

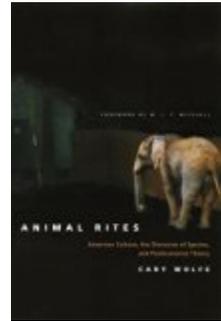
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Cary Wolfe. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003. xvi + 238 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-90514-3; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-90513-6.

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The Links and Limits of Species Discourse

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Posthumanist theory and literary/cultural studies have recently paid significant attention to the question of human/animal interrelationships and their discursive and literary manifestations. Cary Wolfe's *Animal Rites* is an important and timely intervention in this field. Wolfe's work is unashamedly theoretical; he tackles extremely difficult philosophical questions in the belief that "a truly postmodern ethical pluralism can take place not by avoiding posthumanist theory but only by means of it" (p. 207). His prose, however, is always attentive, lucid, and sustained. Wolfe takes us on an invigorating journey through texts from philosophy, science, literature, and film with an attentive eye for those instances where the animal intrudes or, more to the point, those times when it should but, due to some form of effacement or other, does not. That is, he insists on allowing full reign to what he calls "the discourse of species"—to those sites where human/animal difference and similarity are contested. With this approach, Wolfe presents or uncovers powerful challenges to the tenaciously reappearing figure of the human: a figure whose much-touted excavation has, it would seem, still not dug quite far enough.

This book comes flanked by two others that help frame Wolfe's discussion and also establish him as a notable figure in this field. In *Critical Environments* he broaches a consequential dialogue between the too-often disparate fields of pragmatism, systems theory, and post-

structuralism. His goal in that book is "to explore the theoretical, political, and ethical dimensions of how some of the major theorists within 'postmodernism' have confronted the problem of thinking the 'outside' of theory." [1] It is this "outside" in which "nature" and the "animal" are typically located, and whose proper interrogation, he argues, is essential for theoretically strengthening movements for "animal rights." In *Zoontologies*, which was published (like *Animal Rites*) in 2003, Wolfe brings together a number of important essays in the field, including some of Jacques Derrida's recent work. In the introduction to that collection, he raises what I think is the most important question confronting contemporary animal theory: "the relationship between ... the discourse of animality ... and the living and breathing creatures who fall outside the taxonomy of *Homo sapiens*." [2] The context of the ethical urgency behind this question is of course the fact that "the consequences of that [species] discourse, in institutional terms, fall overwhelmingly on nonhuman animals, in our taken-for-granted practices of using and exploiting them" such as the factory farming which forms part of what he calls, following Derrida, "carno-phallogocentrism." [3]

The context of all these projects is in fact a theoretical deficiency with regard to the animal question on the part of postmodern thought. For example, the term "animal rights" and its liberal humanist scaffolding is too often still used, if only as a rhetorical strategy, in lieu of precisely the sort of investigations Wolfe and others are

now beginning to make. And so in the first two chapters of *Animal Rites* (part 1) he interrogates the philosophy of (to make use of the same strategy) animal “rights,” from those who feel no need for the scare quotes, such as Tom Regan, to those such as Derrida who would hardly speak the word, but are just as committed to the prevailing ethical situation. And in these meticulous commentaries Wolfe continually exposes the humanisms still characterizing what he otherwise sees as useful and animal-motivated work. In the cases of Ferry, Singer, and Regan, it is liberal humanism that weakens their positions on animal rights. In the cases of Heidegger, Levinas, and Lyotard, a harder-to-spot species-humanism hides within what are otherwise largely posthumanist approaches. For these latter thinkers, Wolfe argues, the full ethical force of interspecific alterity—the unsettling otherness of the animal—is foreclosed on the basis of models of subjectivity in comparison to which animals lack, respectively, a “hand” (Heidegger), a “face” (Levinas), or “the capacity to phrase” (Lyotard). Thus Wolfe expounds Derrida’s significant deconstruction of the persistence of “man” in such cases. But, in keeping with his claim in *Critical Environments* regarding “the priority of systems theory ... over deconstruction for ‘new social movements’ such as ecology and animal rights,” and the theoretical interdisciplinarity of that earlier book as a whole, he also discusses the pragmatism of Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Hearne, and the systems theory of Maturana and Varela.[4]

In part 2 of *Animal Rites*, Wolfe examines a number of cultural texts with an eye to the operations of species discourse. It is here that one first fully apprehends the versatility and nuance of Wolfe’s understanding of species discourse, particularly its interrelation with those other categories (gender, sexuality, race, and class) with which we might by now be overly familiar. Wolfe uncovers the deployments whereby various homologues, oppositions, or other mappings serve the interests of a particular form of domination. In his reading (with Jonathan Elmer) of the film *The Silence of the Lambs*, he uses and extends psychoanalytical understandings of the interrelation of subjectivity with the biological and sexual “real” (or “outside”), expertly articulating the sacrifice of the animal on which the subject is based, and which the film’s heterosexism and speciesism confirms. Wolfe also reads two Hemingway novels, *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Garden of Eden*, emphasizing the importance and ambivalence of cross-species identification, and Michael Crichton’s *Congo*, examining the discursive interrelation of species and neocolonialism in that novel.

Wolfe’s most important contribution is, I believe, his

insistence on “the irreducibility of species discourse” (p. 124). In a disciplinary context justifiably concerned with the categories of race, class, gender (and so on), too often concern for animals is marginalized. The discourse of species is habitually reduced to a site onto which the real and determinative cultural forces are projected, a field always manipulated according to other ends. It is precisely the racist deployment of “animality” to exclude the non-white, or the sexist deployment of “nature” to exclude the female, which has motivated antiracist and antisexist movements to reclaim the space of the human subject for their own liberation. But the problem, as Wolfe points out on a number of occasions, is not only that such moves fail to challenge the speciesist dominance of the human over the animal—a failure which Wolfe admirably reverses in his foregrounding of the species discourse in these texts—but also the massively destructive institutional context of such discourse.

It is this which presents, I think, the “outside” that simultaneously grounds and challenges both Wolfe’s work and that of other postmodernists interested in the animal question, and particularly that question mentioned above, of the relation of “the *discourse* of animality ... [to] *living and breathing creatures*”.[5] Derrida’s “carnophallogocentrism,” that “‘sacrificial structure’ that opens a space for the ‘noncriminal putting to death’ of the animal,” (p. 66) is increasingly cited but has yet to be comprehensively explored and theorized in its material and institutional dimensions. But it seems more likely that the best tools for this exploration are elsewhere. In fact, in *Critical Environments* Wolfe outlines the importance of the non-discursive poststructuralism of Deleuze and Foucault, who focused on “force” and “power,” respectively, for a theory attentive to the “outside.”[6] These thinkers, particularly Foucault in his attention to discipline and biopolitics, would seem to provide a useful backing to such an enterprise. And so when Wolfe says in the conclusion to *Animal Rites* that it “constitutes for me not only a beginning but also an end, a completion, the second half of a project begun in that earlier book” (p. 193), we can only hope that his work inspires further investigations, by him and others, into the multiple contexts in which we both talk about and live with (or, too often, live due to the sacrifice of) our animal others.

Notes

- [1]. Cary Wolfe, *Critical Environments: Postmodern Theory and the Pragmatics of the “Outside”* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. xxiii.

[2]. Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xx.

[3]. *Zoontologies*, p. xx.

[4]. *Critical Environments*, p. xix.

[5]. *Zoontologies*, p. xx, emphases added.

[6]. *Critical Environments*, p. 87.

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