

2022

[Review] Antoinette Burton and Renisa Mawani, editors. *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 240pp.

Peta Tait
La Trobe University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj>



Part of the Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons, Art and Design Commons, Art Practice Commons, Australian Studies Commons, Communication Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Digital Humanities Commons, Education Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Legal Studies Commons, Linguistics Commons, Philosophy Commons, Political Science Commons, Public Health Commons, Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons, Sociology Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Tait, Peta, [Review] Antoinette Burton and Renisa Mawani, editors. *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 240pp., *Animal Studies Journal*, 11(2), 2022, 120-123.

Available at:<https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol11/iss2/7>

[Review] Antoinette Burton and Renisa Mawani, editors. *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 240pp.

Abstract

[Review] Antoinette Burton and Renisa Mawani, editors. *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 240pp.

[Review] Antoinette Burton and Renisa Mawani, editors. *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 240pp.

Peta Tait

La Trobe University

The edited volume, *Animalia*, offers a focused investigation of the ‘biopolitical’ imperatives of imperial history that encompasses a diverse range of nonhuman animal species. The book makes fascinating and engaging reading with a postcolonial orientation that extracts ironic perspectives from the curious thinking and spurious conclusions of the past. The value of this historical material for animal studies is that it repeatedly reveals the extent to which human views of animals were misleading and even delusional.

The volume presents succinct, researched commentaries on a number of the animal species brought under imperial control and thereby reconstitutes the bestiary compendium. Editors Antoinette Burton and Renisa Mawani and twenty-two specialist historian contributors, some of whom contribute two entries, consider keystone animals that were part of imperial sovereignty in order to explore the myriad of ways in which geographical dominance also meant culturally shaping the identity of the animal inhabitants. It meant instigating control over animal lives – and deaths. The politics of the British Empire of land and sea are reappraised by highlighting its utility of material bodies and the symbolic value that underpinned how species were differentiated and exploited for imperial advantage. Land-based animals predominate, although there are two chapters on whales. One on North Atlantic Right Whales describes their emotional attachments to kin, and one on generic whales in culture explains how they embody human emotions in mythology and in artistic works.

The book is about human attitudes and behaviour as much as it is about nonhuman species lives, thereby inviting readers to question current assumptions. The maturity of animal studies as a field is apparent in the way that *Animalia* draws on diverse sources to offer a targeted cultural history ‘foregrounding the British Empire as a multispecies enterprise’, one animal at a time. Read together and cross referenced, the chapters reflect the book’s thematic purpose of revealing how ‘taxonomies’ of animals also became indicative of the empire’s broad goals of ‘racial supremacy’.

This is an A-to-Z compendium for the twenty-first century that points back to the historical taxonomy as it moves forward to trouble its purpose, often by revealing the porous boundaries between species and the instability of ‘animalia’. It begins with ape and associated species and cultural resistance to Darwin. Common animal species like horses and dogs are included as well as unique species such as okapi, quagga and platypus, with selections and coverage probing the scientific attention accorded particular species in the imperial past. For example, there is discussion of the peculiarities of breeding and the anxious reliance on horses by the military for their dominance. I found the points on emotions in each chapter, such as in the one on the ibis, illuminating. The book’s broad sweep is ideal for those of us who utilize species-specific research because it balances the need to understand a particular species with a cross species context with diverse perspectives. The chapter on the elephant provides a sense of a longer history of species relations which colonial practices intensified and the chapter on the giraffe highlights money-making ventures. *Animalia* encourages comparisons without losing the specificity of animal bodies and lives to some amorphous ‘animal’ that still continues to appear in some analysis. A reader can follow up on species-specific references provided at the end of each chapter, which will suit those of us thinking about particular animals in relation to environmental change over time.

The volume facilitates consideration of the extremes of human thought and practices, not to mention ongoing cruelties. The boar-pig appears alongside the fox with the unfolding ramifications of what follows from those introduced species that are legacies of a colonial world. The chapter on the fox reveals how it was introduced into Australia for hunting by settler squattocracy, and how it has become necessary to preserve endangered wildlife by containment. (As I write this review, the fox that had somehow managed – some claim by swimming – to get

onto fox-free Philip Island, home to Australia's largest colony of little penguins, has been caught). These introduced species have brought indigenous animals to the brink in too many places. It became necessary to place some kiwi on predator-free islands in New Zealand.

The chapter on cattle is confronting because it connects up with ideas of the colonising through farming that radically changed environments. Colonial patterns haunt the continuing expansion of cattle farming. Apparently, an animal such as the zebu was deployed in both agriculture and zoo exhibition. The distortions created by colonial hunting and specimen collecting are covered vividly in chapters that bring the tiger and the lion into focus as a demonstration of masculine hubris and class. At the same time, the tiger was perceived to create gendered fear within racially distorted hierarchies. The decline in tiger numbers and, to a lesser extent in lion numbers, in the wild reminds readers that the consequences of colonialization continue for nonhuman animal species. The chapter on racoons is at least more hopeful, since they have proved smart and adaptable, and it seems their fearlessness makes them harder to dominate.

In other chapters, the human capacity to deploy other animal species for their own purposes is presented as boundless. The scorpion became integral to language of colonial battles, and despite difficulties with classification, perpetuated an idea of danger. The unicorn was especially indicative of human fantastical projections onto animals and, historically, adventurers searched for sightings emblematic of its discovery. The use of the word vulture as a derogatory term and the hunting of vultures was especially about the clash between cultures as colonial England and Europe encountered different beliefs and practices around death.

There is a surprising amount of detail to be gleaned from the narratives in *Animalia* and their overarching connections. A grouping of the jackal and dingo foregrounds destructive emotional attitudes to both species, albeit in different geographical locations. The chapter on the mosquito reveals that the practices of colonial agriculture encouraged dispersal and facilitated the spread of malaria in Egypt. Malaria was often wrongly attributed to 'gaseous plumes' although the chapter points out that is probably how the mosquito perceives the human body (122). A yak was transported to England from Bhutan in 1784 and painted by George Stubbs in an idealised landscape. The Xerus squirrel caught this reader's imagination because of its non-

hierarchical sociality, size and dispersal, and because of its role in African oral traditions, such as a Ghanaian tale in which a squirrel sues a friend for stealing his corn but loses because he cannot prove that he grew it.

Colonialization drastically changed the habitat of countless species. *Animalia* also implicitly warns about the way human practices continue to destroy the habitat ecologies of other species. At the same time, the species diversity that is valuably emphasised by this history remains a postcolonial responsibility to conserve.