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Marcy Norton’s *The Tame and the Wild* places relationships among people and animals at the center of the remaking of the Americas. Departing from Alfred Crosby’s influential *The Columbian Exchange* (1972), Norton uses close and creative readings of sixteenth-century sources in combination with evidence and theory from anthropology and linguistics to challenge assumptions about the intrinsic superiority of European livestock and the tendency to divorce a “biological” conquest from sociocultural contexts and entanglements. Over the course of eleven thematically organized chapters, Norton elucidates critical differences in European and Indigenous “modes of interaction” with animals and the consequences—mostly, but not entirely destructive—of these differences.

Norton presents a thesis that is clear and deceptively simple: hunting and husbandry were the key modes of interaction among people and animals in European and Mediterranean societies. These modes of interaction, stretching for millennia, gave rise to an ontological separation between people and animals. In contrast, Indigenous America’s modes of interaction with animals, consisting of what Norton terms “predation” and “familiarization,” functioned to nurture a sense of commonalities “across the species divide” (p. 8). She uses predation and familiarization to convey that Indigenous cultures in Greater Amazonia (defined as the Caribbean and lowland South America) and Mesoamerica upheld “distinctions between the categories wild and tame rather than those of ‘human’ and ‘animal’” (p. 5).

Predation and familiarization do a lot of analytical work in this book and therefore merit brief elaboration. Norton defines predation as first and foremost about the production of food. She draws on linguistic evidence from Central Mexico and Greater Amazonia to show that Indigenous languages in those regions used the same word for hunting and warfare, suggesting that speakers of these languages did not maintain a rigid human-
animal dichotomy. Norton also uses the word “predation” to draw distinctions between European modes of hunting and Indigenous ones, arguing that Indigenous hunters did not rely heavily on “vassal” animals (e.g., dogs or horses) commonly used in European societies. The term “familiarization” is a complementary notion that refers to relationships that resulted from giving food to creatures that would not be eaten. That is, a creature (for example, a parrot or monkey) might be captured, fed, and essentially tamed as a companion animal without any intent to control its movements or its ability to reproduce. In this regard, familiarization was fundamentally different from what is often called domestication or pet keeping that typically involves the management of an animal’s life cycle and/or movements. Throughout the book Norton uses these concepts to (re)interpret the basis of European-Indigenous interactions during the sixteenth century.

The structure of The Tame and the Wild reinforces the ontological cleavage that drives Norton’s analysis. The first part of the book consists of three chapters focused on European modes of hunting (with a bias toward the hunting practices of nobility); livestock raising and meat production; and the use of domesticated animals in warfare and as a means to remove Indigenous people from their land. The second part of the book examines Indigenous ideas of the “tame and the wild,” exploring in depth the idea of iegue, defined as an animal whom one feeds and cherishes as a companion, not as a food. Norton documents that practices of familiarization have been widely recorded in Amazonia and elsewhere in lowland South America. She then turns to Mesoamerica, offering detailed and original interpretations of Mexica (Aztec) iconography from the Codex Borgia and Codex Zouche Nutall, drawing distinctions between both lowland Indigenous forms of predation and familiarization as well as European modes of hunting and livestock raising. Norton argues that in Mesoamerica (she draws primarily on Nahuatl- and Spanish-language sources produced in Central Mexico; Mayan sources are not consulted), some animals (e.g., dogs, turkeys) would be fed and killed for ritual purposes. She provocatively posits a connection between the ritual killing of nonhuman animals and people—the “human sacrifice” that Christian observers invoked to condemn the Aztecs—contending that the killing of people was made “tenable” by a “fundamental truth of the cosmos:” everything is both food and feed (p. 219).

The final part of the book consists of four chapters that examine entanglements, showing how Indigenous people incorporated (often with little choice) European forms of livestock keeping, while Europeans in turn incorporated Indigenous ideas about taming into practices of gifting and keeping wild animals. Finally, Norton demonstrates how the combined labor of Iberian and Indigenous intellectuals produced knowledge about animals in the Americas that circulated in Europe, including what is today known as the Florentine Codex and the less well-known Historiae animalium, a work of text and images credited to Francisco Hernández that remained unpublished for decades.

In a brief epilogue, Norton links the events of the sixteenth century to the present, suggesting that the roots of contemporary ecological and climate crises, along with ongoing dispossessions of resources, extend well beyond the Green or Industrial Revolutions to when livestock was “reinvented” in colonial America. For a reader steeped in the modern socio-environmental history of the Americas, the leap from Francisco Hernández to Berta Cáceres is big, but achievable. However, for readers less familiar with Latin American environmental history and/or political ecology, the leap might be a stretch.

The Tame and the Wild offers a much-needed corrective to biological explanations of “conquest” that often strip Indigenous actors of power while downplaying the role of cultural practices (“modes of interactions”) and systematic violence. The au-
Thor's stated interest in exploring the creation of subjectivities largely explains the privileging of late twentieth-century ethnographic findings over the empirical observations of ecologists studying animals. The use of ethnographic upstreaming, primarily done in the context of the Amazon, is combined effectively with extant sixteenth-century sources. I wonder if a similarly careful use of “Western” science—ecological upstreaming?—could have shed light on how specific kinds of animals influenced modes of interactions, including interactions with life forms beyond humans/people. Recently, at least some ecologists are collaborating with the inhabitants of Amazonia to learn about animals, not unlike the “Western” authors of the sixteenth-century texts Norton draws upon heavily for Mesoamerica.[1] 

The Tame and the Wild draws on sources that cover a big swath of territories and multiple socio-linguistic groups to build its argument (p. 133). This results in implicit generalizations that potentially flatten Indigenous subjectivities. In addition, the necessary privileging of texts produced by sociopolitical elites leaves open the question if dominant modes of interactions could produce variations across diverse socio-ecologies, or if European or Indigenous ontologies spawned contradictions. For example, in the highly stratified, agrarian societies of Central Mexico—where maize, beans, and squash were cultivated for thousands of years prior to the arrival of the Spanish—one wonders if sixteenth-century communities of maize cultivators viewed avian life or herbaceous predators differently than did an urban-based member of the Aztec ruling class.

The Tame and the Wild is a book that deserves to be widely read among scholars interested in Iberian empires, colonial Latin America, animal studies, and history of science (i.e., knowledge production). Although some readers may question elements of Norton's bold interpretations, few would deny the importance of interactions among diverse people and animals in shaping the Americas (and beyond) following the fateful moment in 1493 when Columbus returned to Hispaniola with a suite of domesticated animals whose violent expansion would be central to European notions of modernity, and the construction of Indigenous “inferiorities.” Marcy Norton's willingness to consider not only how this happened but why will feed scholarship on people and animals for years to come.

Notes

This review is based on the reviewer's reading of uncorrected page proofs provided by Harvard University Press.

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