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Multispecies studies is a vibrant and heterogeneous interdisciplinary research field that challenges anthropocentrism. The scholars involved mobilize notions that have been fundamental for the humanities to center nonhuman existents. Thus, they facilitate discussions on “multispecies justice,”[1] “hybrid labor,”[2] or more-than-human “response-ability.”[3] In doing so, they place an emphasis on “the complex ways that we, all of us, become in consequential relationship with others.”[4] With war, authoritarian regimes, neoslavery, and far-right ideas increasingly re-entering the venues of public attention in the Global North, these discussions have not remained uncontested. At the peak of the popularity of the nonhuman turn, skeptics point to its “ontological idealism.”[5] Instead of committing to the rhetoric of relationality and entanglement, some social scientists emphasize the urgent need to prioritize the study of how (human) lives are systematically excluded and made unbearable.[6] Amid this landscape of growing uncanniness, *Nonhuman Humanitarians* comes in as a particularly important and intriguing contribution. Benjamin Meiches does nothing less than study the contributions nonhumans make to practices that mean to reduce human suffering.

*Nonhuman Humanitarians* begins with a detailed introduction, which I would wholeheartedly recommend to everyone interested in multispecies thinking and a cultural critique of humanitarianism. In this first quarter of the book, Meiches acquaints the reader with fundamental assumptions and concerns shaping the social study of interspecies relations. Besides, he also provides an excellent synopsis of literature on the idea and practice of humanitarianism. With a reference to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, he characterizes the latter as an “apparatus of capture” (p. 30). Similar to what others have argued for capitalism itself, Meiches portrays humanitarianism as an overarching hegemonic formation with the power to
enroll various relations and incorporate critique. [7] Anthropocentrism in particular is depicted as its rather neglected yet momentous flaw that needs to be dismantled and tackled. From this vantage point, a study of nonhuman labor in humanitarian projects carries the unique potential to show how things could be otherwise. Put in his own words, Meiches seeks to encourage further thinking on how humanitarianism could “join ... other political efforts to challenge planet-wide mass extinction, ecological destruction, and entanglements of gratuitous violence that affect humans and nonhuman communities” (p. 39). Nonhuman Humanitarians succeeds in conveying both the significance and the limits of this aspiration.

The main part of the book consists of three chapters that deal with different nonhumans enrolled in different humanitarian projects, respectively. Each of these three chapters first introduces a particular animal in a pseudo-ethnographic vignette and then zooms out to delve into the history, biology, and politics of its becoming as a humanitarian. While highlighting the differences between the three stories told, Meiches also develops arguments that resonate with all of them.

Chapter 1 deals with dogs involved in demining missions. In tracing the history of corresponding training programs, it elucidates the intricate entanglement of military and humanitarian practices. Besides, this chapter provides an exceptionally well-orchestrated summary of social-science literature on dogs as a charismatic companion species that has coevolved with humans. It is not simply their olfactory capacities but also their charisma, as well as breeding regimens and extensive behavioral training, that facilitates the enrollment of dogs in demining projects. In fact, Meiches’s account of their potentially lethal labor aptly demonstrates that charisma and humanization “do[ not necessarily lead to protection but instead may jeopardize nonhuman life” (p. 56). Given his overall highly differentiated analysis of dog-human relations, it is surprising that the author ultimately dwells on a rather speculative insight to address his actual research interest, namely the subversive potential of nonhuman humanitarians. According to Meiches, this potential is to be located in the joy of demining dogs. To be exact, he emphasizes how their playfulness also changes the affective disposition of human demining workers and thus “interrupts the looming sense of tragedy, sadness, and horror” that gives form to humanitarianism (p. 71). In the absence of any empirical material to support this far-reaching claim, the reader is left wondering about its scope and significance. Is the fact that dogs come to enjoy the task of demining, and demining humans come to enjoy the playfulness of their companions, indeed “generative of different values” (p. 76)? What might be an overstating assessment is also an expression of the author’s honorable commitment to figuring out “the possibility of another politics beyond the constraints of dominant humanitarian versions of compassion” (p. 75).

Unlike chapter 1, chapter 2 undeniably reveals a significant new possibility engendered by the existence of nonhuman humanitarians, namely that for a transformation of rat-human relations. In discussing their enrollment as detectors of explosives and infectious diseases, Meiches tracks how rats could be turned from objects of disgust to humanized heroes. Even though I do not share the author’s fascination for the notion of “agrologistics” (p. 92) that comes with an ethos of epochal explanatory power, I highly appreciate his nuanced take on the genealogy of human disgust toward rats as rooted in industrialized agriculture. The detailed relational account of the sensory apparatus of rats and its utilization for human interests, in turn, sheds light on another, more recent trajectory of the cohabitation of humans and rats. While the author urges “to appreciate the rats’ capacities as generative, agentic, and perspectival” (p. 90), he also clearly sympathizes with the main human humanitarian protagonists of this case study, who “admit[] rats into a realm of objects of care” (p. 107). As care is given in re-
sponse to detecting labor, Meiches situates it in an economy of gifts. He then interrogates both the limits and potentials of such anthropomorphic recognition. Can the “ecological sensitivities” (p. 108) of rats be meaningfully translated into a symbolic realm of gift exchange? No. Is it still worthwhile to try to do so by providing care for nonhuman humanitarian workers? Yes. Thus, the portrayal of humanitarian rats makes a strong case for the enrollment of nonhumans in humanitarian projects as “a laboratory for the articulation of new models of humanitarian ethics, grounded in mutual care, that remain open to nonhumans” (p. 113).

The third case study leaves detection work and sensory capacities behind and moves on to livestock as an alternative to food aid. Here, Meiches introduces the reader to the history of the delivery of animals for the mitigation of food insecurity and of the production of nonhuman milk for human consumption. He also picks up arguments introduced in the previous chapters to discuss the framing of goats and cows as gifts as well as their utilization for the promotion of agrologistics. In fact, the main argument in this chapter revolves around the juxtaposition of industrialized agriculture and subsistence. Delivering goats and cows to encourage economic transactions and market integration, according to Meiches, is grounded on a “condemnation of subsistence” and its contingencies (p. 139). Whereas the critique of development promotion by means of making economic subjects is hardly disputable, this particular claim is overly generalizing. It neglects the fact that concepts such as food sovereignty and agroecology have long entered the domain of humanitarian activities and are actively enacted by many organizations (from the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism to the World Food Programme). Despite the dualistic view of humanitarian projects as necessarily complicit with mainstream agri-capitalism and disapproving of authentic and resistant subsistent economies, however, the chapter finally ends on an invigoratingly ambivalent note. Meiches draws attention to the thin lines between companionability, labor, and death as they coexist when interspecies collaborations unfold in the arena of humanitarian practice (p. 146).

The conclusion seeks to wrap up the insights from the three case studies by relating them to two newly introduced notions: metacommunication and nonchalance. According to Meiches, paying attention to implicit communicative acts of nonhuman humanitarians reveals their indifference toward humanitarian projects. Thus, neither the dogs and the rats nor the cows and the goats appear to be stirred by the missions and affects sustained by their labor. The author, then, urges the reader not to think of this as “a result of poor understanding, exhaustion, or lack of comprehension on the part of nonhuman animals but rather a form of communicative nonchalance that emerges from the deep ambiguities that affect nonhuman laborers” (p. 163). Meanwhile, he refers to accounts of “nonchalance as an important democratic virtue” (p. 165) and a matter of “refusing to be subordinate to the demands that one must be for or against a force” (p. 167). One cannot help but wonder whether such an analysis romanticizes the animals' capacities to reflect upon and relate to a politics designed by humans in deliberate ignorance of nonhumans. At the same time, the author's thorough and attentive way of introducing the concept of nonchalance is overall inspiring and invites further thinking with or against his argument.

The notion of “nonchalance” is by far not the only one the book refers to in an impressively detailed and nuanced manner. From ethology to feminist theory, Meiches's masterly way of weaving in a diverse range of concepts and debates to make intriguing claims turns his book into a valuable read for anyone interested in critical social theory. Thus, Nonhuman Humanitarians provides many thought-provoking insights into relational thinking, biopolitics, warfare, and the “biology of history.”[8] These insights go way beyond what the
title and the short description of the book could possibly convey. Its original promise to elucidate the enrollment of nonhuman animals as a “turning point” (p. 38) for humanitarianism, however, proves to be difficult to redeem. While teaching its readers a lot about dogs, rats, cows, and goats; the genealogy of their cohabitation with humans; and their humanitarian labor, the book provides comparably few insights into how the latter “disrupts the loops that characterize humanitarian discourse” (p. 174). It might be the case that the author’s determination to avoid a naïvely sympathetic account of humanitarianism made him prioritize the analysis of its uncontestable drawbacks. It might be the case that interview material or ethnographic encounters to be generated in follow-up studies will be more likely to foster odd findings instead of appealing speculations. It might be the case that an analysis of humanitarianism as always already fragmented rather than monolithic will uncover more contingencies. It might be the case that the enrollment of nonhuman humanitarians has yet to unfold its counterhegemonic potential. We will surely find out, as this innovative and courageous book is likely to inspire further inquiries on this and similar kinds of actors. After all, Meiches’s work proves that the foregrounding of interspecies relations can well go hand in hand with and enrich classic tropes of social critique.

Notes

