




EKATERINA NIKITINA

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4326-2468>

ITMO University, Saint Petersburg

Art & Science Center

Katja M. Guenther: *The Lives and Deaths of Shelter Animals*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. 295 pp.

In *The Lives and Deaths of Shelter Animals*, the monograph published by Stanford University Press in August 2020, Katja M. Guenther investigates volunteerism at a high-kill shelter in the United States and the social, gender, racial conditionality of this question. As the author argues, one of the key goals of the research is to “attend to those groups—volunteers and animals—whose experiences and voices have rarely, if ever, been included in research on animal sheltering” (p. 26). Approaching the issue, Guenther shares their long experience of working as a volunteer in the Pacific Animal Welfare Center (PAW) which is a part of the multishelter animal control agency of the Southern California Animal Services (SCAS). The structure of SCAS in general and PAW in particular is arranged around anti-animal ideology, which the author calls *anthroparchy*, or “the assertion of human interests” in various fields of everyday life that “can always be easily used to justify and explain away decisions that harm animals” (p. 162).

Already in the beginning of her book, Guenther argues that being either a volunteer or an animal in a high-kill animal shelter means, in a sense, to cross a common marginal line, that is, to be subjected to rigid biopolitical protocols, bureaucracy, state informational systems and inhuman rules of late capitalism. Thereby the very concepts of care, love, and mourning for the dead are marginalized and excluded from the place where animals should be supported and feel safe. The chapter “The Monster’s World,” which opens the book, raises an important question of stereotypes about “breeds for fighting” and indicates how racial stereotypes turn out to be fatal in certain human and non-human socio-

political situations. Guenther shows the complexity of the no-kill status itself which is, as it turns out, driven by the variety of discourses such as race, gender, sex, social status, age, etc.: “Dying in a shelter is not a random-likelihood event for any given animal but rather a risk that increases or decreases depending first and foremost on the animal’s location and then on the animal’s species, breed, coloring, age, health status, behavior, and ability to attract the attention of staff and/or volunteers” (p. 95).

These discourses easily become necropolitical instruments of control not only of animals in shelters, but also of marginal areas of the American society. In this sense, immigrant neighborhoods are remarkable because, as a rule, animal shelters like PAW are found here very often. Social inequality promotes both the rise in number of stray animals and erasure of the difference between the notions of population and life/death/health control of marginalized humans and their companion species.

Guenther’s research problematizes the killable/murderable border between animals and particular groups of people. Telling the stories about animals at PAW, exploring the reasons by which they found themselves there, the author argues that the exclusion policy regarding the marginalized and minoritarian segments of society not only endangers human lives but also victimizes fates of companion animals. Within the thesis the common myth of irresponsible owner—who is always the main reason why animals find themselves in trouble—gets new coverage. According to Guenther, poverty, precarity, and social vulnerability become one of the most substantial causes of stray and unwanted animals. Moreover, frequently, as they note in the chapter “The Myth of the Irresponsible Owner,” the complex questions of successful rehabilitation and socialization spread not only to the marginal levels of human society, but also to animals, with the difference that the failure often ends in death for the latter.

In this book the animal shelter appears to be one of the many correctional, sanitary, and disciplinary social institutions described in the Foucauldian thought. The same idea of the panopticum is put in the core of the pre-empting institutions, normalizing and correctional places where principles of discipline and punishment are extended to animals, or rather to the complex concept of animal life and animality in the modern world. Guenther emphasizes that while, on the one hand, there is very few objective statistical data on animal mortality in shelters, on the other hand, here, like in every disciplinary institution, every step of all relations and decisions is recorded and registered in the system in accordance with clear regulations and protocols for the stuff.

Death, as wells as the process of putting to sleep, are impersonalized and deprived of feelings by protocols. According to the state animal population control policies, every animal life in shelter is a bare life whose death is not worth grieving. Thus, the process of animal normalization—something that the animal protection and animal welfare should avoid ideologically—became the

main element of biopolitical managing the life and death of “unwanted” creatures in relation to their health and behavior. Helping, policing, and killing are connected in one indissoluble tangle. Caring very often turns into death, care is deadly for most pets in such institutions.

Shelter animal is a “vague category of ‘animals’” (p. 126). The very entry into a shelter knocks them out of the classification of animals and raises a large number of ethical questions: what should care for unnecessary/unwanted pet be like? Should all shelter animals, regardless of race, gender, and social level, have a chance for adoption, which they are often deprived of by definition? The sexual question also has an interesting solution in the context of shelter animal life. The author notes that pregnancy often becomes the cause of euthanasia or painful abortion for females, whose mortality is very high (p. 60). Do females who have ended up in a shelter or are still living in a cozy house with humans have the right to motherhood? Is sterilization so safe? These questions are not in the spotlight of the staff.

While the main staff of the shelter benefits from “treating [...] animals’ lives as ungrievable” (p. 128) and adheres to the principle “that no one is responsible for an ungrievable death” (p. 128), eliminating the issue of euthanasia from the moral, ethical, and legal field, the volunteers use mourning and grief to build an alternative community where humans and animals can fight back bureaucratic oversight and control: “Mourning is a way of making connections, of establishing kinship, and of recognizing the vulnerability and finitude of the other. The protocols that refuse to recognize our mourning refuse all sorts of tangible, social intelligibility” (p. 127).

In her analysis, Guenther devotes a lot of attention to gender factors which, in many situations described in the book, contribute to animal protection and care. For example, such unwanted category of stray animals as pregnant females receives, where possible, special support and protection from death by female volunteers who “irrespective of their views around reproductive choice for human women argue that pregnant dogs should be allowed to complete their pregnancies normally” (p. 60). Gender factors point to a common feature of animal shelters—the high number of women among the main volunteers, as care and grief are often feminized. The author adds that “women’s experiences as survivors of violence, including child sexual abuse and domestic violence, seem to make them more connected with animals, whom they connect with as innocent and undeserving victims of mistreatment that no one else will stand up for” (p. 102).

The last chapter entitled “A New Revolution” starts with the utopian idea of social and ethical changes in human community as a result of which domestic and stray animals receive the right to have a voice and a choice. Telling the story on behalf of the Monster, a pit bull, in reality, euthanized in a shelter due to their racial characteristics, Guenther emphasizes the seriousness of the

ethical and legal crisis as well as the immoral attitude towards those who find themselves abroad the concept of “domestic animal.” Unwanted and ungrievable lives, as Judith Butler put it, “cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone” (p. 126). Anyone who has gone beyond the “home”/“domestic” is already dead, so it does not matter where their biological death occurs. The institutions of power and control have already subjected them to a symbolic death.

Ekaterina Nikitina – doktor nauk humanistycznych na Uniwersytecie Śląskim w Katowicach, kuratorka niezależnej platformy badawczej „Posthuman Studies Lab” w Moskwie, wykładowczyni na Uniwersytecie ITMO w Sankt Petersburgu na studiach magisterskich „Art & Science”, dyrektorka Wydziału Sztuki Współczesnej w Wyższej Szkole „Sreda Obuchenia” w Moskwie.

Ekaterina Nikitina – Ph.D. in literary studies, graduated from the University of Silesia in Katowice, curator at independent research platform “Posthuman Studies Lab” in Moscow, lecturer at “Art & Science” Master’s program at ITMO University, director of the Faculty of Contemporary Art at the “Sreda Obuchenia” Higher School in Moscow.