Animal Acts: Performing Species Today ed. by Una Chaudhuri, Holly Hughes (review)

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A half-century each of literature and scholarship demonstrate that "moving beyond the black-white binary is incredibly difficult" (238). Even a critique of such reductive thinking may "reproduc[e]" it (xvii). *Imperfect Unions* offers an analytical history of efforts to define the "problem" of miscegenation. In explaining the consequences of "the limited language we have for talking about the complexity of identity," Paulin provides a model for how we might do it better (239).

—Alex W. Black

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Animal Acts: Performing Species Today. Edited by Una Chaudhuri and Holly Hughes. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014; 254 pp.; illustrations. $90.00 cloth, $35.00 paper, e-book available.

The past several years have seen what might be called "the animal turn" in the humanities and social sciences, Una Chaudhuri notes in her introduction to *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today* (1). It has been over 30 years since the publication of such foundational texts as John Berger's "Why Look at Animals?" (1980) and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975), and critical animal studies is more relevant than ever. Developed concurrently with activist movements for animal welfare and the ethical treatment of animals, the interdisciplinary field of critical animal studies is significant because it examines interspecies relationality at a moment when awareness of ecological crisis is heightened. However, although critical animal studies has from its beginnings approached the figure of the animal through numerous disciplinary lenses—including philosophy, anthropology, literature, and cultural studies—only in the past decade has it come to include the work of theatre and performance scholars. Chaudhuri, in particular, has been a key contributor to this area of research, publishing numerous articles on the subject and guest-editing *TDR*'s special issue on "Animals and Performance" in 2007. Through their selection of performances and scholarly commentary, Chaudhuri and fellow *Animal Acts* editor Holly Hughes demonstrate that theatre and performance studies offers a unique contribution to the current "animal turn." The collection draws readers' attention to the multiple resonances of the verb "to act" as it includes performance texts that by turns act on behalf of animals, represent animals mimetically, and enact possible futures for interspecies relationships. *Animal Acts* shows that interspecies performances hold the power to change not only the way we see and interact with non-human animals, but also the way we understand ourselves.

It should be emphasized that *Animal Acts* is not a collection of essays about the intersection of performance studies and animal studies. Rather, it is a collection of performance texts by solo performers—including Rachel Rosenthal, Deke Weaver, and Jess Dobkin—with accompanying commentary by scholars such as Jill Dolan, Ann Pellegrini, and Cary Wolfe. One of the most successful aspects of this collection is the way it highlights embodied perfor-

mance: prioritizing performance texts by offering scholarly commentary in a supplementary position. The book includes a link to the University of Michigan Press's website where readers can find video excerpts of many of the performances. This supplement gives a taste of the diversity of live events represented in the collection and reminds readers that the published texts are a documentation of embodied performances. Furthermore, the scholarly commentaries, which range from personal reflection to historical contextualization and performance analysis, follow the performance texts as opposed to introducing them. This foregrounding of the performance text valorizes the contributions that performance artists offer, rather than allowing discursive intervention to be attributed solely to the work of scholars. One such pairing is that of Holly Hughes's *The Dog and Pony Show (bring your own pony)* (2010) with commentary by Donna Haraway. Haraway has made her own important contributions to the field of animal studies, yet here she provides a more personal reflection, taking up Hughes's phrase "Dogs made us" (29) to explore her own relationship to animals and, more specifically, the experience she shares with Hughes of running with her dogs at agility trials. In relating her experience, Haraway offers the helpful phrase "*becoming-with*" (32) to describe the cofashioning of self that the dog and human partnership performs. Haraway's commentary on Hughes's performance provides one of the most successful of the performer-scholar pairings in the book because of the way it similarly *performs with* Hughes's performance text, offering scholarly commentary alongside personal reflection.

Animal Acts is not a book about interspecies performance of the sort involving animals performing alongside human performance (as in the circus). In fact, with only one exception, none of the performances have animal performers. As Chaudhuri writes, "animal presence—in performance as in cultural life—is a *continuum* rather than an absolute" (7). Some of the most powerful performance moments come as a result of the absent presence of other animals in relation to the embodied presence of humans. In Kim Marra's performance text, *Horseback Views: A Queer Hippological Performance*, Marra presents her own body as one that has been physically marked by her relationship with horses. Her body stands in for the absent horse, which is further represented by a well-worn saddle, imprinted with the sweat of the horse in the saddle leather over years of use. The reader thereby understands a level of intimacy in the performer's interspecies relationship with her horse through the traces left by the interaction of human and animal.

The performance texts of *Animal Acts* reveal just as much about humans as they do about animals. Regarding Kestutis Nakas's *No Bees for Bridgeport: A Fable from the Age of Daley*, commentator Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson argues that the bees demonstrate the power of "the multitude" in a group of politically activated humans (108). Hughes and Marra reveal much about their very human understanding of death, belonging, intimacy, and embodiment through their relationships with their animal partners. However, Chambers-Letson also warns against the animal becoming "a screen upon which we [...] can project the exigencies of human political and social being" (106). Even *Animal Acts* cannot completely avoid the impulse: in Carmelita Tropicana's *With What Ass Does the Cockroach Sit?* the cockroach protagonist of the story arguably functions as a metaphor for immigrants in the story of Elián Gonzalez's 1999 departure from Cuba. Nevertheless, *Animal Acts* takes great pains to ask its readers to always consider the specificity of the animal, as opposed to treating animals as a metaphor for the human condition.

Animal Acts demonstrates that the embodied performance of human actors holds the capacity to offer profound insight into the animal experience. It also asks readers to attend to the ways in which our understanding and treatment of humans depends on our understanding and treatment of (other) animals. *Animal Acts* demonstrates the ways in which performance can be a space to imagine and enact possible futures and, in this case, alternative interspecies relationships. Scholars and students alike will find this collection a welcome contribution to the fields of animal and performance studies and their unique overlap.

—Catherine Ming T'ien Duffly

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More Books

The Freak-garde: Extraordinary Bodies and Revolutionary Art in America. By Robin Blyn. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013; 328 pp.; illustrations. $82.50 cloth, $27.50 paper, e-book available.

In *The Freak-garde*, Robin Blyn traces an evolving lineage of the freak show from P.T. Barnum to Matthew Barney, examining the works of a diverse group of artists that includes Mark Twain, Lon Chaney, Djuna Barnes, Nathanael West, and Diane Arbus. By reading their work together, Blyn proposes a uniquely American "art of dissent"—the "freak-garde"—that "defies the Eurocentric and rationalist theories of avant-gardism that still pervade this field" (xi). The book interrogates the ways in which the freak-garde appropriates a once blatantly capitalist form to critique capitalism from within.

Taking It to the Bridge: Music as Performance. Edited by Nicholas Cook and Richard Pettengill. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013; 400 pp. $95.00 cloth, $35.00 paper, e-book available.

Taking It to the Bridge is an excellent primer in the current dialogue between musicology and performance studies. Born from the Music as Performance working group of Performance Studies international, the book reflects musicology's recent explorations of popular music performance as well as performance studies' incorporation of textual analysis of musical scores into its own methodologies. As the editors assert, the "interdisciplinary performance studies approach helps to clarify *what* performances mean" while "more empirical [musicological] approaches help to clarify *how* performances mean what they mean" (15). Seventeen scholars explore music as performance through subjects as varied as liveness and mediatization in concert films (Susan Fast and Jason King, respectively), improvisation and ornamentation in jazz and Italian opera (Philip Auslander and Philip Gossett, respectively), ethnographic examinations of jazz funerals (Joseph Roach), and musical performance in virtual realms (Roger Moseley and David Borgo).