


BOOK REVIEW

An Other: A Black Feminist Consideration of Animal Life

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Sharon Patricia Holland's *An Other: A Black Feminist Consideration of Animal Life* deepens the growing body of feminist texts that turn our attention toward other-than-human animals to understand *human* forms of injustice. These texts encourage their readers to apprehend gender, race, and other hierarchical forces through the prism of interspecies relation and the meanings and value humans assign to animals and animal life. *An Other* joins this scholarship which challenges traditional and limiting anthropocentric perspectives, insisting that the human–animal divide indelibly shapes much of the gendered and racialized phenomenon feminists and critical theorists routinely analyze. To neglect to attend to animals, as most standard feminist and other critical accounts do, is to fundamentally miss the mark (not to mention an enormous portion of the violence that occurs on our planet).

Into this field of feminist posthumanist and animal studies, *An Other* proffers the new term of “hum:animal.” This term invites readers to “reflect upon how the animal opens to the human and the human opens to the animal: this configuration sees relation” (xiii), and is offered as a replacement to the standard human/animal binary formative to large swaths of Western thought. The wide-ranging chapters mirror this relational emphasis signaled by the colon. Chapter 1 is called “Vocabularies: possibility,” Chapter 2 “Companionate: species,” Chapter 3 “Diversity: a scarcity,” Chapter 4 “Love: livestock,” Chapter 5 “Horse: flesh,” and Chapter 6 “Sovereignty: a mercy.”

An Other pursues the exploration of “hum:animal” in these chapters by asking “What happens when Black people do things with animals?” (xi). This is the central query of the book, taken up through interpretation of a variety of novels, films, and social movement media representations. And though human hierarchical classifications between and among animals and various species is not theorized, there is elevated attention to horses and equestrian experience (Chapter 5 is by far the longest). The reader learns early that attention to horses and human–horse interactions is part of the author's (gendered) personal passion and motivation for focusing on interspecies relations.

Holland's desire is not to definitely answer the book's central question, but to show the relevance of “hum:animal” to our understandings of blackness and also the *positive* ethical relations between Black and animal bodies. The latter representation is offered to

counter the mainstream perception that it is only white people who care about animal liberation, or that animal liberation is irrelevant to Black liberation. The discussion exposes its readers to a multitude of ideas and insights, but the book's central claim is about the US Southern slavocracy and how it operated (through the hum:animal configuration) and what it led people to do to each other and to animals (grab power and exert violence against others positioned lower down in the slavocracy to save themselves).

Holland traces this claim through most of her chapters, arguing that the slavocracy and this element of self-preservation are still with us in contemporary times. This critique is by no means new and other scholars have also addressed how Black authors specifically have engaged with animals and animal life. Holland distinguishes her contribution by offering that "this study is the first to focus on African-descended people caught in the act of *living* with animals" (30). It is not always clear what this "focus on praxis" denotes (30), but it is clear that the analysis is keen to explore the practical limits to ethical relations. In this regard, a recurring sub-query is the complicated question of collusion and whether we (humans) "take the (slaveholder's) whip when offered" (33) to ensure our own survival and fortunes.

Holland alerts the reader from the second paragraph that the analysis is a "feminist text" (xi) and it is an impressive achievement of *An Other* that it retains gender as a critical focus particularly when others would likely let it go as "almost passé" (28). When examining spaces of and responses to deep racial injustice, *An Other* does not sublimate gendered elements. It contests a description of "blackness flattened, ungendered, generalized" (28) and focuses on the "insurgent female social subject" (29) as a repeated figure of analysis to help discern "what being *female* can tell us about hum/animal distinction" (116). In terms of keeping gender repeatedly in view, *An Other* also importantly shines a spotlight on mothering, inviting us across chapters to consider the plight of mothers whose children are taken from them or who give them up hoping they will experience less violence and suffering. To scaffold this theme, *An Other* introduces the reader to Hortense Spillers' classic text "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" in Chapter 1 (24–25) and frequently circles back to it to highlight the centrality of motherhood and reproduction that shape the trajectory of animalized lives, particularly for Black females.

Holland's pointed questions and remarks, the sheer breadth of topics, and easy, conversational prose, provide for an enriching and quite fascinating literary analysis despite the sometimes-disjointed nature of how it all hangs together. *An Other* provides new takes on well-known texts (e.g., *Twelve Years a Slave* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*), and an engaging and provocative introduction to lesser-known novels and social movement history that deserve a wider audience (e.g., C.E. Morgan's *The Sport of Kings* and the Black vegan animal rights group MOVE). The analyses in each chapter succeed in helping us "think the idea of Black freedom through the multiplicity of species, rather than an ontology produced upon the negation of the Black in a paradigm that is so faulty and centered on *human* life" (30). To this end, *An Other* helpfully adds to the body of existing critical work that should persuade feminist and other scholars who have not embraced an "animal turn" to consider doing so.

However, reading *An Other* requires considerable background theoretical knowledge and buy-in to absorb the book's claims. The analysis is shaped by the (often abstruse for the unfamiliar) works of poststructuralist and new materialist scholars. Many claims are also simply posited and will seem overstretched to those with divergent perspectives. The book is liberally peppered with the phrase "always already" (sometimes appearing

twice on the same page). The phrase, of course, is meant to signal to those in the know the well-established or undeniable nature of a certain phenomenon. But when used so often as it is in *An Other*, argumentation gives over to opinion. Holland seems to anticipate this critique, telling the reader at the outset not to expect standard scholarly argumentation: “I move at a curiosity, but not always an argument...I allow some of my finer points to fall away, I get comfortable with my failure to master” (xii) and that they should expect “some impolite questions and outrageous assertions” (xiii). *An Other* is thus better suited to advanced graduate seminars where students have acquired the background knowledge it references and can approach the material as a set of essays that requires reading in to properly cohere. Given an “organizing structure (that) is *peripatetic*” (xii), teaching the text will also be easier in courses where a more free-flowing style of academic writing is acceptable, and readers will not be frustrated by the text’s frequent introduction of a point only to be told that the text will come back to it later. Those readers “in the mood for suture” (3) in this way, will likely find the text rewarding.

Those who expect a more thorough decentering of the human through engagement with critical animal studies or ecofeminist animal scholarship will instead likely be disappointed. This intersectional feminist scholarship receives no mention even though it has long made the claims about human–animal relationality and the nexus of species–gender–race that *An Other* seeks to illustrate. *An Other* is much more influenced by new materialist and posthumanist scholarship, such as Donna Haraway’s (1989, 1991, 2003, 2008, 2016), that many ecofeminist scholars have criticized as anthropocentric, guilty of celebrating human animal use and exploitation as relation. The text seems unaware of the scholarly tension that exists between these two sets of literature over the responsibility to commit to anti-exploitation endpoints for animals rather than only to acknowledge the need to decenter the human or normalize interspecies relationality (Timeto 2021). For example, despite discussing foodie culture and motherhood, *An Other* glosses over the feminist debate regarding the relational ethics of eating animals and also neglects to recall the animal motherhood and reproduction which enables the human consumption of animals at such a colossal magnitude. The book is also shaped by the author’s joy of riding horses, a practice that vegan ecofeminists would problematize given the human–horse power asymmetries involved. As a result, *An Other* does not bring animals into much of a subject position as part of its focus on critical praxis.

But this relative non-consideration of animal subjectivity seems pre-ordained in a project where the aim is to highlight that “Black subjects, vulnerabilities on display, (are) capable of producing important interventions in our consideration of animal life” (50). Holland obtains her aim handily. It seems the next-order question is to consider how animals are also producers and then ask what this means not only for an ethical re-ordering of our feminist philosophy and human social justice praxis, but our accountability to animals as well.

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