

Cute and Monstrous Others

Queering the Non/Human

Edited by Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird

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Queering the Non/Human is a daunting text, a heavy and hard-covered, three hundred and eighty-four page, fifteen-chapter tome that requires a preface, forward and introduction to conceptually position itself. The cover image is of a smiling embryonic salamander, which you later discover is actually dead. Regardless, *Queering the Non/Human* is an engaging and vibrant volume and the cute, dead salamander actually contributes to this. This project aims to queerly remake the world, a decidedly practical impulse despite the rigorously theoretical foundations of all the chapters. The project of 'queering the non/human' is primarily queer in that many of the essays focus on alternative paths for and manifestations of desire, identity or sexuality. But, like all good queer writing, the chapter essays draw on a broad range of intellectual traditions within the humanities and social sciences, such as feminism, post-colonialism, environmental studies, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, history and science studies, as well as philosophical and new media theories.

Donna Haraway's work on 'companion species' is established as a cornerstone of this broad conceptual project. Haraway provides the foreword to *Queering the Non/Human*, 'Companion Species, Mis-recognition, and Queer Worlding', in which she revisits ideas that first surfaced in *The Companion Species Manifesto: dogs, people and significant otherness* (2003). In this manifesto, Haraway outlined a way of thinking laterally about relations between human and dog. Back then she exclaimed, 'dogs are not surrogates for theory ... they are here to live with' (5). That is, dogs are not metaphors for something else; dogs are material beings, partners in our existence just as we are partners in theirs. This practical, embodied and non-hierarchical manifesto constitutes the premise of the editors' vision. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird then draw this notion into concert with queer theory. The focus is on the ways in which the human is *always already* entangled with the nonhuman—'Non/Human'—and the potential of such relations to queerly remake, reorient and reform our vision of the world.

While this volume does not focus on human subjectivity, Giffney and Hird recognise the organising feature of this volume as the problem of the human subject and the effective fictions that surround it. According to Giffney and Hird, the volume works to tease out 'the trace of the nonhuman in every figuration of the Human. ... [This] also means being cognisant of the exclusive and excluding economy of discourses surrounding what it means to be, live, act or occupy the category of the Human' (3). The exclusive fiction of the Human, the privileges and rights that Humans get over Others (human, superhuman, animal), is configured here as unstable from the outset.

'Queer' is a performative term within this volume, generative of the relations between human and nonhuman. To quote the editors, 'while there may be reluctance to say what queer 'is', there are ... assumptions circulating about what queer does' (5). While a long list of verbs follows this broad definition of queer, essentially what queer 'does' in this volume is facilitate a multitude of surprising relations. The individual chapter essays splinter off from these complex critical foundations, undoing and remaking the category of the Human in concert with a raft of perverse, scary, delightful, monstrous, cute, violent and cuddly Others. The topics range from incest, ideality, apocalypse, monsters, vampires, antichrists, dogs, werewolves and starfish to glowing green bunnies.

In this review it is impossible to summarise all of the contributions, as valuable as many of them are. I have selected some highlights in order to demonstrate the way in which, even though diverse, such topics articulate queer as a central theme. In chapter one, 'How Queer Can you Go? Theory, Normality, Normativity', Clare Colebrook revisits ideality within the context of queer discourse. Queer theory has generally focussed on undoing the idealist fantasies of Plato and Kant by focussing on materiality or the embodiment of politics, desire and pleasure. Colebrook's lucid use of Gilles Deleuze's reversal of Platonic idealism enables her to argue that 'theory is the intuition of our lived and actual reality ... as a becoming-clear or identifiable Idea' (25). That is, theory is not detached from material reality but rather is the way in which the relationship between materiality and ideality is made legible. This strategically positioned first chapter unapologetically engages with the frequent and tiresome accusations that queer theory is too abstract. Colebrook argues that if we understand idealism in this Deleuzian way we actually expand queer theory's practical possibilities. The capacity for subjects and objects to 'enter into relations where the mode of relation cannot be determined in advance' (30) helps to consolidate the queer potential of such idealism. These relations do not follow a strict hegemonic order; the relations mapped in this book are surprising and dynamic. Many chapters that follow Colebrook's prove this point by putting unlikely things into relationship with each other.

These queer linkages are prominent within the chapters on antichrists and vampires. For example, in Chapter 4, 'Queering the Beast: The Antichrists' Gay Wedding', Erin Runions investigates the way in which the figure of the antichrist manifests within contemporary political rhetoric in America. She investigates how this figure is 'politically malicious (and) homosexualised' (79) and how it is attached to political figures like Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. Her argument links up the scriptural ambiguities of the antichrist with the definitive way in which the antichrist is written into contemporary consciousness. The fluidity of the antichrist, its raw sexuality, is where Runions sees its queer potential: 'antichristic desire confuses identity, transgresses borders and confounds telos. It is polymorphously perverse' (102). In this perversity she finds a crack in the façade of extreme conservatism, and the subversive potential in what is otherwise entirely homophobic right-wing propaganda. Likewise in Chapter 6, Robert Azzarello engages with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) in order to link queer theory to environmentalism by interrogating the 'intense play between the human, the natural, and the sexual' (152-3). This transgressive play of desire and blood lust, written at the very end of the nineteenth century, destabilises the ontological status of both Human and Nature at a time when the categories were becoming more clearly defined. Subsequently, Azzarello opens up space to think about ecology without reifying the category of Nature as distinct from the Human.

As well as linking unlikely themes, *Queering the Non/Human* rehearses different positions on similar subjects. For example, there are two very different chapters that engage with *echinoderms*, the starfish (Chapter 11) and the brittlestar (Chapter 13). First, Myra J. Hird's 'Lessons from a Starfish' is a personal and conversational engagement with the Antony and the Johnston's song 'Cripple and the Starfish'. Hird fuses the lyrics of the song, about cutting off limbs and watching them regrow, and Johnson's own queer identity into a theoretical discussion about transsexuality and regeneration. Secondly, Karen Barad's chapter 'Queer causation and the ethics of mattering' in part explores the discovery that brittlestars 'don't *have* eyes; they *are* eyes'. Once thought to be entirely blind, the brittlestar is now understood as a complete 'visualising system'. This creature does not have a brain but exhibits the capacity to respond to danger and to survive. Barad lifts off from here to draw an ethical distinction between responses to such a discovery: 'it is fair to say that the excitement surrounding this finding ... has more to do with its potential applications than pure amazement at the ingenuity of this creature's bodily know-how' (322). Barad's interest in this extraordinary bodily know-how challenges the notion that the human mind is the apex of knowledge and intelligence. In turn she critiques the way in which corporations harness such nonhuman know-how for the human project. While the results of both chapters are radically different,

both Hird and Barad exemplify the impulse to understand ‘companion species’; these echinoderms are definitely not ‘surrogates for theory,’ but instead ‘they are here to live with’ (5).

Most of the chapters are remarkably lucid but some chapters are too ambitious and fall short of resolving their argument. Noreen Giffney’s ‘Queer Apocal(o)ptic/ism: The Death Drive and the Human’ is an example of this. Giffney sets up a new conceptual term ‘apocal(o)ptic/ism’ which fuses three grand concepts ‘the optic or the gaze (desire), the Panopticon or self-surveillance (normativity) and apocalypticism (cathartic change)’ (57). She also engages in a close reading of the figure of the child in Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. This project is loaded with potential but there are too many ideas to be properly finessed in such a short space. Although the essay does not resolve itself, it should be acknowledged that Giffney genuinely does open up possibilities for future re-engagement with these ideas by positing such bold linkages in the first place.

This volume marks a significant contribution to the field of queer theory as well as other discourses such as animal studies, science studies, feminism and cultural theory. The volume promotes a way of thinking about the world that, as the series editor Michael O’Rourke summarises, ‘clears a space for an openness without anticipation or prescription, for surprise, for wonder, for love, for happiness, for a world in which our very uncertainty about what it means to be human comes to be understood as definitive of the human condition’ (xix). While *Queering the Non/Human* celebrates the wonders of ‘significant otherness’ it also remains mindful of the serious political, social, environmental, sociological, legal and rhetorical obstacles that endure. It is the theoretical openness in the face of such obstacles that makes *Queering the Non/Human* such a dynamic and compelling volume.

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Work Cited

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