

Reviews

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The Power of Silence

Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* (Posthumanities 21). Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$75.00 hb. \$25.00 pb.



This is an intriguing and quite original book that makes a significant contribution to Agamben scholarship, the philosophy of race, and the “posthumanities” more generally. Combining interstitial parabolic creative sections with conventional argumentation, Seshadri offers important reflections on language, law, race and silence, themes she then explores through anomalous literature, beings, events and practices. She works patiently throughout with primary texts to articulate Agamben’s philosophy of potentiality. The book’s central motif is silence, the dehumanizing force of which the author wishes to rehabilitate as withdrawal from the power of law and sovereignty. To

this end, she coins the neologism “humAnimal” to refer to that zone of indistinction, outside of proper human identity, where is produced the brute silence of the beast and slave — a hollow in language and law — but where also, perhaps, grows a weak saving power.

In the first chapter, Seshadri delves into a range of scholarship on silence, working towards an understanding of it as both negative and productive, neither simply repressed weakness nor inaccessible purity. Following Agamben’s suggestion that language is the originary *dispositif* to capture human life, Seshadri’s innovation is to explore the way in which language is not only deployed by biopower to produce subjects and make them speak, but also withheld by it to exclude certain bodies from discourse, society and selfhood. Importantly, she sees within this animalizing and racializing operation the possibility of resistance, where the capacity not to speak can undermine the power to silence.

Seshadri then moves to a discussion of silence in literature, eschewing the avant-garde silence of modernism, instead making use of Derrida’s theory of literature’s ethical secret to analyse Coetzee’s *Foe*, a novel centred around the attempt to write an impossible novel, to tell the story of a shipwreck (as Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* had done) and indeed of the “savage” Friday (whom modern literature had rendered voiceless). She also later examines Charles Chesnut’s “The Dumb Witness,” a folkloric story that likewise features a racialized mute with a severed tongue, here a slave who holds the secret of her master’s inheritance. In both stories, silence is revealed not only as a means of repression, but also as a capability to withhold, a neutralizing force that can deactivate the very sovereignty that silences. In Giorgio Agamben’s idiom, it is in the ban of the law, in its animalizing reduction of the political subject to *homo sacer*, that power’s secret weakness is disclosed as such and thereby made vulnerable.

Indeed throughout the book, Seshadri engages deeply with the thought of Agamben, and works hard to demonstrate the Italian philosopher’s essential yet vexed proximity to his French predecessor Jacques Derrida. She wisely avoids dwelling on the acrimony occasionally evident in their published exchanges, instead engaging in numerous close readings from their respective archives, and emphasizing the extent to which, despite important displacements, Agamben’s work “can only be understood as arising in the wake of deconstruction” (110). Thus she devotes significant attention to combining the ontological analysis of biopolitics with the deconstruction of sovereignty and metaphysics. Importantly, while attentive to the dehumanizing aspects of sovereign power, Seshadri is not beholden to the repressive hypothesis to which deconstruction is

sometimes prone, but recognizes that forces of diffraction do not necessarily undermine modern racist, speciesist biopower, indeed that the latter often operates precisely through the production of difference, instability, and hybridity. Elsewhere she reads together Derrida's deconstruction of phonocentrism with Agamben's study of the negativity of the voice, and indeed argues that Agamben performs a rigorous parody of deconstruction, making of the Derridean *différance* in which we rootlessly wander a homeland in which to dwell. Central to this clearing is, of course, language, which is key to Agamben's simultaneously traditional and innovative philosophical anthropology.

Following the discussion of "Language and Silence" in part I, the book shifts in part II to "The Exemplary Plane," where it presents two figures that, for Seshadri, exemplify what she has identified, in the foregoing, as the potentiality of silence to neutralize power. Firstly, wild children are shown, in their muteness, to sit outside (and indeed to disrupt) the humanist and racialized apparatus of language, and the historical nomenclature of biological science. Then, the anarchic movement witnessed in certain forms of exceptional acrobatics — Philippe Petit's 1974 highwire walk between the Twin Towers in New York is her main example — is taken to reveal the silent power of human gesturality. Given their marginal or exceptional character, these are offered less as "examples" (representative of a kind and speaking to the universal) than as "paradigms" in the sense Agamben has outlined, explaining his methodology of making historical circumstances intelligible by reasoning from singularities.¹

The two chapters on wild children explore this phenomenon through politics, ethics, and science. Their description in Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* is marked by their singularity: lacking language and race, between proper name and common noun, they are described not as belonging to a group but each in its individual case. These anomalies of natural history thus trouble the epistemological and ontological foundations of the discipline of taxonomic naming, proving the exception to Adamic categorization — that is, in their muteness, they undermine the anthropological power of the act of naming. Indeed, Seshadri delves into an in-depth study of the status of the name in philosophy, its place in language, and its role in responsibility, arguing that *Homo ferus* ultimately problematizes naming as an ethicopolitical task: the question of our ethical response to those who do not share language leads to this *sauvage* other exposing the instability of our own, supposedly proper "possession" of language.

Indeed for Seshadri, “the onomatopoeic wild child is perhaps the only human being who truly dwells in language at the level of name. Agamben has a term for such dwelling: he terms it ‘infancy,’ a condition in which the originary is also the most contemporary” (171).

The book’s final chapter, titled “HumAnimal Acts: Potentiality or Movement as Rest,” explores how the thoughtful agile movement of those who play as children might also attain or approach this contentious condition. Seshadri discusses the meditative practices of certain Eastern traditions, not in order to relate abstract ideas *à la* comparative philosophy, but to expose the commonality of *practice* between Eastern meditation and certain strands of Continental philosophy, insofar as, in the understanding of “spirituality” valorized by Hadot and Foucault in their excavations of ancient modes of philosophical ascesis, a pathway is opened up to renew our understanding of the exercise of ethics. In the dynamic body of the acrobat, in its joyful concentration and severe exuberance, is disclosed an intractable power of resistance: “if approached from a certain angle, any agile exceptional movement, such as walking on a tightrope ... can be said to harbor the kernel of human gesturality (as worklessness) that may well disclose the happy, profane life that is lived in the generic potentiality of the human body” (238). This is an intriguing and in places profound argument. To practice freedom, Seshadri suggests, is to act in such a way as to preserve one’s “capacity” *not* to act — to “prefer not to,” in Bartleby’s phrase that is so meaningful for Deleuze and Agamben, or in the Pauline idiom to live one’s vocation “as not” (*hos mē*). I can attest to this argument’s effectiveness, considered in Foucauldian terms as philosophy *qua* spirituality — that is, as exhorting in its addressees the care and indeed modification of the self. Drawing as it does one’s attention to the body/mind relation, to everyday embodiment, to the ubiquity of reserved power in exercise and action, reading this section imparted a certain childlike attentiveness to my own experience of social sport and solitary writing.

Through reflection on historical practices and discursive events, these paradigms of agile movement and humAnimal muteness ingeniously clarify Agamben’s theory of potentiality, and respond to common objections to its focus on inoperativity. Most prominently, Agamben’s friend and adversary Antonio Negri has repeatedly bemoaned the lack of a producing subject, capable of meaningful resistance, in his political ontology.² Similar objections might perhaps be made against the feebleness of the mute wolf child or the virtuoso acrobat. Yet Seshadri pushes back against this objection to Agamben’s perceived quiescence: “I suggest that for Agamben, such so-called passivity is thinkable only within the context of movement understood ontologically as

production" (199).³ Her book is notable in providing a strong and integrative interpretation of this aspect of his thought, in particular of his reading of Aristotle on *dunamis*, that will contribute to this ongoing debate over productivity and potentiality. In addition, she has more recently contributed two new translations, including of Agamben's important essay on potentiality, that emphasize the centrality of power and movement in his ontological reflections on human capacity.⁴

Of course, questions remain as to how far Agamben's philosophical anthropology in fact escapes the hierarchical structures of anthropocentric humanism.⁵ His political ontology hinges on the unique human experience of language, and our resulting lack of a proper essence, nature or work. Following Heidegger, Agamben has repeatedly emphasized moments in which nothing is spoken save language itself. Similarly, Seshadri's chief concern is the silence that lies at the heart of the human capacity for language and gesture. From the perspectives of posthumanism and animal studies, such approaches remain open to the deconstruction of human exceptionalism, in particular insofar as it challenges the denial to animals of this exceptional experience of language.⁶ Philosophy's habitual deafness to animal voices must itself be understood as a silencing.⁷ What of the speech and language, not to mention infancy and silence, of singular animals? At the same time, given the contemporary stakes of the war on animal life, reflection on the contingency and power of humankind is necessary and timely. While eschewing both "biological continuism and metaphysical separationism," the posthumanist critique of human/animal dualism ought urgently to be followed by empirical and phenomenological reflection on the distinctiveness of human nature (or our lack thereof) — and likewise, on the different differences of other living creatures.⁸ Perhaps cultivating our curiosity in regards to the latter might still come to disrupt our habits in asserting and securing the former.

Seshadri does deal well, if briefly, with the rendering of animals as brutes (25), even while not broaching many aspects of the contemporary "animal question" (indeed, the book is obsessively aware of all the questions for which it lacks the space to do justice). For her part, Seshadri seeks in the main "to make a contribution to the philosophy of race and racism in terms of the questions raised in studies of animality and human propriety" (ix). As she ably demonstrates, Agamben's political ontology enables a compelling response to the racialization and animalization of human subjects. What we are left to think is the animalization of *animal* subjects, their discursive and material

imprisonment in their own nature that perhaps constitutes the ordinary operation of the “anthropological machine.”

Notes

1. Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D’Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009).
2. See, for example, Antonio Negri, “Giorgio Agamben: The Discreet Taste of the Dialectic,” trans. Matteo Mandarini, in Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, eds. *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 109-25.
3. In an interesting footnote (pp. 275-6 n. 12), the author summarizes an occasion on which Agamben discussed the concept of “movement” in response to Negri’s questioning.
4. See Kalpana Seshadri, “Agamben, the Thought of Sterēsis: An Introduction to Two Essays,” *Critical Inquiry* 40:2 (2014), pp. 470-479; Giorgio Agamben, “The Power of Thought,” trans. Kalpana Seshadri, *Critical Inquiry* 40:2 (2014), pp. 480-491; Giorgio Agamben, “Vocation and Voice,” trans. Kalpana Seshadri, *Critical Inquiry* 40:2 (2014), pp. 492-501.
5. See Matthew Chrulew, “Animals in Biopolitical Theory: Between Agamben and Negri,” *New Formations* 76 (2012), pp. 53-67; Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
6. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
7. On the silence of animals in philosophy, see Elisabeth de Fontenay, *Le silence des bêtes: La philosophie à l’épreuve de l’animalité* (Paris: Fayard, 1998). For a deep ecology critique of the modern suppression of animist attention to nature’s voices, see Christopher Manes, “Nature and Silence,” in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA & London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 15-29.

8. Leonard Lawlor, *This Is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).