

Marcy Norton

The Tame and the Wild: People and Animals after 1492

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The global environmental effects of the European colonisation of the Americas from 1492 onwards have long been the subject of scholarly scrutiny. Marcy Norton's recent book fits into this line, yet takes it into new directions by adopting a refreshing cultural-anthropological approach and, crucially, by bringing in Indigenous perspectives. The book focuses on the culturally-specific structures, or modes of interaction, that shape how humans engage with animals. Its guiding question is how the confrontation of such structures in Indigenous societies in Meso- and South America and the Caribbean, and those of European newcomers led to transformations on opposite ends of the Atlantic between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Marcy Norton, associate professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania School of Arts and Sciences, has previously published on such themes as the history of tobacco and chocolate in the Atlantic world. Norton's second monograph, *The Tame and the Wild*, is a landmark study that substantially expands – both geographically and thematically – on a frame of analysis she pioneered in a prize-winning article in *The American Historical Review* in 2015.¹

The main focus is a cultural framework of animal-human interactions shared among Indigenous American societies from the Kalinago of the Caribbean to the Nahua of Mesoamerica to the Tupinambá of lowland South America, that derived from a cosmogeny wherein all animate and inanimate beings alternate between being fed and being food in a generative nutritional cycle. This translated to biosocial hierarchies that were highly fluid. The key explanatory concepts are, first, predation, a mode of interaction between predator and prey wherein the latter is captured to feed the former, but built on the realisation that the predator, too, will eventually die to feed the grass, as it were. Norton draws explicit parallels with ecology here, which also centres on the continuous circulations of nutrients. Indeed, in Nahua culture, even a tree may appear as apex predator as it consumes 'fire from the sun and water from the earth'. Ultimately, though, predation is a circle, and the tree will in turn be 'rendered as prey' to the sun (pp. 168–69). The second key concept is predation's flipside, familiarisation, the process of taming captives by feeding them, thereby shielding them from becoming food. This applied to animals as much as humans, so that members of these Indigenous American societies equally entered into bonds of kinship with prisoners of war as they did with captured wild animals. *The Tame and the Wild* stacks these Indigenous modes of interaction against European hunting and livestock domestication, which

1. Marcy Norton, 'The Chicken or the *legue*: Human-Animal Relationships and the Columbian Exchange', *The American Historical Review* **120** (1) (2015): 28–60.

altered American cultures and ecosystems with detrimental effects – even as the Indigenous mode of familiarisation contributed to the emergence of the modern pet in Europe.

Norton traces the intellectual ancestry of her book to scholars who have previously examined the cultural construction of animal personhood, notably Donna Haraway, as well as authors such as Cora Diamond who emphasise the importance of everyday practices that reify the separation of the human from the animal. Although *The Tame and the Wild* is also rooted in a historiographical tradition that stretches back to Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange* (1972), Norton pushes back against the notion, implicit with Crosby and explicit with such scholars as Jared Diamond, that European livestock husbandry is a 'necessary and inevitable part of human progress' (pp. 9, 75–76, 132). The book challenges this teleology, instead tracing the deep roots to the modern slaughterhouse industrial complex in early modern cattle ranching in the Americas.

The result is an expertly structured page-turner. The quality of the analysis is exceptional, as is the sheer quantity of research that has gone into it, not to mention the variety of the underlying source material. On one side, Norton uses all manner of evidence collected from colonial archives (the pitfalls of which she explains in exemplary fashion on p. 15; cf. n. 7 on p. 109). Next to this, she relies on pre-Columbian textual artifacts from Central Mexico called *amoxtili*, as well as hybrid colonial era 'natural histories' commissioned by Europeans but co-authored by Indigenous scholars, the so-called Florentine Codex being the best-known example.

The book is subdivided into three parts. Part one ('Subject and Object') starts with an excursus to the dominant modes of interaction with animals in early modern Spain. Its aim is to acquaint the reader with the situation in the European metropole whilst simultaneously cultivating a sense of distance to it. The first chapter begins with a thick description of a hunting expedition undertaken by the Marquis of Villanueva del Fresno in 1634. The key takeaway is that in European (elite) culture, people accorded a measure of subjectivity both to animals they hunted as prey and to the 'vassal animals' who assisted in hunting. In stark contrast, chapter two explores how the status of domesticated livestock was progressively degraded to that of objects, distanced ideologically from humans for their lack of 'reason' and literally by moving slaughterhouses away from human habitations. Chapter three explores how the early Spanish colonisers of the Americas deployed those two modes, both through their vassal dogs and horses and through large-scale animal husbandry, to subjugate Indigenous people, animals and environments. Cattle ranching especially became a cornerstone of this new American 'extractivist regime' (pp. 94–95).

In the second part ('Tame and Wild'), Norton explores the modes of interaction in Indigenous American societies. Chapter four introduces the reader to Indigenous predation techniques and the accompanying mental frames. One

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example is mimesis, where humans not only imitated animals through their sounds, but also through ritual dances. They also wore body parts (feathers, teeth, hearts) of certain animals to be imbued with their desirable attributes, while eschewing the flesh of others during the gestation and infancy of their children for fear of passing on undesirable traits (pp. 120–121). The fifth chapter focuses on familiarisation, that is taming individuals to attain personhood and become kin. Central here was feeding of the prospective kin, even breastfeeding and premastication (p. 140). Chapter six lays out the worldview associated with this predation–familiarisation spectrum. Here, Norton draws parallels with the cyclical aspects of ecology. Similarly, she likens Indigenous cosmogonies and their sense of long-term history divided into human ‘ages’ to evolution. Chapter seven explains how these cosmogonies gave certain animals special status. A notable example were quail, who formed an intermediate link in the food cycle between maize, which they fed on, and predators that fed on them. Dogs and turkeys, too, were a special case in Mesoamerica. Bred as food, and fed on maize, they were associated with enslaved humans. Deemed incapable of feeding themselves, feeding (and feeding on) these creatures embodied the supremacy of slave-holding elites.

Part three (‘Entanglements’) focuses on the transformations occasioned by the confrontation between Indigenous and European modes of interaction. Chapter eight discusses how colonial rulers banned certain practices associated with predation, particularly the killing of humans to feed them to the Sun and Earth. The Christian Europeans mislabelled this ‘sacrifice’, and outlawed it along with the (rightly) associated killing of quail. The response among Indigenous people was to substitute chickens – a European import – for quail and incorporate them into familiarisation. The colonisers also vilified the *nahuali*, key figures in familiarisation-predation, as ‘sorcerers’ using the vocabulary and legal toolkit of witch-hunters in Europe. However, the resultant discourse unintentionally spawned the attractive personage of the ‘shape-shifter’, which informed later generations of Nahua, so this aspect of Indigenous culture continued to exist (albeit changed). Chapter nine discusses the ready incorporation of European animals (horses, pigs) into familiarisation-predation practices, further ensuring the longevity of Indigenous customs. Again, though, livestock husbandry was a key disruptor. The exploding availability of meat disrupted Indigenous social structures by eliding the association of meat eating with the apex predator status of elites. Many Indigenous people also turned to animal husbandry to stay financially afloat, which galvanised the changing place of animals in these societies. Chapter ten focuses on the export to Europe of American animal familiars, notably parrots and monkeys. Norton provocatively argues here that Europeans who entered into affectionate relationships with such animals were ‘unintentionally being socialized’ into Indigenous American modes of animal-human interaction. Chapter eleven takes a closer look at how works of American natural history, commissioned

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by King Philip II with Francisco Hernández and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, were largely shaped by the labour and knowledge of Mesoamerican Tlatelolco scholars. Despite Hernández and De Oviedo's attempts to erase their Indigenous co-authors along with their cosmogony, European and Indigenous epistemologies commingled in what would remain highly sought-after scholarly works throughout the seventeenth century and beyond. In the epilogue, then, Norton speculates on the ramifications of her findings for present-day environmentalism, moving from a pessimistic reading of European extractivism and animal objectification towards a more optimistic take in the light of Indigenous environmentalist initiatives and the prevalence of animal-human companionship.

The book is recommended to anyone interested in early modern environmental history and historical animal studies. As evidenced by the use of endnotes and the relatively numerous pictures, it caters as much to specialised academic audiences as to a broader readership. Norton's accessible prose of envy-inducing eloquence is a key asset here. My only point of critique is that the pictures in chapter six are printed a bit too small to adequately assist the analysis. On the flipside, this is a small sacrifice to make for the book's reasonable price, which hopefully will enable a broad dissemination of this outstanding study.

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