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Centering Animals in Latin American History

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Centering Animals in Latin American History. Edited by Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. xiv + 391 pp., foreword, illustrations, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$94.95 cloth.)

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Many ethnohistorians will initially doubt the need for a collection of essays to “counteract the relative invisibility of animals in Latin American historiography” (5). After all, animals and other biota, from plants to pathogens, have long been prominent in historical studies of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Yet the editors of this collection intend a much more radical centering of animals than, for example, histories about horses and the impact of their introduction on native life on the Pampas. Instead, the editors propose to decenter humans and make horses and other nonhumans the central actors in shared human-nonhuman histories. The emergence of posthumanism in the social sciences provides the inspiration, namely, the recognition that nonhumans also possess the agency to transform social relations. The hope is that the expansion of protagonists from humans to animals will enhance historical accounts to a similar degree as prior expansions from elite white males to women, native peoples, and other social groups. The challenges remain how to apply such a “more-than-human approach” to historical analysis, whether the necessary primary sources exist, how to write such animal-centered history, and even how to rethink the concept of agency.

Those challenges focus the volume’s chapters. They feature animals as varied as cows, birds, dogs, locusts, and seals. They range from Patagonia to Mexico and Brazil to the Andes. They span colonial and postcolonial times, from the sixteenth century into the twentieth. And they address topics from hunting, rebellion, entertainment, and medicine to religion, science, politics, and environmental conservation.

A single chapter must serve to illustrate the approach. Zeb Tortorici offers a history of weddings and baptisms for dogs staged as entertainment in eighteenth-century Mexico. In one case, a dog dressed as a bride and another as a groom were married by a priest to entertain a crowd of revelers, after which the canine couple retired to a miniature matrimonial bed. The Inquisition charged the priest with heresy, his fate hinging on whether he had blasphemously blessed the union with “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost” versus the more lighthearted “In the name of the Father and the Mother of all dogs” (95). The records of the Inquisition

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preserve detailed histories of the involvement of seven specific dogs that participated in such mock sacramental ceremonies. Their human companions and inquisitors also figure prominently, and the documents reveal much about their beliefs, motivations, feelings, and choices—their agency, in other words. The public spectacles were part of the profound shifts in the social relations of Bourbon Mexico: in part entertainment for the growing bourgeoisie and an expression of their changing affective relationships with pets, and in part a challenge to the sanctity of the Catholic Church and authority of the colonial metropole. Although the archives reveal the names of some of the seven dogs, Tortorici can do no more than speculate on their agency, because the inquisitors did not ask witnesses about the canine protagonists' reactions, their body language, or any vocalizations that might signal how they resisted costuming, delighted in the attention, or savored the rich food.

Yet such “absent presences,” actors who are clearly “there but not speaking” (19), often occur in the histories we are beginning to produce in which blacks, natives, whites, and people of mixed origins share agency in the colonial emergence of novel social relations in Latin American and the Caribbean. The archives produced by elites, largely white and mainly men, render many of the others involved anonymous and voiceless. Yet we are learning how to hear them speak through complementary types of primary sources such as material culture. If anyone can do the same for animals, it will be the talented group of scholars who contributed to this volume.