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Of Sheep, Oranges, and Yeast: A Multispecies Impression / Julian Yates

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Julian Yates. *Of Sheep, Oranges, and Yeast: A Multispecies Impression*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017. 384 pp.

Reviewed by JIM BEAVER

“Welcome to *Of Sheep, Oranges, and Yeast*,” Julian Yates writes in the opening of his book. “Welcome to an orientation that takes for granted that what we call ‘humanity derives,’ in Donna Haraway’s terms, ‘from a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies’” (11). For Yates, hospitality is not merely a stylistic gesture, but, rather, a conceptual grounding for the fields of posthumanism, eco-criticism, animal studies, and plant studies (among others). “The matter of hospitality,” he writes later, “Haunts our discourses as we attempt to imagine the contours and limits of the poshumanities” (31). To this end, *Of Sheep, Oranges, and Yeast: A Multispecies Impression* is an archive of hospitable interpretive acts, which attempt to “cultivate an awareness” of the central fact of hospitality to existence: “that to be means to become many [and] fundamentally alters what it means to be now. It asks that you open the question of what grounds your world, what serves as its foundation and to consider other modes of organization” (272). And so, Yates welcomes us, but the world(s) to which he plays host are strange, the stories he facilitates always shifting our perspectives on what makes humans *human* and what makes “our” world as it is. On the bubonic plague: “a parasitic overcoding of England’s infrastructure by *Yersinia pestis*” (58). On breadmaking: “The yeast eats its sugar. We capture its breath” (226). With each description, Yates opens perspectives to include nonhuman actors and, in so doing, reconfigures our sense of agency. His methodology disorients and unsettles, precisely by undermining those carefully crafted categories which stabilize the world as we know it, terms like “human,” “animal,” “plant,” and “mineral.” Yates is a welcoming host, but reader beware: he is serving some strong stuff.

Whether it is hashish in Marseilles with Walter Benjamin or the decidedly less pleasant sensory deprivation chamber of Antonio Gramsci in Milan, Yates argues for the value of a critical mode of disorientation which allows us to reopen and interrogate basic questions of being and difference, the status of “human animals” in relation to nonhumans. It is, as articulated in Gramsci’s prison letters, “‘an ironic standpoint,’ a mode of being there, which we might gloss as an ability still, despite everything, to pose your existence in the form of a question” (45). Indeed, with each new species he introduces, Yates poses an implicit question: is this really what “human” is? “Sheep”? “Orange”? “Yeast”?

Writing lies at the heart of Yates’s project, and, by this, I mean writing in the expansive sense it has accrued through decades of critical theory. Each chapter is an attempt to break through, or disrupt, a “regime of description” that stabilizes our world in favor of an alternative mode of description, “some syntax that might parse these beings differently” (46), which can fundamentally alter what we say and see. “Language,” Yates reminds us, “Remains the first inhuman technology,

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which [...] serves as a tool for rhetorical persuasion and as an external device for installing memories in individuals and collectives” (4). The former helps shape how we see the world, while the latter contributes to the “durable archives” which stabilize ontological difference (6). Within “an understanding of the historical process that regards interventions in the writing machine or the figural life of ‘things’ as one of the most important and durable modes of political action,” the politics of the trope, or figure, becomes essential. This is because tropes “designate a set of relays or switches, whose turning or performance [...] choreographs our relations with other beings” (4). As the performance repeats over time, this choreography stabilizes, creating the illusion of permanence in our impressions, so that the performance becomes the reality. Identify a “sheep” as a mindless herd animal often enough—over centuries, even—and the metaphor takes: stabilizing, or policing, the possibilities and boundaries of not only the beings we name “sheep” and “shepherds,” but also the things circumscribed by the metaphor “sheep-like.” The problem, as Yates emphasizes, is that much of the “writing” we do is inhospitable to other forms of life. We mobilize tropes in “a marshalling of terrestrial resources to craft a durable archive that takes animals and plants as a substrate to acts of human writing” (6), and so close the door on what “sheep” could be (for our ends), with consequences not only in our language, but also our material practices and understanding of the phenomenal world.

Of Sheep, Oranges, and Yeast is divided into three sections, which progressively interrogate more deeply the nonhuman actors that support “our world(s).” The sections are held together by a singular moment from Shakespeare’s *Henry VI, Part 2*, when the rebel Jack Cade pauses at a (sheep) parchment and laments both the thing that was killed to make it as well as the writing on the parchment itself. For Yates, this pause thematizes his inquiries into the “co-making or cowriting of human, other animal, plant and mineral” (2).

Part I, “Sheep,” consists of two chapters that “tak[e] up the biopolitical quotient of Jack’s skin memory [the parchment] to disclose the undergirding *oves* (sheep) to the *omnes et singulatum* (all and one by one) logic of pastoral power” (28). In Chapter 1, “Counting Sheep in the Belly of the Wolf,” we meet varying figures of animated sheep from Thomas More’s *Utopia*, a Royal Society and Restoration comedy, well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with Charlie Chaplin, Antonio Gramsci, *Bladerunner*, Dolly (the world’s first clone), Serta mattress commercials, wool art installations, and Ewe-topia (a theme park in southwest England), among others. This dizzying array of examples, as one might guess, eschews chronology and creates an impression of the ways sheep have served as *topoi* for metaphors of community and the individual. With each trope, distinctions between matter and metaphor, human and sheep, are blurred.

In Chapter 2, “What Was Pastoral (Again)? More Versions (*Otium* for Sheep),” Yates moves from the collage of tropes in the previous chapter—his “counting of sheep”—to the genre of pastoral. As Yates seeks to determine “what ‘counts’ for sheep” (92), versions of pastoral, as well as key critical commentaries from Raymond Williams, William Empson, and David Halperin, become a means to access a notion “sheep-being” (94). More’s *Utopia* is again a touchstone, this time, for reflecting on the meaning of “*otium* (leisure, idleness, boredom)” (92). In

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Yates's hands, *otium* becomes an expansive philosophical category describing existence itself: "*Otium* designates the mechanism of exchange or crossing that occurs for both technologies of self to function (to make up people and populations) along with other polities of actors (sheep, grass, and so on) that we take as the "world" (106). Reading Agamben and Derrida, Yates plumbs the depths of animal *otium*, until he finds a working version of sheep *otium* in the experiments of "primatologist turned sheep observer Thelma Rowell" (88).

In Part II, "Oranges," Yates considers "the differently scaled world of plants and their reproductive technologies" (29). In Chapter 3, "Invisible Inc. (Time for Oranges)," he gestures toward the detective *whodunit?* as he attempts to "read oranges back into [...] stories" (29) of the 1597 escape of Jesuit priest John Gerard from the Tower of London. The question of writing is central in the chapter. It is, after all, the invisible ink of citrus juice that allowed Gerard to circulate secret letters coordinating his escape. And yet, as orange pulps and peels collect, Yates indicates it is not Gerard's—or even human—writing for which we need to account. Rather, it is "orange as a form of writing itself" (173), "as prewriting or coding [...] of the plant, [...] a dormant *kairos* [...], the reproductive technology of a particular genus of plant that goes mobile in and by its recruitment or rental of those differently animated entities we name animals (human or otherwise)" (172). In other words, if we slow down and attend to differently scaled temporalities, Gerard's escape can be seen as the effect of orange-writing upon a prison warder whose desire to consume the fruit allowed Gerard to infiltrate oranges into his cell.

In Chapter 4, "Gold You Can Eat (On Theft)," Yates inquires further into this particular desire, or fondness, for oranges, what he calls their ability to "captivate" (201), as he "charts the arrival of oranges or 'golden apples' in Western Europe as a formalizing event [...] that collides with the emergence of the commodity form" (30). Framed by William Pietz's seminal essays on the commodity, the chapter treats a series of orange-human encounters in early modern England, when the fruits were first imported. In a stunning reading of the myth of Atalanta, and the golden apples in Ovid, Yates considers what might well be the *locus classicus* of the commodity-form, specifically, what happens when we consume. Inhabiting this allure in oranges, Yates then turns his attention to the reconfiguring of worlds which can occur through the reframing of the orange trope, as seen in George Orwell's 1984 and Karen Tei Yamashita's *The Tropic of Orange*.

Part III, "Yeast," magnifies the scale of analysis even further, as Yates makes the case that the co-writing of species occurs not only across animal and plant realms, but even through "the invisible or only partially visible world of yeast as a fungal actor" (30). Chapter 5, "Bread and Stones (On Bubbles)," uses Peter Sloterdijk's conception of the "the biune bond of radical inspiration communities" (227) to ask what communities are made (together) through shared breath. Bread, Yates reminds us, is a "fossilized or sculpted bubble, [...] a strange archival remnant that captures the breath of a fungus" (226-7). In its foundational quality to human infrastructures—it "anchors our notions of collectivity" (227)—bread, Yates observes, often metaphorically takes on the weight of stone. Yates

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traces this fossilized breath of yeast through various writers, observing how it manifests as a marker of (im)permanence for the human communities. Here, he considers Walter Benjamin's stony "bread of [...] imagination" in "Hashish in Marseilles" (233), Benjamin Franklin's "three great puffy Rolls" as part of a civic-building enterprise (243), the regulation of bread in early modern England, Daniel Defoe's life-sustaining bread in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and the essential element of bread making to Robinson Crusoe's social project. As in the previous chapters, Yates skips across centuries and cultures, ever-faithful to the trope: because of its sameness and difference, its iterability and permanence, bread, the examples say, figures often as the bedrock (here is the trope again) of human civilization. Of course, just as he defines the figure, the trope turns. Inhabiting it, Yates offers a glimpse of world-building which comes from within the "zone of indistinction or nuanced sameness" of the bread-as-stone trope (264), and even offers the possibility of a world in which yeast is the subject. From this perspective, the chapter concludes with the image of a fool shoveling stones into his mouth.

Of Sheep, Oranges, and Yeast is filled with these kinds of glimpses and possibilities. As each chapter explores the tropological paths of sheep, oranges, and yeast, it leaves the reader with an overwhelming sense that these glimpses are the best we can do, and even the epilogue, simply entitled "Erasure," speaks to the ephemerality of its results. Yates is upfront from the beginning: this book will provide no answers. Answers, I suppose, would only be repeated or recycled, until they, too, became more scripts for us to tell more stories and build more inhospitable worlds. As a critical act, hospitality resides in the halting, or slowing down, of this process. In slowing down, you might just get sidetracked, and then, just maybe, you can discover unwritten or yet-to-be-written worlds of the nonhumans who, after all, have already been co-writing with (and through) us.

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