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Rosemary-Claire Collard
University of Toronto

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Made, not born, machines

Critical Animal Studies: An Introduction

by **DAWNE McCANCE**

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Reviewed by **ROSEMARY-CLAIRE
COLLARD**

The field of critical animal studies (CAS) is thoroughly multi-disciplinary and, as Dawne McCance's wide-ranging review text, *Critical Animal Studies: An Introduction*, demonstrates, its diversity is growing within the recent scholarly surge now widely referred to as the "animal turn." One of the key arguments that unites the field is that the widespread (but not universal) characterization of nonhuman animals as not thinking or feeling, as "inert objects, useful, disposable things," is a product of specific histories, ideas, and practices. This characterization is not reflective of a pre-existing or "natural" order. To loosely paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir's famous words about becoming a woman, animals are not born machines; rather, dominant ideas and material practices *make* animals into machines. From Descartes's infamous and enduring insistence that animals are simple automatons, to agricultural technologies that reduce domesticated animals to living technologies for meat and dairy production, animals are diminished to the status of mere machinery—live but not quite *alive*. Introducing key ideas from several theoretical fields, including animal liberation, feminist care ethics and posthumanism, McCance visits several sites—laboratories, zoos and language, among others—to trace how

this reduction is accomplished and what its implications are for animal life and death.

After a short introduction in which McCance outlines the hierarchical Cartesian dualism (mind/body, human/animal) to which her book and critical animal studies' are opposed, McCance turns to what are, for CAS scholars, familiar figures in a familiar place: Peter Singer and Tom Regan on the factory farm. Singer and Regan are widely credited with initiating central arguments and debates that comprise the field of critical animal studies. As McCance summarizes in chapter 2, "Animal Liberation on the Factory Farm," the "master-narrative" origin story of animal studies is one in which academic concern for animals and their moral status was born in 1970s "Oxbridge-style" analytic moral philosophy, in particular Singer's *Animal Liberation*, which focuses on factory farms, a topic that has continued to occupy critical animal studies thinkers to this day. In the same book, Singer develops his anti-speciesist framework for animal equality, a framework that has continued, although in contested and arguably lessening fashion, to dominate CAS. Both Singer and Regan, who is associated with a stricter animal rights approach, have been and continue to be occupied with the question of how to decide who—or what—has moral status.

But this conventional beginning to *Critical Animal Studies* belies what is a much more radical and varied book, and scholarly field, more broadly. For McCance, the "critical" of critical animal studies indicates a willingness—even a requirement—to continually "question

inherited conceptual frameworks and modes of action they inform.” And so McCance slips from summarizing Singer and Regan’s arguments into a serious and sustained critique of their positions in the remainder of the book, thus acknowledging and also challenging the two philosophers’ position as founders and leaders of critical animal thought. In this sense, McCance’s book is more than a straightforward review text, as she urges the field in new directions. In doing so, she suggests that critical animal thought can deepen its critique of how animals are made machines by acknowledging how the very subject of the human depends on this subordination of the animal and its relegation to machine-like status. For McCance, it is imperative that critical animal studies interrogate these categories of human and animal, rather than re-deploy them and risk perpetuating a so-called “natural order” and liberal individualism that is at the root of systemic maltreatment of animals.

In particular, McCance calls into question two aspects of Singer and Regan’s dominance within CAS. First, she is concerned about the elevated and exclusive position that philosophers, especially analytic philosophers, have carved out for themselves within the discipline. For McCance, it is important that CAS embrace work outside of “utilitarian and rights-based Anglo-American analytic philosophy,” in part because arguments from this tradition tend to be founded on concepts of the subject and human-animal relations that derive from Cartesian notions of rational thought, individualism and hierarchy. McCance follows continental

philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Matthew Calarco in maintaining that these concepts “have for centuries facilitated human domination over animals.” Second, and related, McCance joins a rising chorus of voices from feminist thought, continental philosophy, and posthumanism arguing that it is not enough to merely shift the line that demarcates what is included and what is excluded from moral consideration. Rather, the very move to mark this line, the logic of the “who counts?” calculus, must be questioned. For example, as McCance shows in chapter 3, “Animal Rights in the Wild,” this line too often ends up granting moral status to animals “most like us” and therefore only reinforces human exceptionalism.

Two major forces directing the logic and effects of the “who counts” calculus are capitalism and colonialism, and so it is curious and unfortunate that CAS has tended (with some important exceptions) to refrain from critiquing these coupled forms, whose ascendance is deeply implicated in mass animal death, suffering, and exploitation. Both capitalism and colonialism depend on and perpetuate particular configurations of human-animal relations and notions of “the human” and “the animal.” For the most part, such discussion is absent from McCance’s book, but this should not be read as a fault of hers as it is indicative of a larger gap in critical animal thought. But over the last decade there have been patchy but hopeful signs that CAS is moving into more collaborations with Marxist and Indigenous thinkers, among others who offer critiques of capitalism and colonialism. Examples that do not

have play in McCance's book, but are noteworthy in this respect, include Shukin's recent *Animal Capital*, longtime writings by Indigenous thinkers (for example Linda Hogan, Jeannette Armstrong, Winona LaDuke and Leanne Simpson), Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, and Ted Benton's Marxist-CAS *Natural Relations*. Critical animal studies might also engage productively with environmental historians, many of whom have chronicled the unfolding of colonialism as, in part, a process of domestication as well as a universalizing of the Western, liberal version of "the human" that CAS challenges.

It is also interesting to note that there are few actual animals populating *Critical Animal Studies* pages. McCance's preface is a visceral and compelling account of her experience conducting experiments on rats as a (understandably short-lived) biochemistry graduate student. This vivid beginning to the book sets a tone that is not carried through the text—perhaps in part because her book is based in academic literature and not first-hand research. When McCance writes of the violence of factory farming, zoos and laboratories, she does so in a largely abstract and aggregate manner. It can be assumed that this was intentional, but it may have been helpful to have her justify this decision.

In urging readers to question CAS's inherited theoretical precepts, McCance opens up the field to even more diverse approaches, an opening that is compatible with the kinds of collaborations I advocated earlier in this review. This book will thus be of interest to scholars who wish to push the

boundaries of contemporary thought about human-animal relations. Further, with her clear prose and simultaneous theoretical breadth and depth, McCance provides an accessible introduction to key and emerging theoretical arguments brewing in CAS. This is a field that has grown rapidly in the last two decades, and shows all indications of continuing to do so, especially within a global context of escalating, pressing ecological crises. Given this topical and scholarly context, McCance's timely book will be an excellent tool for drawing in new scholars and familiarizing them with the field. Her book reviews and encourages desperately needed ideas and interventions that will hopefully contribute to sparking a dramatic rethinking and reconfiguring of human-animal relations.

ROSEMARY-CLAIRE COLLARD is a postdoctoral fellow in geography at the University of Toronto, where she studies the role of animals—especially wildlife—in contemporary capitalism, biopolitics, scientific knowledge production, and culture (i.e. film).