

[Review] Maren Tova Linett. *Literary Bioethics: Animality, Disability, and the Human*. New York University Press, 2020. Crip: New Directions in Disability Studies. 213 pages.

Wendy Woodward

University of the Western Cape

Literary Bioethics proffers a thoughtful crossover of disability studies and animal studies – their interconnections and differences. Linett reads literary narratives as ‘thought experiments’ (2) in relation to bioethical issues pertaining to the flourishing of human and nonhuman lives, especially within the rise in technological developments and the potential for those in power to misappropriate such developments. What do value ethics for those with compromised subjectivities look like? Nonhuman animals, aged human beings, those who are intellectually disabled as well as cloned human beings feature respectively in astute analyses of H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away* and the more recent *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Linett suggests that analyses of literary texts serve to ‘extract’ (7) the underlying ethical significance where characters with disabilities are involved, even though, or perhaps because, texts do not provide comprehensive solutions. Because literature itself is not necessarily ethical of course, the practice of resistant reading needs to be deployed. (A practice followed for many decades in feminist studies, Decolonial Studies and Human Animal Studies).

Although Disability Studies and Animal Studies (Linett uses this nomenclature rather than Human Animal Studies) have a common focus on the valuing of difference, they may work against each other. Linett attributes this to arguments like those of Peter Singer. His theories of animal rights are held up to scrutiny throughout the volume; that his dismissal of rights due to disabled human beings lacks empathy is dramatized when his approach is contextualised in some of these narratives. Similarly without empathy are his lenient attitudes to the justification of pain suffered by an animal if s/he is instrumental in reducing further suffering for others.

While H.G. Wells' novel tends to be read as critical of Dr Moreau and his project, Linett maintains that the ethics of animal suffering is never condemned unambiguously and that it colludes with his experiments. The novel, its revision and its context bristle with contradictions – Wells was a supporter of vivisection yet held that the celebration of human superiority of other animals was excessive, and his attitude to eugenics vacillated.

One of the strengths of *Literary Bioethics* is its grounding of theories and issues raised by the narratives in the 'real' world. The dystopic *Brave New World* is read in connection with the 'value' of old age (much of the discussion is relevant to contemporary attitudes to the aged). Ominously, Western culture's valuing of productivity features in Huxley's novel where humans who are not fit or productive are eliminated. Linett highlights the intersections of racializing and disabilities, and discusses how the narrative of a life trajectory is foreclosed by the totalitarian society of *Brave New World* in which people do not age or get ill. Huxley's imagining of a dystopia reveals his own prejudice – Linett foregrounds, for example, the representation of Linda, a mother aged outside dominant society, living on an 'Indian Reservation', as repulsive and in a context of native savagery.

Linett's resistant reading of *The Violent Bear it Away* stresses O'Connor's negative attitude to the intellectually disabled Bishop Rayber. A curative imaginary in which humans deemed unable or 'unfit' for a future are got rid of or cured is again relevant. Linett reads the novel finely in terms of narrative strategies: the exclusion of Rayber's point of view, the comparisons made between human and animals, (he is likened to a hog and a dog). As Linett emphasises: it is a trope in modern literature that the reader is denied entry into the minds of disabled characters. Perhaps even more shocking than O'Connor's prejudice is its continuation in many critics' analyses, for whom the murder of an intellectually disabled boy is of no moral significance.

Linett's reading of the four key texts are, on the whole, thoroughly contextualised within critical debate. It is surprising therefore that Linett does not engage with Ato Quayson's *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation** as their approaches have much in common. For Quayson, the figuring of disability in a literary text lends itself to an analysis which is often metaphysical; disabled characters generate a 'subliminal unease' (14) which results in 'a series of crises in the protocols of representation' (14). Further, he suggests that the

figuring of disability in a literary text is always more complex than it is in the 'real' world. Quayson also raises substantial questions about the reader as nondisabled and the ethical vs aesthetic dimension, maintaining that 'aesthetic nervousness' correlates with the 'nervousness' in relation to the disabled in the everyday.

In the chapter on *Never Let Me Go*, Linett's comparison of the privileged but short life of a group of clones at an elite school (their organs are 'harvested') with animals reared on organic farms is finely done. Linett asks what ethical accountability we have to beings who are instrumentalised, with clones rendered 'killable' by being represented as animalised. From a Human Animal Studies perspective, this chapter is the most substantial – in its critical analysis of the cloned lives in the novel and the parallels with the humane meat movement, its hypocrisies and rationalisations. What Tom Regan terms 'death as a deprivation' obtains in both instances.

In alerting the reader to the figuring of non-normative characters, *Literary Bioethics* opens up myriad ethical aspects. Linett ends the volume by taking the ideologies underpinning the novels into the quotidian to show, chillingly, the effects of the belief in human exceptionalism in our lives along with the prevalence of and increase in eugenic practices.

* Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.