

Book Review of *Empire of Brutality*

Christopher Michael Blakely, *Empire of Brutality: Enslaved People and Animals in the British Atlantic World*. LSU Press, 2023, 256 pp.

This review of *Empire of Brutality: Enslaved People and Animals in the British Atlantic World* provides a concise overview of the book's chapters, exploring various manifestations of what are shown to be the inextricably linked commodification and exploitation of human captives and nonhuman animals in the British Atlantic World, before developing a critical analysis of the text's contribution to existing literature in this connection. *Empire of Brutality* is celebrated as an empirical substantiation of the reduction of racialized humans to exploitable "animals" by European colonizers and enslavers, though its shortcomings are located in its failure to properly dismantle the ideological underpinnings of said reduction and elucidate their contributions to the ongoing oppressions of both marginalized human and nonhuman animals today.

Drawing on a range of historical sources – from business documents, newspaper advertisements, and art, to natural history treatises and personal diaries – Christopher Michael Blakely's *Empire of Brutality* provides an illuminating account of the simultaneous and inextricably linked exploitation of human captives and nonhuman animals during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Examining "the history of race and racialization under slavery ... through the lens of human-animal relationships" (p. 150), Blakely elucidates various ways in which European colonizers rendered their human victims "animal" – and thus, "naturally" exploitable – through dehumanizing discourse, "scientific" knowledge, and physical systems of oppression.

After introducing theoretical understandings of dehumanization – a process rooted in a hierarchical conception of humanity as dichotomous with animality, through which a majority of humans are perceived as "animal-like" – the book begins with an exploration of the "coconstitutive commodification" of humans and cowry shells, the latter of which was used as a currency in the purchasing of the former; "Turning people into slaves depended on turning animals into money," Blakely concludes (p. 52). The second chapter attends to "intersection of slavery and animal knowledge" (p. 60) in the British Atlantic World, wherein enslaved Africans were made to collect nonhuman animals and supply vital knowledge about them, leading the author to question whether "the history of science in this period begin[s] to look decidedly more African than European" (p. 55). Not only were enslaved humans forced to provide the physical and intellectual labor indispensable to the inception of modern European science, but they were also reduced to "natural historical curiosities" themselves – "objects for consumption, satisfying curiosity, and delivering intellectual pleasure" (p. 64) – alongside the other-than-human specimens they collected.

Polygenism was developed in concert with the scientific study of nonhuman animals at this time. This racist and dehumanizing thinking was employed as a justification for slavery, whereby enslaved humans were sold and exploited as if they were nonhuman animal "chattel." The third chapter of the book explores these entanglements, evidencing ways in which human and nonhuman captives were sold and exploited together, housed together, and fed the same food – "material realities" that mutually reinforced conceptual dehumanization. Chapters four and five pay attention to the efforts of enslaved humans to elude and frustrate their subjugation through acts of sabotage, killing, and otherwise incapacitating their oppressor's nonhuman "livestock" and/or appropriating the labor and flesh of said animals for their own benefit. Through "rival geographies," the enslaved undermined "the cultural, political, and envirotechnical foundations of slavery" (p. 128) and asserted their own autonomy, disrupting the financial operations of plantations, decreasing calorific inequalities between human captives and their oppressors, and ultimately escaping enslavement – if only temporarily – on horseback.

The book's epilogue begins by stating that "enslavers leveraged dehumanizing animal comparisons ... everywhere slavery existed" (p. 140) – a reality confirmed by the chapter's discussion of Enlightenment treatises on slavery and abolitionist texts by the formerly enslaved, both of which

placed dehumanizing animalization at the center of their defenses of, and cases against, slavery respectively. In this connection, *Empire of Brutality* offers an empirical substantiation of the central role that European binary human-animal ontology – that is, the social construction of a hierarchical dichotomy between (some) humans and other animals – played in the reduction of racialized humans to exploitable “animals” during (past) European colonialism. What the book somewhat lacks, however, is a breaking down of this anthropocentric conceptual framework – a framework that continues to support the exclusions of the Global Majority (and people of otherized genders, sexual orientations, classes, physical and cognitive abilities, etc.) from the moral consideration afforded to those deemed to sit within colonial conceptions of the fully Human/Man. Neither is the exploitation of other-than-human animals explicitly problematized, leaving intact the ideology of instrumentalization and exclusion that renders – as the book persuasively shows – the exploitation of humans and nonhuman animals inextricably linked.

Among others committed to “consistent anti-oppression” (Feliz Brueck & McNeill, 2020), Critical Animal Studies scholars have drawn on anticolonial literature to make clear the indispensability of this dismantling of anthropocentric ideology – with its narrow conception of the human – to achieving decolonial “total liberation” (Colling et al., 2014). For the anti-racist vegan theorist Aph Ko (2019), such efforts demand not just a recognition of “the ways in which [people of color] are ‘animalized’ by the dominant system,” but also a rejection of its “zoological roots.” “We need to abandon our former choreography of resistance, which relies on stepping on the animal,” she writes, by repudiating the derogatory, dehumanizing implications of animality and fighting for the simultaneous liberation of all those otherized by white-supremacist anthropocentrism (Ko, 2019, pp. 105–106). Its shortcomings notwithstanding, Blakley’s work provides a valuable historical account of co-constituted human and nonhuman oppressions from which critiques of both can be developed, heedful of the ongoing importance of confronting conceptions of the morally relevant that function to exclude anyone – human or not.

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References

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