

# H-Net Reviews

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Donna J. Haraway. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. x + 423 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-5046-0.

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## Human and Post-Animal

In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway describes the rapport of a trainer with her dog as a model of how animal and human may be joined, almost as a single being, by bonds of shared purpose, understanding, and concern. In her view, the relationship between human beings and technologies is not one of exploitation but of mutual adaptation, and human beings and animals who work together intimately, in a bond that she calls one of “companion species,” therefore must also change one another.

In Haraway’s previous work, especially “A Cyborg Manifesto,” her abstractions are often so detached from any practical context that, to me at least, they seem to conceal more than they explain.[1] Realizing that theory is not enough to communicate her impressions, in this book she supplements theory with personal experience. Haraway writes movingly not only of her dog, Cayenne, but also, for example, of her father, a sports writer, who inspired her. She tells about her initiation into the world of dog shows, and the tribulations, triumphs, and frustrations that she and her canine companion have shared.

But Haraway writes almost nothing about how the activities of dog fanciers have come under intense criticism for the past several decades. According to critics, the division of dogs into breeds mirrors, and sanctions, the division of society into classes.[2] The emphasis of pure breeds, extended to human beings, has provided important rationalizations for Nazism and other racialist agendas.[3] Furthermore, critics maintain, canine breeds are unhealthy, since inbreeding renders the dogs subject to genetic diseases. Breeds are not even authentic, since they cannot be maintained without continual and intensive human intervention. The routines that dogs are trained to do are a symbolic affirmation of human dominance over the natural world. And, perhaps most pragmatically, humane organizations object to the idea of breeding more dogs, when mutts in shelters are con-

tinually being euthanized by the thousands for lack of homes.[4]

I would not necessarily expect Haraway to pedantically respond to all of the criticisms of dog breeding and training, for one thing because such debates seldom convert people of opposing views. But the sort of apotheosis that she finds in training would seem not only more plausible but also more precious if she acknowledged that there might be a substantial price to pay, for both the animals and the human beings. As it stands, *When Species Meet* is often a touching book and sometimes a wise one, but it is usually not a very probing one.

Haraway dismisses her critics in a way that can be oddly anti-intellectual, especially coming from a prominent voice in literary theory: “First, I venture a word on bioethics, perhaps one of the most boring discourses to cross one’s path in technoculture. Why is bioethics boring? ... Bioethics seems usually to be about not doing something, about some need to prohibit, limit, police, or hold the line against looming technoviolations, to clean up after the action or prevent it elsewhere” (p. 136). But why should that make it “boring”? The protection of people, animals, and the environment requires that corporations and their technologies be regulated. In part because many of these technologies are unprecedented, this regulation has not only practical but also social, cultural, and philosophical dimensions. That is why we now especially need the discipline of bioethics, which, like literary theory, may bore the uninitiated but is fascinating to those who are engaged in it.

There are interesting contrasts, and parallels, between Haraway’s new book and *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* by Paul Shepard, certainly one of the most provocative and insightful books on animals written in the twentieth century.[5] Shepard considers the hunt a sacramental activity joining people with other creatures, while Haraway attaches that significance to breeding and training. Shepard wishes to enter the world

of wild animals, while Haraway endeavors to bring animals into the domain of civilization. Shepard takes a very negative view of pet-keeping, since he believes this entails disrespect for the autonomy of animals, while Haraway shows hardly any interest in wild creatures, except when these offer opportunities to display human ingenuity. The contrast falls a bit comically along the lines of gender roles, since men in Western culture stereotypically try to escape from domesticity (and women) in activities such as hunting, while women allegedly try to assert absolute control over everything within the home. In many ways, each author may be the nightmare of the other, yet the two share a great deal with respect to both methodology and aspiration. For one thing, they are both, in their respective ways, trying to overcome the duality between the human and natural realms, even if they approach this from very different directions.

Equally significantly, they both focus on a single activity, which they regard as a template for human-animal relationships. This narrowing of their focus often leads both authors to new perspectives and important insights. It is also, in my opinion, why both authors ultimately are not successful in realizing their objectives, even if their endeavors are productive in other ways. Both authors fail to take into account the full complexity and diversity of human-animal relationships. One lesson for us here is that we should not take our personal understanding of animal symbolism for granted, especially in reference to such commonly used concepts as “dominance” or “anthropocentric perspective.” A relationship that impresses one person as one of complete “domination” may seem balanced and perhaps even egalitarian to another. What seems totally “anthropocentric” to one may come across as “zoocentric” or “biocentric” to a different observer.

The perspective of Haraway has a remarkable resemblance to many ideas of the contemporary Italian theorist Roberto Marchesini in his book *Post-Human*,<sup>[6]</sup> but since Marchesini’s books have not been translated into English and she does not cite his work in Italian, the resemblance must be an instance of convergence. While the explication of Haraway is more vivid, that of Marchesini is far more detailed and systematic, so it seems worthwhile to summarize it briefly. According to Marchesini, the growth of human power and domination through technology (including biotechnology) is an illusion, since new technologies always create dependencies, thus undermining human autonomy. They do not so much expand human power as change our idea of what it means to be “human,” as we affiliate with various creatures, gods, machines, or ideas. But these affiliations also place human identity in question, so we try to balance the ex-

pansion of the human realm through deliberate exclusion of other elements, as we redefine ourselves in opposition to various other animals, deities, devices, or social groups.

Today, according to Marchesini, the rapid growth of new affiliations, especially technological, is rendering the illusion of human autonomy unsustainable. We cannot, for example, plausibly claim that machines are simply following our commands and serving human agendas any longer, when computers are thoroughly integrated into decisions on every level. But animals continue to be the major template in relation to which human beings construct their identity, and are as central to our conceptual understanding as machines are to utilitarian tasks. Animals, in other words, must become not simply an object of study, but full participants in the creation of culture. I believe this is also the ultimate intent of both Haraway and Shepard. It is the intimacy among all beings that Shepard finds in archaic myth and Haraway finds in modern science fiction.

People often think they are assailing the boundary between humanity and other creatures when, in fact, they are merely adjusting it, as others have done throughout history. We could, for example, eventually decide that powerful computers and trained dogs are “human” like ourselves. We could, on the other hand, decide that true “humanity” is only for the gods. In each case, however, the boundary between nature and civilization would merely be shifted, and it would not dominate our lives any less. We must instead develop a conception of humanity that will not place people in opposition to the natural world. The desire to reconnect with nature is perhaps the most dynamic impulse driving human culture as we enter the twenty-first century. It is what unites, for all their differences, animal rights activists, animal trainers, hunters, gardeners, environmentalists, and many others. But no vocation, and no movement, can justifiably claim that mission as exclusively its own.

#### Notes

[1]. Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

[2]. Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[3]. Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats and the Holocaust* (New York: Continuum, 2000);

Arnold Skabelund, "Fascism's Furry Friends: Dogs, National Identity, and Racial Purity in 1930s Japan," in *The Culture of Japanese Fascism*, ed. Alan Tansman (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, in press).

[4]. Mark Derr, *Dog's Best Friend: Annals of the Dog-Human Relationship* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 2004).

[5]. Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996).

[6]. Roberto Marchesini, *Post-Human: Verso Nuovi Modelli Di Esistenza* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002).

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