

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Bénédicte Boisseron.** *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 288 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-18665-0.

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Bénédicte Boisseron's *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* is an engaging and broad introduction to historical and philosophical concerns regarding the human/animal divide and racist accusations of prejudicial blackness. The introduction of the synthetic *Afro-Dog* focuses on Marjorie Spiegel's *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (1988) and Claire Jean Kim's recent *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (2015) to offer academic dialogue on how the activist use of animal oppression and/or the history of slavery often privileges one oppressed group through possibly trivializing categories of human or animal oppression. To further illustrate these concerns, *Afro-Dog* portrays recent propaganda from the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals that compares enslaved bodies and modern animals in chains.

Searching for narratives of interspecies connectedness, rather than structural similarities used by activists, Boisseron specifically argues that a troubling discourse often emerges when black studies or critical animal studies is combined with activist goals that provides a space for either group at the forefront. As a corrective, *Afro-Dog* pushes back against scholarship that privileges the projects of animal liberation through applying a comparison to chattel slavery as a similar form of structural oppression. Boisseron argues against such oversimplifications within activist literature while also offering nuanced critiques focusing on the comparison between animals and slaves regardless of the direction in which the political argumentation is applied.

Chapter 1 explores these general concerns with intersectional discourse that often privileges either nonhu-

man animals or racialized black populations for activist goals. Tracing the history of the animal rights movement from Jeremy Bentham through Peter Singer and into modern discussions of animal rights activism, *Afro-Dog* offers a summary of the dreadful comparison often used to prop up social arguments that combine the misery of slavery with nonhuman animal oppression. Boisseron then summarizes the most forceful aspects of the animal liberation movement within this troubling dialectic through comparisons to the historical work of black abolitionists and analysis of the current studies by Carol Adams on intersections of speciesism and sexism. This discussion on masculinity and meat continues into questions of class, race, and the politics of veganism as a possibly settler manifestation within neoliberal modernity.[1]

Chapter 2 traces the history of the nefarious use of dogs within American and Atlantic slavery through introducing the multivalent and metaphorical rhetoric of Donna Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003). Summarizing the use of slave dogs to control chattel populations throughout the Atlantic world provides one of the few existing analyses of these biopolitically educated canines and their calamitous hunting skills. Starting with portrayals of such slave dogs in depictions of slavery within modern media, this summary continues through an interesting reading of the use of canines during the military excursions of European empires related to the Haitian Revolution.

This history of dogs and black bodies is then framed through modern discussions of the informal public trial, formal conviction, and prison sentence of American football player Michael Vick for running a dog-fighting ring

that was uncovered in 2007. Arguing that resistance to dogs was an important aspect of black civil disobedience within slavery, during the civil rights movement (as with struggles at Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963), and into modern confrontations in cities like Ferguson, Missouri, Boisseron walks a fine line that almost absolves Vick while articulating a redolent distaste for dogs within black communities in the Americas.

Chapter 3 applies French social theorist Michel Serres's understanding of *The Parasite* (1982) to articulate a fresh appreciation of the use of rebellious animal metaphors through considering the commensal dog and the rights of minorities to own animals within their oppressed living spaces. Commensalism is a term that defines the human/dog relationship through an understanding of mutual benefits. The domestication of the dog, in this conception, came because of the benefits that dogs gained through their relationships with early humans. This reading of domestication procedures locates a reading of the shared ecology of subaltern humans and animals through a later history of the concept of diaspora for both black and Jewish populations alongside animals that were part of diasporic familiarities. Those experiences often involved languages created to keep dogs at a distance through terms akin to "scram." For Boisseron, the creole and commensal dog within diasporic communities, due in part to this language of distancing, exists often within liminal spaces of the outside, as in the Caribbean, where ownership by a private individual is relatively extraordinary.

Chapter 4 focuses on these ideas of ownership and nuisance concerning nonhuman animals and the memories of colonialism and chattel slavery. This analysis explores issues of language within the French terminology of "un meuble," "meuble," and different other terms used within the Francophone animal rights movement. Comparing issues related to this signifier that means "furniture" but also implies movement and freedom, *Afro-Dog* examines etymological issues through expanding a discourse regarding the subjugation of Algerians in modern France and Jews during the Holocaust through the use of often oppressive and rhetorically potent animal

metaphors that imposed languages of pre-ownership and the concept of the stray dog upon subaltern, colonized, and previously enslaved populations.

Throughout the later chapters of her work, Boisseron connects how the human is often considered a human through the right to ownership of nonhuman animals, and how only white men have historically been granted this right of ownership and companionship. The last chapter frequently uses Jacques Derrida's lectures on witnessing published in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) to question these concepts of ownership through the idea of observation relating to a famed anecdote regarding Derrida's cat seeing and possibly judging his naked body. This often repeated analysis of the animal gaze within *Afro-Dog* turns to discussions of how the Curse of Ham and the Abrahamic religious traditions that articulate blackness were part of a curse placed upon Canaan caused by Ham witnessing Noah's naked body. The final chapter ends with a famous question from Gayatri Spivak regarding the ability of the subaltern to speak through a summary of slave narratives and the role of shaming within memories of different forms of social oppression.[2]

A short coda offers engagement with clarifying authorial concerns that Boisseron faced from scholars who argued that specific academics should not engage topics that are better suited to authors only from within that subaltern group. In general, *Afro-Dog* is a deeply engaging summary of important historical theories related to oppression and the human/animal divide. Although often without much thematic structure or a temporal narrative, Boisseron's work is still an engaging, synthetic, and quick read on the importance of understanding the flaws of privilege in the making of activist engagements. As such, it should be read by scholars of Atlantic slavery, racial identity, and the animal liberation movement.

#### Notes

[1]. Carol Adams, *The Pornography of Meat* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

[2]. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

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