



Vol. 13, No. 1, Fall 2015, 404-414

## **Review/Reseña**

Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici eds. *Centering Animals in Latin American History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

### **Animals and Humans in Latin American History**

**Maureen E. Shea**

Tulane University

*Centering Animals in Latin American History*, edited by Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici, is a well-researched study that includes essays by eight contributors as well as an introduction and one article each by the editors, a foreword by Erica Fudge, and a conclusion. The book concentrates on how various animals and insects have impacted the trend of history in Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Brazil, the Dominican Republic and the Patagonian littoral of Chile and Argentina in the pre-Columbian and colonial era, the 19th century and early 20 century. It seeks to find a way to explore animal and human relations with a concentration on the animal, rather than the human. As the editors acknowledge, this is a difficult challenge as archives almost exclusively work the other way, privileging human actors and their roles in the making

of history while relegating non-human actors to an auxiliary status if at all. All of the writers grapple with the question of centering animals in different ways. Some address this gap by engaging with ethnographic and literary studies as well as oral histories. With varying success they try avoiding the use of an anthropomorphic lens and concentrate instead on the impact animals have had on human populations throughout the course of Latin American history. Although these essays cannot approach what it means to be an animal during momentous events in history, they do a good job of emphasizing the importance of the interactions between humans and animals and how certain events involving animals shifted the trend of history. The post-humanist stance of the editors and contributors is evident in their efforts to place animals in a prominent position as a presence, although without human agency, that moved humans to act in certain ways. The essays call attention to a widespread absence in colonial and post-colonial studies that has just begun to be addressed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in that way bestowing more central importance on the role of animals in human societies; and, by referring to the various ways animals have been abused in the past, they link their research to contemporary issues such as cruel forms of animal farming, the animal rights movements and environmental concerns. Because these diverse essays link animals to myriad aspects of human life, it is important to refer briefly to each of them.

Various essays call attention to the parallels between the mistreatment of animals and discriminatory practices against indigenous and African groups who were generally considered to have the same status as animals in Latin America during the conquest and colonial period and, in some regions, until today. For instance, Leon García Garagarza's essay, "The Year the People Turned into Cattle," depicts the clash between cultural practices of the indigenous Nahua of Mexico and the advent of the Spanish conquistadors with their European animals. Rapidly the growth of cattle and sheep ranching took over traditional indigenous lands used for food crops, especially maize. As their food supply decreased, hunger and disease shattered the indigenous populations. Juan Teton, a Nahua diviner, connected the advent of European animals and Christianity with

the decline in the indigenous population, preaching that the Spaniards were turning the indigenous into beasts. He called for the banning of European meat from the indigenous diet, as well as forbidding Christian baptism, to avoid the end of their existence and the renewal of their world. The essay articulates the way in which Europeans privileged their cash-producing livestock over the survival of indigenous populations who became more displaced and marginalized as their land was taken over by European ranchers for cattle and sheep.

Heather McCrea's study, "Pest to Vector: Disease, Public Health and the Challenges of State-Building in Yucatán, Mexico, 1833-1922," also shows how the developing germ theories connecting insects and animals with disease led to increased discrimination against Maya communities in the Yucatán. The first worldwide cholera pandemic brought to the Yucatán from New Orleans that killed one tenth of the population in the 1830's led to widespread fear and paranoia among the population. Because indigenous communities generally have an intimate connection with nature, keeping their animals close or in their homes to care for and protect them, the Yucatecan elite viewed the Maya as barbarous and filthy creatures, prone to spread diseases. Considered obstacles to progress, much like insects and animals, they were subjected to public health campaigns that invaded and isolated their communities. McCrea details some of the scientific thinking of the times, such as tracing the spread of malaria to mosquitoes and the distinction between pest and vector that led to new health policies targeting garbage-strewn streets, stray animals, and contaminated corpses. With the support of urban residents, public health policies intended to control animals also targeted the rural subcultures. Late-nineteenth century positivist thinking establishing the civilization vs. barbarism dichotomy left animals, insects and the indigenous connected to the latter. In this way the control of animals and insects in the name of public health also led to the marginalization and modification of Maya communities.

Martha Few's essay, "Killing Locusts in Guatemala," describes the devastation of indigenous communities due to changes in cultivation of crops under European colonialism that may have increased the frequency

and intensity of locust plagues. Locusts destroyed many of the food crops for growing urban populations and also the cornfields on which the indigenous population depended heavily for sustenance. Great epidemics rocked the indigenous communities, weakened by famine after locust plagues. The essay details the many religious and secular methods colonial authorities employed to try to kill or control the locusts throughout the colonial period; they were regarded both as nonhuman plagues and as an enemy army assuming human characteristics as the destruction caused by locusts threatened the Spanish Christianizing mission in the New World. Because locusts ate the local and export crops, depleted Indian labor through famine or locust eradication campaigns in which the Indians participated, the impact of locusts on Guatemalan colonial history under Spanish imperial efforts to control the land, and its animal and human population becomes clear. Few's essay, as McCrea's, calls attention to the scant notice attributed to the role of insects as compared to other animals in influencing historical trends.

Two essays describe the decimation of vast numbers of animals to meet the demands of European fashion in the late 19th-early 20th century. In "Birds and Scientists in Brazil: In Search of Protection, 1894-1938," Regina Horta Duarte describes how during the era of positivist thought at the end of the 19th century national identities were linked to the natural sciences. Frequently clashing with institutions and authorities wishing to lead Brazil into modernity, scientists argued that the protection of nature, especially birds, was essential to the identity and progress of the Brazilian nation. However, in the first decades of the 20th century plumed and feathered ornaments became popular in Europe. Imitating Western ideas of fashion, bird ornaments especially for hats became popular among Brazilian elite women who wished to be seen as sophisticated and stylish. The local consumption and mass exportation of bird feathers to Europe and the United States, combined with sportive hunting, led to a veritable massive slaughter of birds. For instance, Horta Duarte cites a figure of 20,000 kilos of feathers legally exported between 1910 and 1914, a number considered low because it did not account for a flourishing black market in bird parts. Led by conservationist groups in the United States such as the

National Association of Audubon Societies, in the mid 1920's the acceptance of these ornaments waned. Horta Duarte also links the annihilation of birds to the exploitation of the indigenous in Brazil's interior territories by rubber barons and landowners. Meanwhile scientists eventually proved the utility of birds in nature such as consuming the destructive leaf-cutting ants, and some sectors of Brazilian society came to associate the protection of birds with positivist rational values. Today, although there are strict regulations protecting birds, scientists and activists still have their hands full trying to protect the 117 remaining species of birds threatened by the illegal trafficking of bird parts and Brazil still has one of the highest rates of bird extinction in the world.

In "On Edge: Fur Seals and Hunters along the Patagonian Littoral, 1860-1930," John Soluri depicts the way that sheep ranchers who were granted land in southern Patagonia made a fortune by hunting, butchering and trading fur seals. He contrasts the native Yamana hunters who hunted seals without destroying their breeding colonies as opposed to the North Atlantic seal hunters who slaughtered thousands by clubbing the males, females and pups to death during the birthing and mating season. Notwithstanding this brutal tactic meant to keep the furs intact, he points out that many of the sailors were quite impoverished; as the entire crew gained a percentage of the profit from the sale of fur seals, they stood to benefit from the largest number killed. Although seal clubbing came to be a symbol of animal cruelty in the late 20th century, he speculates that some of the crewmembers may have felt respect or sympathy for the animals they killed, calling the young orphaned seals "pups," for instance. For these reasons he believes that centering animals in history must take into account the relationships among the people with whom they come into contact who have an indirect impact on their lives, arguing that seal hunting was a dangerous occupation and crewmembers also suffered from the trade. He echoes Dorothee Brantz argument that writing animal histories is difficult not only because of a lack of sources but also because of the problems of establishing agency among animals. But when he points to the complexities of writing animal histories—wondering if the fur seals played a role in history beyond that of passive victims—he also seems to imply that

the seal hunters were equally victimized. However, one could argue that despite the hardships endured by the seal hunters, the choice was theirs to participate in the seal slaughters.

Other essays go into popular religious rituals or medicine involving animals. Zeb Tortorici's essay "In the Name of the Father and the Mother of All Dogs': Canine Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals in Bourbon Mexico," describes the affective connection between humans and household pets in 18th century Mexican culture. Playful events such as canine baptisms, weddings and funerals mostly among middle and upper class Mexicans were commonplace enough to attract the attention of the Spanish Inquisition that persecuted priests who officiated these rituals. The essay reveals the anthropomorphic tendencies to dress up animals in gendered roles provoking hilarity among the spectators but also revealing deep emotional connections between humans and animals, enough so that the Catholic Church worried that humans might be led to believe that animals had souls. Tortorici points out that entertaining events like canine weddings emphasized the importance of animal-human relationships and also sustained group identity among humans. He concludes by referring to the absence of animals in historical sources such as the Inquisition files, except in relation to humans, raising the problem of limited access to historical sources about the animals themselves.

In "From Natural History to Popular Remedy: Animals and Their Medicinal Applications among the Kallawaya in Colonial Peru," Adam Warren points out that while the medicinal use of plants has been studied widely in natural histories of the colonial period, the use of animals and animal products for healing has been neglected. Warren's essay partially fills in that gap by studying Martín Delgar, the 18th century surgeon who lived among and studied the healing practices of the Kallawaya Incas, upon which he based his *recetarios* (popular home medical guides) along with borrowing from the Jesuit Bernabé Cobo's natural history of the mid-17th century. Delgar's popular *recetarios* included indigenous plant remedies as well as animal parts and by-products, such as milk, honey, fat, and also those products made by animals such as nests. The *recetarios* suggest that the animal-based remedies were as widespread among indigenous Andean

peoples in the 18th century as plant-based curatives. In this way Warren calls attention to the importance of the animal in healing practices among the Kallawaya of colonial Peru.

Various essays draw parallels between political realities of certain regions to the treatment of animals. For instance, in “Notes on Medicine, Culture and the History of Imported Monkeys in Puerto Rico,” Neel Ahuja connects the fate of imported monkeys for biomedical experimentation to the history of the myriad abuses of U.S. imperialism and neoliberal policies in the region. He focuses on the obstacles to writing the history of colonized subjects, human or animals, in the face of U.S. imperial domination. Puerto Rico was envisioned as a laboratory for the processes of modernization and monkeys were imported for experimentation to help make American medicine “modern.” Ahuja goes into the *chupacabras* (a horrendous imagined creature consisting of a blend of reptile, monkey and dog) legend, linking it to the paranoia brought on by the undisclosed U.S. military and industrial ventures in the area. He points out that in the Puerto Rican imaginary human beings were being watched by monkeys rather than the other way around, as the monkey was linked to U.S. secretiveness and surveillance technologies in the region. Finally he refers to the difficulties of writing a monkey history from mostly human archives that do not take into account, for instance, the suffering of monkeys used for experimentation. But although monkeys were tied to the politics of development and the cultural memory of U.S. domination in Puerto Rico, they also found ingenious ways to escape or transform the experimental research site, in that way gaining some agency in histories written from a human point of view.

Reinaldo Funes Monzote’s study, “Animal Labor and Protection in Cuba: Changes in Relationships with Animals in the Nineteenth Century,” equates the 19th century major shift in how working animals were used with the anti-slavery movements of the time. For instance, both oxen and human slaves were overworked and abused in the production of sugar. The founding of the *Sociedad Cubana Protectora de Animales y Plantas* in the 1880’s coincided with the mounting tendency towards abolition. The *Sociedad* had a significant impact in improving the ways that animals were

viewed and treated, during a time of growing awareness of the barbaric nature of human slavery. Monzote also points to the dearth of animal histories; archival sources tended to focus much more on the role of plants such as tobacco and sugarcane in Cuban economic and social history although animals had a fundamental role in impacting the future of Cuban society. The essay describes the various ways in which machines gradually reduced the need for animal and human labor, concluding with an emphasis on the importance of nonhuman animals as a source of labor, transport, food and clothing in the lives of Cubans, despite their marginal status in historical records.

“Trujillo, the Goat: Of Beasts, Men and Politics in the Dominican Republic,” by Lauren Derby demonstrates how the goat became associated with the dictator Rafael Trujillo after his death, whose brutal rule oppressed the Dominican people for three decades (1930-1961). She describes how the wild goat and the pig became symbols of freedom in the open-range *montero* economy in the mountains after Trujillo put a stop to it, turning the land over instead to plantation production of sugar for exportation. The goat had a reputation as a sexual predator, much as Trujillo did, turning the husbands of the women he seduced or raped into *cornudos*, or deceived “horned ones.” The goat also was associated with Trujillo because of its volatile temper and inability to be controlled. Derby notes that animal nicknames, particularly large, threatening ones such as *tiguere* (tiger) or *gorila* (gorilla) were and are commonplace among Dominicans, connoting “machismo” and predatory styles; Kevin Yelvington observes that adopting these intimidating nicknames is a common trait of black masculinity, as an outlet for unemployed men to rebel against their subservient status and underscoring a sense of admiration for the aggressive animals. Finally, Trujillo was viewed as half-man and half-goat, a fearful, demonic satyr. On the first year anniversary of Trujillo’s assassination, a huge celebration took place in the streets; in this *fiesta del chivo* (the feast of the goat), effigies of goats were burned and real goats were sacrificed so that Trujillo could be symbolically eaten, thereby destroying the old order and rectifying a long era of heinous human rights abuses and humiliation.



In Neil Whitehead's perceptive conclusion he supplies a cautionary note on applying or imposing Western notions of animals rights to Asia, Africa or Latin America that may disguise a form of neocolonial domination by Europe and the United States, one with which these regions of the world are quite familiar, and which also has been applied to the control of a "threatening and foreign nature." He further exemplifies how the question of agency among animals raised in many articles in this volume is rarely a question among indigenous societies who live intimately with nature. Animals who hunt, attack or defend themselves from humans are reasonably perceived as acting with agency. In that light Whitehead draws attention to non-Western thinking about animals, a "perspectival quality" associated with indigenous cultures that view the world as containing all kinds of human and nonhuman subjects with different points of view. He notes that the key issue is to write "histories which are meaningful from the animal's point of view," a challenge that he acknowledges may be near impossible to meet since it means "trying to occupy the position of the other." In his estimation, however, thinking and writing about the past has been much improved by taking into account the profound role nature and animals have played in history.

This volume offers rich intuitive insights into human-animal interactions in Latin American history in a variety of venues. It is an informative and thought-provoking study; it provides some fascinating details, important to gain an understanding of the historical contexts of the times. Some particulars are appalling, such as the mass extermination of birds in the late 19th-early 20th century in Brazil, and the industrial scale massacre of fur seals in the Patagonia littoral, both in the name of European fashion. Other information surprised me in a positive way, such as the existence of strong animal protection societies as early as the 19th century in Cuba and Brazil. In these diverse essays animals are connected to many aspects of human life such as, medicine, science, health, fashion, popular rituals, masculinity, politics and the plight of indigenous groups and African slaves. The editors note that the study is not meant to be all encompassing but rather a beginning that may inspire others to work with interdisciplinary scholarship to address the lack of animals from historical

writing. However, it is still disappointing to note the absence of the usual marginalized countries in Latin America, especially as regions with heavy indigenous and *campesino* (peasant) populations who live closely with the land tend to have rich connections with animals and the natural world. With the exception of Guatemala, there are no other essays on Central America, and besides Peru, none on others with prevalent indigenous populations such as Bolivia, Ecuador or Paraguay, while three essays concentrate on Mexico. Despite this limitation, the study makes clear that in a post-humanist world it seems limited and outdated to focus only on research and archives that document the activities of humans while ignoring the vital role that the interactions between animals and humans played in the formation of Latin American history. It calls to mind the manner in which indigenous and African societies, as well as questions of gender and sexuality and the economically marginalized classes were sidelined in traditional colonial and 19th century histories written mostly by privileged white men. Today these inequities exist to a much lesser degree and it becomes apparent in this study that it is not such a great leap to consider that perhaps the centering of animals has become the next fundamental and dynamic step in creating a more well-rounded and complete understanding of not just Latin American history but that of our global community. As Neil L. Whitehead points out, the publication of articles, books, films, and the growth of animal rights advocates and lifestyle changes reflect a mounting awareness of the importance of treating nonhuman nature with reverence and respect. The caveat is that most of the discussions of issues involving the cruelty involved in animal farming, lab testing, hunting and trapping takes place among European and U.S. academics. This volume is a valuable contribution to such a discussion in the context of Latin America, although probably still limited to an English-speaking university-educated public. As a literary scholar with an interdisciplinary bend myself, I was happy to see how this historical work complements literary studies by including Latin American literature professors such as Scott Devries, Adrian Taylor Kane and Laura Barbas Rhoden, among others, revealing the ways animals and nature have impacted Latin American fiction and historical realities. Perhaps these

kinds of studies could be expanded to further include more representation of animals in popular culture, music and the visual arts by past and current Latin American writers, artists, and performers which could tell much about the ways animals influenced the shaping of societies and, if also published in Spanish, might reach a wider Latin American public. Regardless, this well-documented and meticulous volume does much to draw attention to the way human history is inextricably connected to the animal in a Latin American context and will most likely influence others to do further research on this fascinating subject from an interdisciplinary focus.