

The Book of Biopolitical Silliness

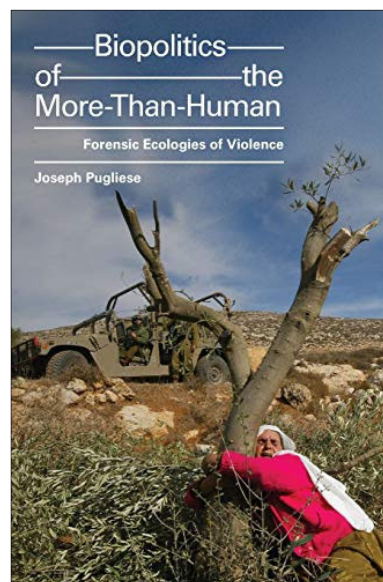
by A.J. Caschetta

Biopolitics of the More-Than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence. By Joseph Pugliese. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 312 pp. \$104.95 (\$27.95, paper).

With “Biopolitics,” “More-Than-Human,” and “Forensic Ecologies” all in the title, some might conclude that Pugliese’s book is an elaborate prank, satirizing the bewildering opacity of academic discourse.

The term “biopolitics” indicates the nation state’s influence on people through governance. Coined by Rudolph Kjellen in the early twentieth century, the term took on a darker connotation under the influence of French philosopher Michel Foucault in his 1978-79 lectures at the College de France on “The Birth of Biopolitics.” Pugliese’s “Biopolitics” is less about state-mandated intrusions into people’s lives, what Foucault called “governmentality,” than its powers of incarceration, capital punishment, and war-making. The nation states he has in mind, of course, are Israel and the United States.

By “more-than-human,” Pugliese, professor of cultural studies at Macquarie University in Australia, simply means everything that is not human. He disdains the terms “non-human” and “other-than-human” because they participate within “the Eurocentric grid of property law.” Using them would amount to an act of “othering,” or committing the unpardonable sin of being “speciesist.” He explains that “more-than-human ... effectively brings into focus my refusal, in this book, to view



either human or other-than-human entities as categorically separated from each other.”

As for “forensic ecologies,” Pugliese claims that his focus on “the caesura that divides the human from that which is cast as altogether other-than-human and is thus categorized as lawfully killable” will shed light on “the complex assemblage of biopolitical forces mobilized by the Israeli state and the United States in their respective military campaigns.” In other words, this is the latest example of Post-Modernism conscripted to the cause of depicting Israel and the United States as the world’s most egregious violators of human (and more-than-human) rights.

Pugliese believes that nature itself is constantly threatened and even destroyed by U.S. and Israeli military units flexing their

biopolitical muscles in blatant disregard for more-than-human life forms. From Israel's conflict with Palestinians, to U.S.-led conflicts against al-Qaeda and ISIS, Pugliese takes his readers on a bizarre, jargon-encrusted trip through warfare-affected landscapes. He links his analysis (at points tenuously) to Foucault, Nietzsche, French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others, calling it in turns, "aquapolitics," "aeropolitics," and "necropoiesis." Jerusalem and Washington, readers are told, are guilty of "ecocide."

The book contains far too much fantastical silliness to cover in a short review, but a few examples stand out, such as the story of a Palestinian family evicted by the "Israeli settler state" from the home they rent. It quickly focuses on a little girl, Hala, and her separation from the lemon tree in the garden of her former home. As an example of "vegetal life," the tree misses Hala as much as she misses it ("her" in Pugliese's telling). Not since Erasmus Darwin's poem *The Loves of the Plants* (1791) has amorous vegetable life been hyperbolically anthropomorphized to such an extent. Darwin's sexualized narratives were written in rhyming couplets, partly in jest and intended to titillate his readers while simultaneously teaching them about botany. Pugliese, on the other hand, seems quite serious about the "intra- and interspecies communications and relations." The book's cover [depicts](#) a distraught Palestinian woman hugging a damaged olive tree as an Israel Defense Forces soldier looks on.

Another chapter proselytizes on the evils of the Guantanamo Bay prison, then turns into a series of bizarre tales about prisoners' inter-species relationships: Shaker Aamer's love of ants ("they know me, they knew me—as me") and Mohamed Bashmilah's

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friendship with a fly that "introduces a new spatiotemporal dimension" to his existence. But Mansoor Adayfia's devotion to an iguana who

taught him about life is the centerpiece. Pugliese explains of the man and his reptilian mentor, "Their interspecies friendship worked to annul systems of hierarchical positionality grounded in the hubris of human exceptionalism."

In the concluding chapter, Pugliese's moral outrage reaches a crescendo in a condemnation of drone warfare as practiced by the U.S. military. The chapter is titled "Drone Sparagmos" (from the ancient Greek, meaning to tear apart, as in the ritual slaughter of animals). Primarily a survey of post-drone strike scenes, its macabre depiction of mutilated humans and animals and cratered landscapes found at what he calls "the drone-kill fields of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen," sets the tone for a 14-page "After-word." The book ends with this:

Challenging the dogma of human exceptionalism, the figure of the more-than-human, as flesh of the world, continues to interrogate the Euro-anthropocentric hegemon, its narcissistic points of irreflection, its violent foreclosures, and its attendant ecocidal logic of autoimmunity. From this locus, the more-than-human persists in articulating the urgent need for an ethical awakening critical to the realization of ecological justice.

Some readers will be left wondering why Duke University Press published it. Duke is, after all, the publisher of *Social Text*, the journal tricked by Alan Sokal in 1996 into publishing a parody of academic writing as

the real thing. In this context, Pugliese's book fits in perfectly, as part of Duke University Press's most strangely-named series, "ANIMA: Critical Race Studies Otherwise," where its audience will likely number tens of people.

A.J. Caschetta is a Ginsburg-Milstein fellow at the Middle East Forum and a principal lecturer at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

