

Book Review: Animal Studies: An Introduction

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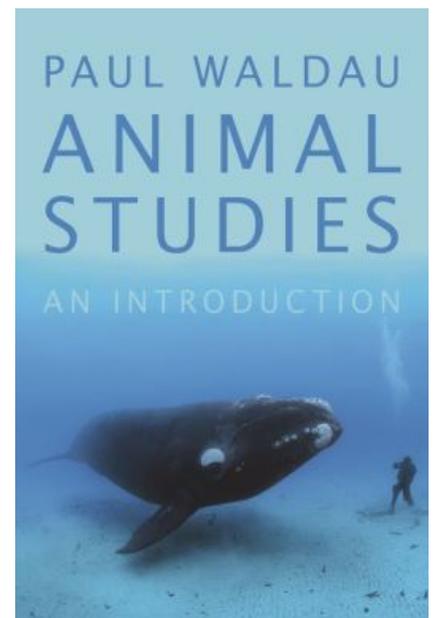
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*Animal studies seeks to understand how humans study and conceive of other-than-human animals, and how these conceptions have changed over time, across cultures, and across different ways of thinking. This interdisciplinary introduction to the field foregrounds the realities of nonhuman animals, and is compelling and comprehensive, writes **Jia Hui Lee**. **Paul Waldau** convincingly argues for a deeper and more meaningful engagement with the world, and students of all social science disciplines should find this of interest.*



Animal Studies: An Introduction. Paul Waldau. Oxford University Press. March 2013.

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Taking a cue from the post-human turn in the humanities and social sciences, [Paul Waldau](#) gives us *Animal Studies: An Introduction*. The book is easy to read and provides a breadth of resources to familiarise the reader with the myriad ways that human lives intersect with that of non-human animals. Perhaps betraying the author's past as a lecturer of the Animal Law course at Harvard, the book also attempts to illuminate the ethical dimensions of human-nonhuman interactions. Yet rather than predetermine a set of questions, the book breaks open new frontiers for multi-disciplinary engagement within more-than-human worlds.

The book's greatest strength is found in its ability to embed the human animal into a wider network of actors, environments, and histories. By taking apart human exceptionalism prevalent in most disciplines, Waldau interrogates the location of the human species at the very centre of the world. The faculties of law, physics, anthropology, art, and philosophy interpret the world from the vantage point of the human species. Through Waldau's individual chapters on how these subject areas might interface with animals and the other-than-human, the human species is effectively contextualized into a wider ecology.

Two themes stand out from the book in particular. First is the theme of how human animals have historically claimed superiority over and subjugated non-human animals. In the chapter on 'Science, Politics, and Other Animals', Waldau particularly addresses the debate around nonhuman animal testing and the use of nonhumans in invasive, harmful experiments. Waldau wonders aloud why these scientifically valuable experiments are conducted on nonhuman animals, rather than on human animals, since "humans are likely to be the best experimental subjects by far if the goal is to identify and solve human problems" (p. 74). The issue for Waldau is not that nonhuman animals should not at all be used as subjects in experiments, but that there is a greater conversation that has been left out by the scientific community around a naturalised order of things where human lives are privileged over nonhuman animal ones.

The justification for the subjugation of nonhuman animals by human animals, Waldau reminds us, is eerily similar to the ways in which the subjugation of several human communities has historically been justified. Referring to [Marjorie Spiegel's comparison](#) of the treatment of black slaves and the contemporary treatment of nonhuman animals, Waldau lists several similar ways in which human slaves and nonhuman animals have been treated, housed, and made to work (p. 275). These examples are striking given an established history of comparing blacks to animals as a way to further degrade the humanity of blacks throughout the nineteenth and parts of the twentieth century. By reversing the comparison, Waldau does not indeed trivialise the struggle of black slaves, and instead asks if our humanist disciplines can account for suffering, pain, and marginalisation across the species line.



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The second theme follows on from the first theme, which is the ways in which humanist knowledge systems construct and reaffirm human exceptionalism over nonhuman animals. Contesting the adage that humans are “social animals” or Aristotle’s comment that we are “political animals”, Waldau goes on to describe how nonhuman animals participate in social networks, use tools, and form political hierarchies.

But more importantly, Waldau notes the need for a “sociology of knowledge” (p. 197) whereby knowledge claims about human exceptionalism may be challenged and critiqued. Just as the book attempts to embed human animals within a more-than-human world, Waldau’s chapter on ‘Animals and Modern Social Realities’ displaces the human from the genealogy of knowledge claims in religion, science, and philosophy that validate a human-centred view of the world. Such a line of critical inquiry immediately leaves categories of being human open to re-interpretation. By placing the human within a more-than-human world, Animal Studies “elucidate contemporary interactions with other-than-human animals and thereby plumb the very meaning of community and society” (p. 220).

While Waldau’s book does a brilliant job at re-positioning the human animal subject within a network of physical environments and human-nonhuman interactions, it leaves out a key component responsible for Animal Studies’ recent resurgence in anthropological and geographical circles. Recent work on the corporeal connections between human animals and non-human animals has raised interesting questions about embodiment and vulnerability across the species line. The edibility of humans by large predators, the mortality of humans to disease, and the ingestion of other-than-human animals at the macro- and micro-scales by human animals are some examples that suggest that the fleshy or membranous boundaries that define a body are being constantly negotiated.

One other aspect of Animal Studies that Waldau’s *Introduction* does not explore is the other-than-human ways of knowing the world. The exciting possibilities that thinking beyond the species line offer are the different ways through which non-human animals relate to the world. For some animals, the worldview is not so much mediated by vision

as it is by sound or smell – “world harmony” or world whiff, if you like. Such other-than-human ways of knowing present intriguing possibilities for future research at the intersection of human-nonhuman encounters.

Despite these omissions, Waldau’s book does already examine a broad range of fields, including history, law, philosophy, public policy, politics, religion, critical and cultural studies, science, and the creative arts. The book’s individual chapters, which interrogate each of these fields in relation to the nonhuman animal, provides a detailed overview of the impact which Animal Studies have had and will continue to have on these fields.

Compelling and comprehensive, the book convincingly argues for a deeper and more meaningful engagement with the world by foregrounding the realities of nonhuman subjects. In doing so, the book successfully disrupts the humanist privilege in our knowledge systems and points us in the direction of research that engages with a more-than-human world.

Jia Hui Lee did his postgraduate studies in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge. His research has focused on the relationships between neoliberal capital and sexuality, changing conceptions of gender across time and place, and international development. He is now particularly interested in the relationships that humans build with other life forms and the environment. He has previously worked on socially responsible investment strategies. He tweets [@jhleewrite](#). [Read more reviews by Jia Hui.](#)