

From Disability to Eco-ability

[Review] Anthony J. Nocella II, Amber E. George, and J. L. Schatz, editors. *The Intersectionality of Critical Animal, Disability, and Environmental Studies: Toward Eco-ability, Justice, and Liberation*. New York: Lexington Books, 2017. 168 pp.

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The Intersectionality of Critical Animal, Disability, and Environmental Studies: Toward Eco-ability, Justice, and Liberation (hereafter, *Intersectionality*), edited by critical scholars Anthony Nocella II, Amber E. George, and J.L. Schatz, is the follow-up collection to an earlier anthology edited by Nocella II, Judy Bentley and Janet Duncan. Published in 2012, *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation: The Rise of the Eco-Ability Movement* was visionary in illuminating entanglements of the struggles that people with disabilities share with environmental and nonhuman animal oppression (similar to the realization of the shared oppression of women, animals and the environment that sparked ecofeminism). This connection is termed ‘eco-ability.’ Major themes from *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation* were that those not considered normal – either physically, mentally, or emotionally – are not disabled but merely *differently*-abled, and that the underlying presumption of normalcy is itself a flawed social construction, not a well-defined criterion for judging one’s suitability for inclusion into moral and social consideration.

Intersectionality proceeds through seven chapters that build on these foundational themes while making new connections. Contributors have backgrounds in special education or disability studies, and/or environmental science or education. Thus the expertise in this volume is admirable. With case studies and experiences from the U.S. and Canada, on the whole, *Intersectionality* focuses on inclusion of the disabled person into activism and liberation discourse,

and not marginalizing individuals deemed ‘others’ or outside the norm, within social justice struggles.

As a case in point, in her contribution, Judy K.C. Bentley describes going to a conference on disability studies as someone studying special education and feeling marginalized by other attendees. Disability studies scholars overgeneralized special education teachers as oppressive and an overall hindrance to students with disabilities and disability liberation because teachers uncritically followed unhelpful school and federal mandates. This constructed a scholar-teacher dichotomous hierarchy, and came from those whom Bentley viewed as allies in proclaiming inclusion and speaking against ‘Othering.’ Sarah Conrad addresses this theme further by stressing the point that the focus on in-person, physically related activism as the hallmark of environmental and animal advocates marginalizes people with disabilities who may wish to participate but whose physical, emotional, and/or mental stresses impede the possibility. Other themes include: emphasising that Western education reinforces dualisms that value one category at the expense of another (such as able versus disabled, human versus animal); we must learn to be interdependent, not independent (value our diversity); not to work *for* those with needs, but work *with* everyone in community-building; and that if we do not rethink and re-practice the anthropocentric and ableist outlook, we will reconstruct the same oppressive web of circumstances we are in now.

What is of invaluable importance about *Intersectionality* is that it alerts readers to the possibility that while we may proclaim inclusion, at the same time we may perpetuate potentially prejudicial oversights that exclude certain groups. Although a focused volume, *Intersectionality* does not limit itself to the intersections of animal, disability or environmental activism and liberation. It also encourages reflection on what other implicit biases might exist within individuals or organizations. Sarah Conrad gives examples of how racist, sexist, and ableist notions can contribute to a lack of professional care for those who need it. Only when such injustices are realized and exposed can we then take steps to begin to remedy them.

Intersectionality powerfully argues that society generally views disabled people as holding back progress. The authors maintain that what needs to change is to instead view society as holding back the differently-abled, and that *this* is what actually precludes progress. Disability is

not a flaw in the individual that needs to be ‘cured.’ However, the struggles faced by those with disabilities reflect an institutional flaw in mainstream Western culture and society that does need to be addressed. Disability liberation is not helping a person to ‘overcome’ their disability, but involves working with the disabled to include them in a holistic community and resist the tendency of society to enforce oppressive norms of ability, beauty, and health.

We are continually reminded about the role capitalism plays in this with its focus on appealing to such norms to sell commodities through its construction of the ‘desirable.’ In the first essay, by Scott Hurley, on ‘the dog fancy’ which is the promotion, breeding, and showing of dogs, the connection between capitalism, disability and nonhuman animals is drawn. Dog-breeding for competition is done to enhance and continue the *breed*, which has resulted in physical disabilities in many individual animals. Each breed has its own standard set by the American Kennel Club (AKC). These imposed ideals are often more akin to deformities and can create significant levels of discomfort and pain such as breathing problems or hip and back pain. If genetics do not cooperate with human desires, two outcomes arise. One is that surgical measures may be used to enhance a dog’s look; another is that a dog may be deemed unsuitable for competition, in which case they are considered useless and somehow dispensed with. Dogs that fall outside the norms set by the AKC are considered disabled because they are not desirable for breeding, which recalls the human eugenics movement. Similar results are found in other animal breeding competitions. For instance, pigeon-breeding creates body types that would have difficulty performing many essential life functions such as walking or flying in order to win awards (see the photo stream, Australian National Pigeon Association, n.d.). Outside of prize competitions, these birds’ bodies would be considered grotesquely deformed by most.

Sarah Roberts-Cady examines two ways in which animal, environmental, and disability studies intersect: reason and normalcy. Reason is the vastly favored quality in granting moral considerations to either living or nonliving beings. Normalcy is a social construction that upholds the status quo which is hurtful to those with disabilities. Roberts-Cady argues that on the basis of having an impaired reasoning ability, society excludes people with disabilities from being able to participate which thereby creates the erroneous idea that people with disabilities *cannot* participate. This reinforces the stigmatized image of the disabled as a hindrance. Such

discrimination has become so normalized that it is rendered invisible: most of us simply do not look at a set of stairs as a quiet but profound act of discrimination towards those in wheelchairs.

While both *The Intersectionality of Critical Animal, Disability, and Environmental Studies* as well as its predecessor *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation* are explicitly intersectional in scope, they tend to focus slightly more on the (human) disability and environmental aspects. Animals are far from ignored, however. In addition to examples mentioned above, Bentley draws parallels between animals in factory farms and the elderly in nursing homes, based on both institutions being profit-driven at the expense of the welfare of their occupants, and Amber E. George examines messages of queerness, speciesism, and disability in *Looney Toons* characters. George gives many examples of episodes where cartoons depict animals, the disabled, and non-heterosexuals as sources for entertainment. The reality of this portrayal creates and helps perpetuate the marginalization and violence towards these vulnerable groups.

Altogether, *Intersectionality* provides a much needed voice that links humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment. At a time when the U.S. political establishment is threatening the healthcare of its sick, aged and disabled, as well as environmental and animal protections for the sake of personal profits, this book is exceptionally timely and important.

Works Cited

Australian National Pigeon Association. <http://www.anpa.com.au/>. Accessed 25 March 2018.

Nocella II, Anthony J., Judy K. C. Bentley, and Janet M. Duncan, editors. *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation: The Rise of the Eco-Ability Movement*. Peter Lang, 2012.