

Back to the Slaughterhouse

TRISTAN SIPLEY

Nicole Shukin. *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

While it may seem redundant to assert the *materiality* of animal life, the emerging branch of cultural theory known as “animality studies” has in fact been riddled with philosophical idealism. On one hand, poststructuralist approaches have tended to reduce animals to linguistic and cultural signifiers, overlooking their historical role as actual bodies. On the other hand, environmentalists have celebrated the sensuous existence of real animals in a way that fetishizes their immediate physicality at the expense of a broader socioeconomic, cultural, and political analysis. Into this theoretical impasse enters Nicole Shukin’s *Animal Capital*, a materialist intervention that dialectically walks a tightrope between the twin pitfalls of cultural idealism and flatfooted naturalism.

The basic premise of *Animal Capital*, Shukin’s first book-length monograph, and the sixth in the University of Minnesota Press “Posthumanities” series edited by Cary Wolfe, is that in the global-capitalist era “nature” is no longer external to human society, but is rather imminent to its processes, and has been transformed into an entirely recycled *second nature* (68). The text explores in detail the simultaneous “capitalization of nature” and “naturalization of capital,” explaining how the socioeconomic system feeds off of natural systems while at the same integrating the signs of nature into its cultural logic. Put simply, we are faced with a dual exploitation in which the same industries that destroy animal bodies for profit use their symbolic representation as advertising.

In *Capital*, Marx famously traced the mystical abstraction of commodity fetishism back to its source in the exploitative social relations enacted at the site of production, systematically linking the trinket purchased in the market to the violence of the factory floor. *Animal Capital* follows a similar logic, this time moving readers from the representation of nonhuman animals in popular culture—especially advertising—back to the floor of the slaughterhouse: to the reality of animal life as part of the global foods and services industries. Thus Shukin relentlessly demolishes the prevailing neoliberal dream of a dematerialized, postmodern, cyber-capitalism that is able

to magically generate surplus value without slaughtering animals, felling trees, blasting mountaintops, polluting ecosystems or exploiting working-class bodies. Contemporary Western culture often pretends that “the material exploitation of labor, as well as of nature, is a thing of the past” (43). This myth is of course nothing more than a symptom of the global division of labor, under which the messy dealings with nature are spatially segregated from the eyes of middle-class consumers. Shukin troubles this myth by uncovering the material histories of violence that lie beneath the veneer of “ironic postmodern distance” in pop culture representations of animals (13).

Animal Capital begins with a theoretical introduction that proclaims a “double-edged intervention” into both left politics and animal studies (6). According to Shukin, Marxists and post-Marxists, including even theorists of biopower such as Hardt and Negri, remain blinded by the “species divide” and thus fail to take seriously the “problem of the animal.” On the other hand, Shukin argues, poststructuralist animal studies have paid little attention to the way animals and the claims made about them are circumscribed, mediated, and even produced by capitalism. She enlists the help of Slavoj Žižek in order to criticize the unhistorical aspects of Deleuze’s “becoming-animal” and Derrida’s “spectral” animal alterity. Shukin then proposes her alternative concept of “rendering.” She plays with the dual meaning of “rendering” as both the act of representation or translation and the processing of animal flesh. Animals are rendered aesthetically at the same time that their bodies are physically rendered into commodities. This double entendre allows her to trace two parallel and co-implicated genealogies: the development of mimetic representation and of industrial slaughter. Against claims made by Frankfurt School theorists that capitalism disrupts or distorts an innate biological mimetic faculty, Shukin more skeptically argues that this celebratory “naturalization” of mimesis is complicit with methods by which the rendering industry naturalizes its own exploitation, for example by publishing promotional materials comparing its activities to the use of the “whole animal” by primitive tribes. By contrast, Shukin argues that the development of the modern rendering industry marked a radical shift in the historical relation between humans and the natural world.

The core of *Animal Capital* is made up of three chapters entitled “Automobility,” “Telemobility,” and “Biomobility,” that contain three case studies representative of Shukin’s historical and cultural materialist approach. It is in these close readings that Shukin is at her most impressive, as she acrobatically plays with textual contradictions in order to open up forgotten material histories. The first of these studies links the development of slaughterhouses to both the automobile industry and modern cinema, pointing out that Henry Ford’s assembly line was modeled closely on the “disassembly” process of nineteenth-century abattoirs, and that the essential ingredient in early film production was gelatin made from animal tissue. The histories of animals, cars, and film all coalesce in a penetrating analysis of contemporary adver-

tisements that represent that the automobile as an organic part of the landscape. As cars displace animals as the primary form of transportation, they take on the “animal signifier” to the point that they are symbolically equated with nature, even as their increased production leads to the mass destruction of nature itself (117). In representing the SUV as a species of wildlife, the destroyer of nature is naturalized.

The second case study, “Telemobility,” presents another “triangulation,” this time linking Luigi Galvani’s eighteenth-century electrical experiments on amphibians to Thomas Edison’s filmed electrocution of the unruly elephant “Topsy” in 1903. Shukin reveals how these two forgotten histories of animal violence reemerge in the contradictions of contemporary telecommunications advertising campaigns. The telecom industry’s promotional materials use animal imagery in order to construct a “neoliberal fantasy” in which cell phones “grow on trees” (171). This “magical belief in the possibility of communication without cost, consumption without production” disguises the structural violence and exploitation that make mass communication possible, for example through the mining of the precious metal coltan, which has greatly contributed to war and political unrest, as well as environmental destruction, in central Africa (162).

Finally, “Biomobility” presents two discourses that illustrate the promise and the threat, the desire and the fear, surrounding “interspecies exchange.” First, Shukin analyzes an environmentally oriented photography exhibit that depicts scenes of human/animal interactions in the global south. Under Shukin’s critique these seemingly positive visions of interspecies kinship actually reveal a racist orientalism and exoticism, as they conflate the bodies of subaltern humans and nonhuman animals. Rather than picturing the reality of contemporary third world subjects “working with [or] consuming animals,” the photographs construct the myth of a timeless, conflict-free, symbiotic, pre-modern unity (200). In the second half of the chapter, Shukin argues that the underside of this romantic interspecies “intimacy” is the widespread anxiety over pandemic disease. Shukin dissects the rhetoric surrounding “frightening” forms of trans-species contact such as Mad Cow Disease and Avian Flu (a list to which we might add the recent hype surrounding “swine flu”). While the specter of pandemic would seem to level and unify the population, making everyone equally at risk, its rhetoric actually works to identify, blame, and control the very humans, such as supposedly “unhygienic” peasant villagers, who are most vulnerable (211-213). In this way, pandemic speculation acts as an excuse for increased surveillance and discipline, and also for a new wave of primitive accumulation, as subsistence farmers are divorced from their own protein source and integrated into the global food system (214).

In a postscript, Shukin extends this critique of biomobility, pointing out how the

threat of animal-borne pandemic arises in practice not from subsistence producers, but rather from large-scale agribusiness. In their necessary drive to accumulate profit, agricultural capitalists must develop time- and cost-saving measures, for example the practice Shukin calls “animal cannibalism,” in which the flesh, brains, and spinal tissue of dead ruminants is fed back to livestock as a cheap source of protein source. The fact that Mad Cow Disease originated from this practice shows that ecological systems can only be pushed to produce so much, before systemic breakdowns occur and “nature,” as Engels famously put it, “takes its revenge” (241). Though the external environment may be imminent to the workings of global capitalism, it can never be fully integrated into the economic calculus without generating fissures and contradictions. However, Shukin is careful to note in her concluding statement that environmentally induced crisis is not necessarily a “problem” for capital; those in power seem to be doing a fine job of profiting from the very socio-ecological catastrophes they create. The book thus ends on an extremely cautious note, pointing the way to a political practice that does not yet exist.

If there is any argument to be made against Shukin’s analysis, it may be that in her fervor to emphasize the importance of nonhuman animals she spends much less time on their connection to human laborers. Although several passages deal with subsistence farming, structural racism, the scientific management of labor, and other “human-centered” issues, there are few overt statements regarding how animal politics might connect with, for example, environmental justice struggles for the rights of people exposed to toxic pollution in the workplace. While these issues could simply be beyond the scope of the study, this silence could also result from Shukin’s theoretical grounding in a so-called post-Marxism that, while remaining resolutely materialist, jettisons such basic concepts as “class struggle.” This is not so much a problem with Shukin’s work in particular as it is with radical environmentalism in general, which ritualistically rejects the classical Marxist tradition as “anthropocentric,” and frequently appears to speak as if the natural environment will rise up of its own accord and organize against its oppressors – as if the menacing cattle that adorn the cover of Shukin’s book will spontaneously sing the Internationale. This is a problematic tendency, for while the contradictions of nature under capitalism may supply the primary condition for political intervention, “nature” itself cannot be an agent of social transformation. It is perhaps a mark of the hegemonic triumph of capital and utter despair of the left that human agency in general and labor organization in particular have been removed from recent theoretical critiques of capitalism. To join Shukin in asserting, against Aristotle, that nonhumans too are “political animals” is not to deny that the primary agents of social change must be humans, and more specifically (if I may risk saying it) that portion of the human population that Marx identified as the proletariat. Nonetheless, *Animal Capital* stands as an urgent and much needed political intervention into a field that has so far merely reproduced the

logics of the very system it sets out to deconstruct. Shukin allows for a critique of the shortcomings of liberal individualist and consumer based “resistance” movements, always bringing us back to the slaughterhouse floor where culture meets nature. As a final note, it should be stated that Shukin, like all cultural critics, is at the mercy of an ever-expanding archive of newly published theoretical source material. Given that her analysis of biopower is based almost solely on Foucault’s classic *History of Sexuality*, one wonders what more she would have done had she had access to his Collège de France lectures from 1977 to 1979, recently published as *Security, Territory, Population and The Birth of Biopolitics*. Given the promise of Shukin’s first book, we likely needn’t wait long for a thought-provoking response.

Works Cited

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Tristan Siple is a graduate student at the University of Oregon with a focus in nineteenth and early-twentieth century fiction, critical theory, and ecocriticism. His dissertation, entitled “Second Nature: Literature, Capital and the Built Environment, 1848-1938,” explores fictional representations of industrial and urban spaces and their relationship to progressive health reforms and labor activism. He has published in the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, as well as in the *Encyclopedia of American Environmental Literature*.