

[Review] Dominic O'Key. *Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature: Narrating the War Against Animals*. Bloomsbury Pub., 2022. 202 pp.

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Dominic O'Key's *Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature* (2022) offers a richly textured and much needed critical analysis of the anthropocentrism underlying humanist literary discourse. Literature's educational and ethical mission has long been predicated on 'humanizing' readers and culture at large. For O'Key, this is precisely the problem. Literature, and literary studies more broadly, represent humanism's vanguard whose function it is to elevate 'the best that's ever been said or written' to its place of cultural and social reverence, as Matthew Arnold put it. Rarely asked, however, is what the implications of these lofty and transcendent goals are for animals who cannot write and are often left unheard. If literature is, as Giorgio Agamben has argued, 'an anthropological machine', then literary discourse, by definition, excludes other species. It is in this context that O'Key begins with Derrida's premise that humans are engaged in an ageless war against animals, a premise further theorized by Dinesh Wadiwel as one characterized by the domination and controlled destruction of animals' bodies for human purposes. O'Key contends that literature has long been weaponized to serve humanism's primary (yet oft neglected) mission: our species' transcendence over nature and other animals. Humanism celebrates the exceptionalism of the human spirit while negating and ultimately devaluing the more-than-human world. Thus, the guiding question at the heart of O'Key's book is 'what would it mean to narrate the war against animals?' (22).

If literature serves as humanism's accomplice in the war on animals, it does so by encouraging, and ultimately codifying human exceptionalism in both the production and critical reception of literary texts. O'Key skillfully unpacks the way this hegemonic anthropocentrism is so deeply embedded and naturalized in literary discourse that it is mostly unexamined. He

focuses on the acclaimed works of W.G. Sebald, J.M. Coetzee and Mahasweta Devi as countervailing voices that challenge and/or disrupt the smooth functioning of the anthropological machinery driving literary humanism, even if these interventions remain underacknowledged or underappreciated. For O'Key, such critical and scholarly disregard of the animal, or as he puts it, 'creaturely' engagements on behalf of these authors confirms the broader cultural contempt for animals. These authors are among the most revered in contemporary literature (admittedly a wide temporal category), but it is in spite of their animal preoccupation, not because of them.

It is literature's abiding allegiance to anthropocentric terms then that sets the boundaries for permissible literary endeavours. The exceptions, powerful and compelling as O'Key carefully reveals them to be, also prove the wider rule that mostly excludes animals and animal issues from literary discourse. Accordingly, human exceptionalism becomes the precondition of acceptable literary pursuit – and subsequent analysis. Serious literary and scholarly pursuit must, by definition, focalize the human at the expense of non-human animals and nature. In this way, literary humanism enforces what Robert McKay has called 'compulsory humanity'.

What about the rich tradition of animal stories inhabiting the edges of the literary canon? Such exceptions generally serve paradoxically to uphold literary anthropocentrism by using animal characters as symbolic avatars standing in for human characters or interests. In so doing, readers and scholars learn as, Susan McHugh has it, to read animals 'in and around disciplinary structures' (28) such as symbolism and allegory, or what I have called the 'anthropo-allegorical'. *Animal Farm* is probably the most iconic and illustrative example of how this anthropocentric substitution is utilized. Orwell's novella contains some of the most visceral descriptions of agricultural violence inflicted on animals, an issue that Orwell himself once acknowledged as being deeply germane to both the book's inspiration and its deeper theme of entangled human-animal oppression. This form of species-based appropriative incorporation illustrates one way literary discourse functions as a powerful, yet largely overlooked weapon deployed, as O'Key would have it, in the war against animals. Another more common tactic is to disregard animals altogether or to (mis)read them as mere decorative objects adorning the spaces inhabited by human subjects. These are the anthropocentric exclusions that, laudably, preoccupy O'Key's book.

Before engaging with the cultural and material repercussions of animal erasures, O'Key first addresses the critical, though oft neglected question of how human exceptionalism became so deeply embedded in literary discourse. To this end, O'Key proposes the term 'anthroponormativity' in place of anthropocentrism. He argues that while anthropocentrism focuses on the systemic centring of the human, it does not speak to how this system takes shape. In this light, literary discourse is a key influencer sedimenting the norms that govern the acceptable parameters of our cultural discourse. Understanding human exceptionalism as a function of normativity, he argues, encourages us to interrogate not only the constructedness of animality, but also that of humanity. Indeed, this emphasis on how humanity and animality are divided, as well as iteratively constructed, informs O'Key's provocative title, particularly his choice of the term *creaturely*. O'Key employs the term as it is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, essentially anything that is a product of creation. In this sense, people are constructing what it means to be human or animal. While literary humanism has long been invested in devaluing and diminishing animals, it has not historically privileged all human beings but rather a very specific form of the human, namely those of the white, heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied male variety. O'Key suggests that the invocation of creature as a term empowers us to question the creation, and subsequent normalization, of these categories on both interspecies as well as intersectional levels. This is essential to O'Key's project, as the selected works of Sebald, Coetzee, and Devi all draw our attention to the entangled oppression of humans and other animals, albeit in untidy and sometimes irresolvable ways.

In Chapter One, O'Key outlines the conceptual foundations informing the war against animals. He persuasively argues that we cannot disentangle literary engagements with animals from the wider war inflicted upon them. Therefore, a full interrogation of literature's engagement with animals requires consideration of how we are to 'narrate the war against animals'. To do so, he contends, we would first have to understand how to read animals. Pointing to earlier attempts to animalize literature, such as Timothy C. Baker's *Writing Animals*, O'Key notes that these analyses are limited to the representational level. An animalized or 'creaturely' reading requires intensive methodological attention to form as well as representation. Moreover, commitment to formal analysis requires an equal measure of critical focus on the politics influencing formal literary structures. This necessitates that we read animals in their very absence as well as their presence – and in the liminal spaces in between.

Indeed, O'Key's work insightfully accomplishes much of this task and it is here that he makes an especially important contribution to expanding and deepening what it means to read animals in literature. Sebald's work for instance seems at first glance only marginally committed to animal themes. Yet O'Key demonstrates how careful attention to subtle thematic and formal patterns, and, importantly, their oblique intersections, fosters a richer introspective engagement with the rhythmic, more-than-human resonances haunting the margins of *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*. Doing so offers a critical pathway to reading Sebald's works as a ruminative narration of the war on animals. This is where attunement to formal structures, and particularly, the political influences on form become salient. In this way, Sebald's various manipulations of form subtly illuminate the convergence of capitalism and human exceptionalism and the many consequences for humans and animals alike.

To deepen our reading of Sebald beyond the human, O'Key elucidates the crucial yet under-recognized more-than-human theoretical contributions of the Frankfurt School, notably Horkheimer and Adorno's contention that the Enlightenment's governing ethos of instrumental rationality rests on a foundation of animal subjugation and sacrifice. Chapter Two is devoted to the formal and thematic analysis of *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*. O'Key notes that Sebald's academic career prior to the publication of these two novels had been deeply indebted to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer and Adorno posit that in modern Western culture, demonstrating 'concern for animals is considered no longer merely sentimental but a betrayal of progress' (211). O'Key points to Sebald's 'pessimistic and melancholic' engagement with dead, ornamental animals which reveals that their 'disappearance from nature is coeval with their increased appearance within human culture, in zoological gardens and in natural history cabinets' (42). For O'Key, Sebald's seemingly idle ruminations on dead animal bodies in fact emulate Horkheimer's critique of modernism and its entangled consequences for immiserating animal and human lives. For Horkheimer and Adorno, modernity casts animals to the sacrificial outside of subjectivity and in doing so mutilates an essential facet of humanity depriving it of its intrinsic connection to nature. Sebald's work, O'Key argues, 'suggests that this forgetting of animality is a historical catastrophe, not only because it creates the conditions for the ready "annihilation" of animals but also because it conjures a new kind of human who can be put to work in factories' (45). O'Key elaborates further on the theme of interconnecting consequences for animals and humans later in the

chapter, arguing that for Sebald, ‘human history and natural history are contingent on one another’ (56). Again, O’Key returns to Adorno and his concept of nature-history, a neologism applied to bridge the culturally inscribed binary between nature and history, a concept not dissimilar to Donna Haraway’s more recent notion of nature-culture. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator consumes a comically awful fish and chips meal which later prompts him to reflect on the depleted herring fishery and its consequences for both the herring and the human livelihoods dependent on them. In doing so, O’Key offers that on ‘one hand, Sebald demonstrates how herring fishing is a historical process which necessarily changes nature, and on the other, Sebald shows how humanity is not autonomous but reliant on and subject to nature’ (59).

Crucial to Sebald’s work is his eccentric incorporation of photographs that often seem only tangentially connected to the story. O’Key elaborates on how both *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* contain images of zoo spaces to accompany narration reflecting upon and lamenting how nature and animals are increasingly confined to carefully curated environs like parks and zoos. For O’Key, Sebald is invested in narrating our war against animals but does so at the fringes rather than at the centre of his canvas, so to speak. Does this oblique, de-centred narration of the war against animals undermine its critical potential by seemingly shunting animals to the margins of the story? On the contrary, O’Key makes a compelling case that it is indeed these marginal interventions that disrupt the modernist, humanist flow, that gum up the works of the anthropological machine, as it were, by (re)imposing animality onto literary spaces designated as exclusively human. In so doing, O’Key suggests that the humanist frame is despoiled by otherwise seemingly inconsequential animal presences thereby embodying a ‘return of the repressed’ for the casualties of the war against animals.

O’Key’s analysis of Coetzee’s work in Chapter Three allows for a more direct animal analysis. Coetzee’s work took a decidedly animal in the late 1990s, ultimately yielding three works, *The Lives of Animals*, *Disgrace*, and *Elizabeth Costello*. Whereas Sebald pushes back against humanist notions of realism, plot and characterization, Coetzee’s *Disgrace* offers a full embrace of the conventions of the realist novel with the added twist that it uses this structure to turn our gaze onto the animals suffering in our midst. As O’Key points out, Coetzee’s work has long challenged the transcendent paradigms of humanist literature, even before his ‘animal turn’, as O’Key puts it, as his protagonists are often stripped of their dignity and reduced to the basest emotional and often material conditions. *Disgrace* is similar in this respect except that the mid-

life academic protagonist David Lurie's self-inflicted debasement brings him into contact with doomed shelter dogs and other animals, before they are destroyed. After Lurie is fired from his academic post for sexually assaulting a student, Lurie moves in with his daughter, Lucy, in the South African countryside. In his diminished position, he begins working at the dog shelter and soon becomes tasked with the delicate work of euthanizing unwanted dogs. During this time, he and Lucy are viciously assaulted, he survives an attempted immolation, and she is gang raped. And yet, David dutifully returns to the shelter to comfort misbegotten animals in the final earthly moments. Observing how Coetzee's protagonists are typically drawn 'closer to the ground' (90) by crushing, unforeseen events, O'Key argues that this ultimate capitulation to immanence 'deconstructs the hierarchy of the great chain of being' (86). In *Disgrace*, this motif is deepened by David's unwavering commitment to 'bear witness', as O'Key puts it, to the shelter animals' misery.

Disgrace is at its core a rumination on South Africa's postcolonial future and O'Key deftly unpacks the tensions between David's new-found commitment to animals and his disregard for the Black lives oppressed under the Apartheid system that once supported (and elevated) him. On these terms, 'Coetzee therefore dramatizes how compassion towards animals can go hand-in-hand with racism towards other human beings. *Disgrace* suggests, in other words, that it might be easier for David to care for animals than his black neighbours' (O'Key 94). This incapacity to countenance the entangled but distinct oppression and suffering of humans and animals is an ethical deficit that Coetzee explores further in *Elizabeth Costello*. In this way, O'Key demonstrates how Coetzee complexifies the animal redemption narrative. David finds purpose in the animal shelter, but the wider postcolonial ethical future will continue to elude him. Similarly, Elizabeth Costello's commendable compulsion in *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello* to understand animals more deeply, as well as end their suffering, isolates her from other humans. Here, O'Key frames Costello as a 'vegetarian killjoy' a reframing of Sara Ahmed's notion of the 'feminist killjoy' in the way she is 'constantly ruining dinners' by articulating the animal suffering and death underlying the meat-based food choices of others (115). Costello offends Jewish colleagues by directly analogizing the slaughter of animals to the Holocaust and ultimately alienates herself from her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren in her 'singular' and 'tactless' commitment to animal liberation (O'Key 117). Thus, O'Key argues, Elizabeth's

ambivalent depiction ‘cautions against any instrumental reading: “The Lives of Animals” turns out to be both an endorsement and a critique of vegetarianism’ (117). As with David Lurie’s experience, Costello’s singular commitment to animal wellbeing suggests a critical impasse that cannot be overcome without wider ethical commitment to confronting the entanglement of human and animal oppression, an insight of deep and enduring significance.

O’Key’s analysis of Mahesweta Devi in Chapter Four further pursues this entanglement. O’Key concedes that questions of animal slaughter and oppression are not as salient a fixture in Devi’s work as they are in those of Sebald and Coetzee but rather that Devi’s ‘fiction conceives of the fight for subaltern recognition and redistribution as being inextricable from a fight to arrest environmental devastation’ (128). In this way, Devi’s novella *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* focuses on the marginalization and dispossession of India’s Indigenous Adivasi population. O’Key argues that ‘by writing of subaltern characters who live on the outskirts of an assigned political humanity, Devi’s short stories associate abandoned human life with the lives of animals and other creatures that share these despoiled spaces’ (137). There are deep risks attendant to such readings, as O’Key acknowledges, notably that Devi is animalizing and/or romanticizing the Adivasi people by linking them so closely to nature. However, O’Key convincingly argues that Devi’s stories complexify these associations by ‘incorporate(ing) a metaphoric of animality that identifies and disidentifies the subaltern with “nature”’, reflecting the ways in which these identifications are assigned from the dominant population.

Another risk more salient to the coherency of O’Key broader analysis is how the inclusion of Devi’s ‘metaphoric of animality’ threaten to disrupt his deeper commitment to formal analysis. Given that the ‘metaphoric of animality’ have served the ‘anthropomorphic (literary) machine’ so effectively to erase animals by superimposing human interests, this seems out of step with Sebald and Coetzee’s thematic and formal challenges to anthroponormativity, which O’Key outlines so effectively. However, if we read Devi’s inclusion as I understand it to be intended, it offers an alternative to the critical impasse reached in Coetzee’s, and to a lesser extent, Sebald’s work. O’Key’s contention is that Devi’s work reveals the extent to which ‘cultural genocide is inseparable from nonhuman ecocide’ and consequently speaks powerfully for the entangled fates of humans and other animals alike (128). Deeper awareness and

appreciation of these essential entanglements should, in O'Key's words, 'compel us to conceive of a planetary justice which would leave behind the humanist political ontologies of anthroponormativity' (155).

Overall, Dominic O'Key's book offers deep insights and a necessary critical challenge to the embedded anthroponormativity underpinning Western literary discourse. His analysis of three acclaimed and decorated contemporary authors (representing three different continents) challenges enduring humanist, individualist tropes by extending their narrative, thematic, and formal reach beyond the parochial confines of exclusively human domains and interests. His analysis reveals the ways in which these animal and more-than-human dimensions have been consistently neglected, misinterpreted, or underappreciated by critics and scholars committed to reading literature through the hegemonic anthroponormative prism. Useful extensions would be to analyse how this anthroponormative literary framework is reproduced educationally since it is in the classroom spaces of middle, high school, and university English classes where this 'anthropocentric machine' is so firmly cemented in future pedagogues, scholars, and authors and to consider under-recognized literature, including by Indigenous writers.

Works Cited

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