexity come into play again in Craig Taylor’s chapter ‘Suffering Animals: Creaturely Fellowship and Its Denial’. It is not the knowledge (the accumulation of data, complex analyses, etc.) that other animals can and do suffer that touches and eventually convinces us, Taylor argues, rather it’s a ‘simple’ encounter with other animals and a sense of fellowship derived from it that does it. Facts and abstractions can actually serve as a ‘kind of protection from our sense of bodily existence’, they enable denial of our ‘shared animal vulnerability’ and create ‘distance between us and other animals’ (97).

This distance, Tomaž Grušovnik argues in the chapter ‘Skepticism and Animal Virtues: Denialism of Animal Morality’, is used to protect ourselves further – from that ultimate inescapable vulnerability: our finitude. Death. Physical annihilation. We all die, but that’s an unsettling thought. Animals die, that’s ‘natural’, but we are not animals, we are different: we

have culture, we have ethics – of course other animals have that too but we choose to ignore it; we need these concepts to apply to humans alone because they are ‘our special metaphysical ingredient that cuts us off from the fragile continuity in the natural world’ Grušovnik argues (61-62).

Along those lines, the killing of nonhuman animals and eating their flesh is often perceived as ‘natural’ regardless of how *un-natural* the entire operation may be and the amount of resources – financial and others – the industry may be investing into both disguising the violence of the production process and promoting the consumption of the end product.

For instance, in the chapter ‘Brave New Salmon: From Enlightened Denial to Enlivened Practices’ Martin Lee Mueller and Katja Maria Hydle discuss in some detail the salmon feedlot industry. In this industry the subjectivity of the salmon is largely ignored (or denied), but that was expected. What struck me as incredible, for someone who has managed to survive without salmon (and other animal products) for close to two decades, is the extent people would go to in order to keep these businesses in operation both in terms of the (complicated) micromanagement of the feedlot environment but also, or especially, in relation to planned expansions of the industry in the ocean and on land; a Danish company, for example, is planning a salmon farm in the Gobi Desert (113).

To make ‘meat’ eating feel natural, to keep animal subjectivity but also the environmental impact of these industries out of human minds and to make veganism feel like an assault on freedom and choice, one will need a substantial amount of money, extensive lobbying of decision-makers as well as other (creative) manoeuvres. John Sorenson and Atsuko Matsuoka discuss these aspects in their chapter ‘Political Economy of Denialism: Addressing the Case of Animal Agriculture’. Among other interesting things, we learn that over a period of three years ‘the EU spent tens of millions of euros on anti-vegan/vegetarian campaigns, countering health warnings and characterizing growing awareness about animal cruelty as ‘fake news’’ (150). We also read about ‘mommy bloggers’ – women, ‘ordinary moms’ who work for the industry, or endorse its agenda. Their role is to reassure the public – and who wouldn’t trust a mom? – that

the entire complex is ethical and safe: meat is healthy, antibiotics and pesticides are safe, animal welfare is the industry's top priority, etc.

Ironically, to some extent it may be the very fact that 'meat' doesn't look much like an animal at all that makes it feel so natural and normal to consume. Karen Lykke Syse and Kristian Bjørkdahl discuss the transition from butcher shops to supermarkets in chapter seven with the self-revealing title 'The Animal That Therefore Was Removed from View: The Presentation of Meat in Norway, 1950-2015'. I find certain verbal imagery in this chapter disturbing (rather than witty which was probably the intended effect); two examples include: 'to put some historical meat on the bones of this admittedly rather crude thesis' and 'structural changes ... needed to beef up the yields' (131). The authors conclude that denial is principally a social phenomenon, rather than individual. I support this view, however it's also important to acknowledge individual powers and responsibilities. Susanne Stoll-Kleemann touches upon these tensions of group/individual in her chapter 'From Denial to Moral Disengagement: How Integrating Fundamental Insights from Psychology Can Help Us Better Understand Ongoing Inaction in the Light of an Exacerbating Climate Crisis'.

An interesting psychological phenomenon in relation to the climate crisis and the overall destruction of the planet and species extinction manifests in scientists who claim that in reality nature is thriving, and invite us to celebrate the Anthropocene as a "rambunctious garden" planted by humanity'. We learn about these views known as 'eco-optimism' or 'techno-eco-optimism' (because adherents tend to rely on technology to provide solutions) in the chapter 'Celebrate the Anthropocene? Why "Techno-Eco-Optimism" Is a Strategy of Ultimate Denial' by Helen Kopnina, Joe Gray, Haydn Washington and John Piccolo. The authors describe eco-optimism as a denial strategy and instead propose an eco-realistic view that abandons anthropocentrism and embraces eco-centrism in recognition of the intrinsic value of planetary existence.

Abandoning old views, however, is easier said than done. Old views are not just views, they are attachments. At some deep level we love them, we don't want to part with them, they make us who we are, or so we often feel. We may be aching for a change but then 'culture

enters', writes Arne Johan Vetlesen in the chapter 'Denial as a Sense of Entitlement: Assessing the Role of Culture', centred on the complex relationship of the Norwegians with the(ir) oil industry. Cultures have a lot to answer for, but they too have their beginnings and their ends.

In the last chapter 'Still in the Shadow of Man? Judicial Denialism and Nonhuman Animals', Opi Outhwaite takes us on a journey through the courts that considered (or rather, *refused to* consider) some cases brought by the Nonhuman Rights Project, which aims at changing the legal status of certain nonhuman animal species. It's an interesting and informative read and another sad reminder of how deeply rooted human exceptionalism is in all spheres of life.

However, the concluding remarks of one of the judges are encouraging:

Efforts to extend legal rights to chimpanzees are ... understandable: some day they may even succeed. Courts, however, are slow to embrace change... As justice Kennedy observed... 'times can blind us to certain truths and later generations can see that laws once thought necessary and proper in fact serve only to oppress'. (212)

E pur si muove, and things do change. This includes academia, another reluctant change-hugger: 'What is ignored or avoided in everyday life is also often ignored or avoided in academia', Spanning and De Giorgio-Schoorl remind us (187). So it's good to see this book out. It's a little pricy (RRP Hardback US\$100, eBook US\$45) leading many to rely on libraries for access, I missed some real flesh-and-blood nonhuman animal voices in it, and it would have been interesting to hear about the authors' own perspective-changing encounters. Overall, however, it's a useful reference book for the topic of denial in relation to nonhuman nature that will hopefully inspire greater kindness toward and respect for planetary life.