

Lea Schneider

Of Animals and Other Humans

Publication September 2026. 240 pages

- In times of factory farming, pet culture and animal testing, award-winning essayist and poet Lea Schneider advocates a new approach to our fellow creatures.
- For readers of Robin Wall Kimmerer, Helen Macdonald and Robert Macfarlane



A radical re-examination of the relationship between humans and animals.

When Lea Schneider began observing birds, she learned that only males sing – to attract females, preserve the species, evolutionary theory. But in reality, 71% of female songbirds also sing. And both do so not only out of necessity, but also because they simply enjoy it.

Modern research confirms what indigenous philosophies have always known: animals are subjects, active agents who shape the world with us. This radically different perspective on our fellow creatures gives us hope in the midst of the climate catastrophe: hope for a future in which we build new worlds together.

What distinguishes us from animals? And what exactly is an 'animal'?

Lea Schneider (1989) studied comparative literature, sociology, linguistics, sinology and cultural studies in Berlin, Shanghai and Taipei and received her doctorate with a thesis on radical vulnerability as a feminist writing strategy. Her most recent publications are the poetry collection *made in china* (2020) and the essay *Scham* (Shame, 2021). She has received numerous awards for her work, including being a finalist in the Open Mike competition and receiving the Dresden Poetry Prize, the Horst Bingel Prize and the Berlin Art Prize for Literature. She also studies indigenous philosophy, behavioural research, animal studies and ornithology.

The Book

"Of Animals and Other Humans" radically rethinks our relationship with animals and the question of what an animal actually is.

→ On the one hand, because new insights from biology suggest there isn't actually the distinction implied by the labels "human" and "animal". The further research advances, the more it assumes that animals are also subjects – individuals with unique characteristics and biographies who help shape the world we share through intentional, deliberate actions.

→ On the other hand, because this radically different worldview – the image of a world in which we are not the only actors, the image of a world that is also shaped by others – has implications for how we talk about our present condition in the midst of the climate catastrophe and the possibility of a future. If we are not the only one shaping this world – then spontaneous cooperation and surprises become possible, as does knowledge beyond our limited perspective. This can be a way to tell the story of a provisional, precarious, yet creative survival in a broken world, to tell about lives possible not only in spite of, but precisely in the ruins of capitalism.

→ When Lea writes about or fellow living beings, she never slips into trivializing or objectifying them. She also does not reduce animals to evolutionary functions. Free from our own human arrogance, yet grounded in science, she presents them as subjects who shape the world.

Structure

- 11 essays weaving personal reflections with facts from current behavioral research, insights from cultural animal studies, and concepts from indigenous philosophies
- Collage is the formal principle: the arrangement of quotations and other written elements gives rise to a unique literary form that – at first glance – combines the seemingly impossible and in doing so mirrors biological reality. These are magnificently composed "essay poems" that surprise and expand horizons in the best sense
- Inspiration: Eliot Weinberger, Helen Macdonald and Eula Biss

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Sample Translation by Bradley Schmidt

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BEING PREY, or: the Problem with Food

Before I can eat, I have to have a conversation.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

The history of anthropology is a history of misunderstandings, but only few are as great as the misunderstanding of the concept of animism.

*

Gaagudju, Australia, 1985.

The philosopher Val Plumwood crosses the East Alligator lagoon in a borrowed canoe. The current pushes her towards a tree trunk. The tree trunk is a crocodile.

It is common knowledge that crocodiles are completely harmless for canoes.

*

"How I missed predatory animals and the fear of being eaten," the poet Diane Seuss notes. "How I missed being eaten."

*

Iglolik, Arctic, 1922.

Angakkuq Avva from Greenland explained humanity's problem to the Danish traveler Knud Rasmussen.

*

"There is nothing elementary about alimentary matter," the religious scholar Graham Harvey writes, "culture is often about who you eat and with whom you eat."

*

London, Great Britain, 1871.

The anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor uses the term animism for the first time.

*

Tylor understands animism (from the Latin anima: soul, spirit, breath) as a religion: An original, "primitive" belief that ascribes a soul to non-human animals, plants, and objects; from which all subsequent, advanced religions developed.

Animistic religions, Tylor explained, also have priests. They are called shamans.

*

Of course, Tylor has a translation problem.

*

The crocodile didn't seem very large. Plumwood was completely unprepared when it attacked. She made the split-second decision to paddle towards a paperbark tree on the river bank.

"There is no necessary ontological difference between humans and other-than-humans," Harvey wrote, "especially when it comes to matters of food. Factually (but not necessarily culturally) humans are as edible as animals and plants."

"I steered to the tree, and stood up ready to jump," Plumwood writes. "The crocodile rushed up alongside the canoe, and its beautiful, flecked golden eyes looked straight into mine. For the first time, it came to me fully that I was prey."

*

The translation problem is as follows:

Animism is not a religion. Animism is a social practice.

It has nothing to do with the (Christian) belief in an (immortal) soul, but with the question of who a person is; whether one is allowed to eat people; and if so, how.

*

I think of Diane Seuss's lines when I let myself be undressed and tied to the bed, face down.

There is a form of sexual submission that derives its pleasure

- not (or not only) from pain,
- not (or not only) from the attention and care with which it is produced
- not (or not only) from the freedom to autonomously play a role that is forced upon me as reality in every other situation in a misogynistic society.

What interests me is the feeling of being prey.

*

Animism characterizes the ontological assumption that we are in a world full of person. Some, but not all of them, are human.

Animism characterizes being concerned with the question of how to behave appropriately towards other persons, human and non-human.

Animism characterizes being concerned with about offending other people with one's own behavior – for example, by eating them, or behaving inappropriately while eating.

*

Offended people are dangerous because they can take revenge and their status as people does not end with death.

*

"One must eat well," the philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote and mean both the quality of the ingredients and the way of eating.

*

Revenge can take on many forms.

If one eats poorly, the flesh of the killed person can make one ill. Or if their kin decide to withdraw from the disrespectful eater in the future, so he can live on without them; so that he has to suffer a world without them.

*

Like almost all epidemics of the past decades, AIDS, BSE, Zika, SARS, Ebola and Covid-19 are zoonotics: diseases that have jumped from other animals to humans.

*

Since 1970, the global wildlife populations have declined by an average of 73 percent. The World Biodiversity Council estimates that we will lose more than one million species in the coming decades.

*

"The greatest problem," Avva said to Rasmussen, "lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls."

*

Of course, Rasmussen has a translation problem.

*

The crocodile bites down between Plumwood's legs.

Before she is able to jam her fingers into the soft mud of the river bank, it pulls her down into the water three times.

"A crocodile's death roll is, essentially, indescribable, an experience beyond words of total terror."

"The crocodile's breathing and heart metabolism is not suited to prolonged struggle, so the roll is an intense initial burst of power designed to overcome the surprised victim's resistance quickly. The roll was a centrifuge of whirling, boiling blackness that lasted for eternity, beyond endurance."

*

I know a survivor of sexual violence who wants to have the word "prey" tattooed across his hip.

*

What Avva says to Rasmussen – what Rasmussen translates into Christian vocabulary – is not that everything we eat has a soul, but that everyone we eat is a person.

That everything we eat is, in reality, everyone.

*

"If everyone is a person, not everyone is kin, not everyone is enemy, and not everyone is food, Harvey writes. "But some are."

*

Being a person does not protect you from being eaten. The fact that you are food does not take away your status as a person.

But how can you eat a person?

This is the problem – everyday and fundamental – facing Avva.

*

“Two billion three hundred eighty-nine million pounds of animals died in 2009. They were eaten,” writes the philosopher Vinciane Despret.

“How many pounds of humans disappeared over the course of the same year?”

*

Crows conduct elaborate ceremonies for their dead fellow crows.

Killer whale and dolphin mothers have been observed pushing their dead calves around for days and sometimes weeks.

*

Elephants cover their dead with soil and vegetation.

“Sometimes, when they come across places where their friends died, they will pause and stand very quietly – even when the bones are no longer there.

*

“This is not an exercise in ‘primitivism’ because animism is far from primitive, nor is it about pre-modernity because animism does not serve as a precursor to modernity,” Harvey writes.

“Animism is one of the many vitally present and contemporary other-than-modern ways of being human. Modernity rather than animism or any form of indigeneity is exceptional among ways of being human in this world.”

*

In several societies, which do not collectively repress the idea that meat is a person's dead body, there are other people whose profession is an apology.

If killing is necessary for eating then atonement is necessary to continue living after eating.

*

The ways of apologizing are manifold and must be carried out by all, not just those whose profession it is.

The names given to this profession are manifold and spread across the languages of North Asia and the Arctic.

In Sami: Noaidi.

In Inuktitut: Angakkuq.

In Evenk: Shaman.

*

The translation problem is as follows:

Shamanism is not a religion. Shamanism is an economic practice.

It implies: We must compensate what we take from others – we have to pay for it.

*

Find a compensation

an adequate payment

a sufficient apology for slaughtering

90,000 per second in the meat industry internationally.

*

Plumwood survived the attack, survived the thirteen-hour trip to the hospital while forbidding the rangers accompanying her to shoot the crocodile out of revenge, survived the bites to her groin; survived the infection that almost cost her a leg.

She wrote the following about her encounter with the crocodile:

“It seems to me that in the human supremacist culture of the West there is a strong effort to deny that we humans are also animals positioned in the food chain.

This denial that we ourselves are food for others is reflected in many aspects of our death and burial practices. The strong coffin, conventionally buried well below the level of soil fauna activity, and the slab over the grave to prevent any other thing from digging us up, keeps the Western human body from becoming food for other species.

Animals can be our food, but we can never be their food. It is this rational of mastery that is threatened by the idea of human prey.”

*

Jocelyne Porcher, who researches domesticated animals, suggests instead of referring to animals we kill for food in terms of kilograms or carcasses, we should refer to them as deceased.

The deceased are living beings whose existence continues in a different way after their death. They live on in the memories of the living, in their bodies which they nourish and of which they become a part.

The deceased are living beings without whom the living would not exist.

The deceased are living beings who – through their designation as the deceased – are recognized as persons.

*

If – even in modernity – there are non-modern life forms that are alive and present at the same time as it, then the task is not to go back to a point before the alienation, the fall of modern civilization.

“Anyone who views the world as a sacred place (and humans as worthy of a place in a sacred place),” the philosopher Daniel Quinn writes, “is an animist.”