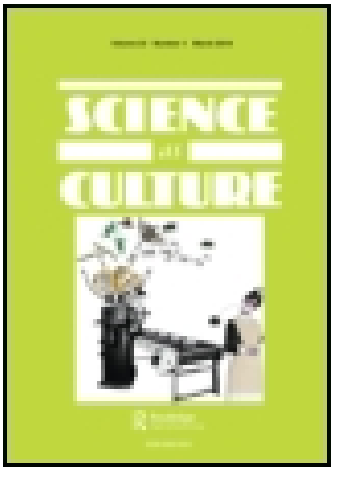


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# Year of the Chicken

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**REVIEW**

# Year of the Chicken

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*Poultry Science, Chicken Culture: A Partial Alphabet*, by Susan Merrill Squier, New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011, 256 pp., £34.95, [$39.95]

> With a cluck-cluck here and a cluck-cluck there, Here a cluck, there a cluck, everywhere a cluck-cluck.
> —*Old MacDonald Had a Farm*

> Follow the chicken and find the world.
> —Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*

Chickens are ubiquitous both in terms of their physical selves—United Nations' estimates put the world chicken population at any given time at about 19 billion—and in terms of their cultural significance. The English language is itself rife with references to chicken words and worlds—think 'coming home to roost' and 'do not count your chickens'— and recently the chicken has been increasingly associated with the monumental social, economic, and political shifts that shape human societies. In the larger context of the industrialization of agriculture, concerns about the living conditions of domesticated animals, ethical food production and consumption, ecology and sustainability, and global public health, chickens have been cast in a reconfigured role in the early part of the twenty-first century. In a time of global economic crisis, the flourishing back-yard chicken movement in both the USA and the UK is debated as a model for self-sufficiency and ethical relations with non-humans and points to a pervasive nostalgia for earlier modes of living.

Chickens, and their increasing salience as entities that are 'good to think' and thus as legitimate subjects of intellectual inquiry, must be seen as part of what

might be termed the 'multispecies turn' in the humanities and social sciences. This turn, oriented around the ethical and intellectual limitations of human exceptionalism, engages the question of how the lives and worlds of non-human beings are connected to those of the human. For instance, in their exposition of multispecies ethnography, Kirksey and Helmreich examine 'how a multitude of organisms' livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces', focusing on 'the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds' (2010, p. 545). In this multispecies view, chickens often find themselves implicated in a range of human social, political, and economic phenomena—from food scares to the ethical parameters of urban chicken-raising, from transnational pandemics to the local effects of global economic crisis—many of which are of central interest to scholars interested in the social studies of science and technology.

Tracking these kinds of multispecies connections is in the spirit of Susan Merrill Squier's most recent book, *Poultry Science, Chicken Culture: A Partial Alphabet*. In this timely work, a collection of related essays she terms a 'chicken abcedarium', Squier places the chicken at the centre of her analysis in order 'to explore the fertile potential this humble domestic animal holds for all kinds of intellectual inquiries and practical pursuits' (p. 13). The specific inquiries and pursuits that Squier explores are organized as a primer, a kind of introductory text designed to help 'writers open up specialized subjects to broad audiences' (p. 4). Squier's opening question—'Why chickens?'—frames her inquiry throughout the book and draws attention to the chicken, a seemingly marginal creature, in the context of our culture. This interdisciplinary volume is organized alphabetically into simply named chapters—Augury, Biology, Culture, Disability, Epidemic, Fellow-Feeling, Gender, Hybridity, Inauguration—hence the subtitle, 'A Partial Alphabet.' In each chapter, she makes imaginative and provocative connections through the figure of the chicken by juxtaposing creative works including novels, short stories, and photography with fascinating histories of science and technology.

Beginning with the question 'why chickens?' Squier positions the chicken as an organizing figure, a figure whose careful explication emphasizes what she calls 'the interconnectedness of all things' (p. 13). As a result, Squier's approach is eclectic, connecting human and chickens' existences through discussions of seemingly unrelated phenomena in seemingly unrelated spheres. Thus, in *Poultry Science, Chicken Culture*, readers should not expect a comprehensive history of the species *Gallus gallus domesticus* nor should they look for a sustained critique of the marginal and abject role of the chicken in a global political economy (see, e.g. Haraway, 2008). Rather, Squier follows 'the thread of [her] own curiosity to assemble an alphabetical series of ten case studies of (poultry) science as (chicken) culture' as a way to explore 'the many roles chickens have played in knowledge production' (p. 6). This is also not to suggest that Squier does not carefully and critically treat the role of the chicken in global, technocratic capitalism: quite

the contrary. Squier's own encounters with chickens led her to think 'about the ethics and aesthetics of designing life, the hidden practices of industrial agriculture, and the role of the global poultry industry in how we farm' (p. 13). Yet, her approach to these issues is not linear; in fact, one might liken her approach to the movement of chickens, creatures who rarely walk in a straight line, but nevertheless reach a satisfactory, if not predetermined, destination.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must confess to keeping my own backyard flock, an undertaking begun five years ago in a kind of ignorance that is difficult to overstate. In the ensuing years, I have variously bored, irritated, and occasionally delighted many long-suffering colleagues, friends, and family members with stories and photos—many, many photos—of my chickens. But more than that, I, like the many others Squier discusses in her book, 'have found the chicken weaving its way into [my] thoughts, dreams, and deeds, shaking up the tidy separation of nature and culture and prompting exploration of what it means to be human—*and animal*' (p. 4; emphasis in original). Squier herself was inspired by her own flock of chickens, and her interactions with them importantly shaped and challenged her thinking throughout the writing of this book. Squier's book, then, is not a narrative of a kind of ethical self-transformation through chicken-keeping but rather a sustained meditation on chickens themselves and 'what we can learn with them, from them, and about them' (p. 18). Squier writes of the 'ambiguities, complications and challenges' she encountered in her exploration of chicken culture and how the book she intended to write—'a history of poultry science … as the foundation for a critique of industrial poultry production' (p. 198)—took on a quite a different shape from what she anticipated.

*Poultry Science, Chicken Culture* will have wide appeal for scholars from a variety of fields including STS and cultural studies. The bookend chapters 'Augury' and 'Inauguration' remind us of birds' long association with divination. In 'Augury', Squier critiques modern society's reliance on technical, scientific, and rational approaches and argues that we have become 'deskilled' in other modes of thought and action, in 'a type of knowledge-making about the present and the future gained through intimacy with animals' (p. 20). In 'Inauguration', she juxtaposes the popular representation of blacks as chicken thieves in early twentieth-century race films with contemporary racialized chicken imagery associated with Barack Obama's candidacy for the President of the USA; in this comparison, Squier traces the consistency of these representations across time, exploring how chicken imagery 'operates as a condensed node of social, political, and economic significance surrounding the candidacy of the first African American man for president of the United States' (p. 180). In the chapters 'Biology' and 'Culture', Squier works through the themes that form the title of the book: poultry science and chicken culture. Through an examination of visual culture (scientific films and art photographs of chickens, respectively), the chapters both explore 'the pivotal role played by the chicken as an object of

biological and cultural engineering' (p. 39), drawing attention to how chickens have inspired creative enterprises across the arts and sciences, and across space and time.

This book will also resonate with scholars in the burgeoning fields of animal studies and disability studies; her fourth chapter, 'Disability', layers close readings of the play 'Days of Antonio', the short story, 'The Triumph of the Egg', and the film 'Yolk' with the histories of embryology, teratology, and eugenics. Central to all of these stories is the image of the chicken and the egg—and the perennial question of which came first—as a way 'to represent and explore the complexity of the disability experience' (p. 96). Squier engages disability scholarship, critiquing what she sees as an overreliance on singular models for illuminating and exemplifying the experience of disability; instead, she argues that such singular models—be they moral, biomedical, or social—are, on their own, inadequate to account for this complexity. In 'Epidemic', Squier interweaves her discussion of the children's tale, 'The Story of Chicken-licken', with an analysis of the scientific, economic, and political dimensions of avian flu. She connects the advent of concerns about an avian flu pandemic with the emergence of corporate and government interventions in biorisk and security, further linking this context 'with the transformation in chicken farming in the United States since 1900' (p. 103). Following her earlier argument in 'Augury', Squier contends that the 'focus on scientifically defined risk and technologically mediated solutions' produces a kind of 'unawareness' that prevents us from grasping 'aspects of experience not subject to quantification' (pp. 99–100). In particular, Squier argues that this lack of awareness occludes for us the 'broader social, biomedical, and cultural consequences of raising genetically similar chickens in the stressful conditions of overcrowded, confined poultry houses' (p. 100), a potential oversight dangerous for chickens and humans alike.

Squier's chapter on 'Fellow-Feeling' reworks economist Adam Smith's classic essay, 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments', by reflecting on the lives of three women whose labour was intimately tied to the lives of chickens, although under very different circumstances (for a more developed discussion of the intersection of women and agriculture, see 'Gender'). Through a retelling of the individual stories of these women, Squier sketches out for the reader the shifting conditions of agricultural production (from small-scale nineteenth-century subsistence farming to late twentieth-century factory-farms) and their impact on human/non-human relationships. I highlight Squier's chapter on fellow-feeling here because her reflection offers a subtle but important challenge to a dominant contemporary discourse that often decouples ethical consumption from the various structures, and strictures, of large-scale agricultural economies. As STS scholar Wyatt Galusky notes in his recent article discussing his own attempts at chicken-raising, the very possibility of the backyard chicken movement, often positioned as the antithesis of the factory-farm, is itself rooted in the technological apparatus of industrial food production: 'This modern industrialized food

production system is precisely what positioned me to desire raising chickens in the first place, even while making it materially possible' (Galusky, 2010, p. 24). Thus, Galusky's point reminds us that attempts to move outside of the constraints of industrial food production cannot be an end point for ethical inquiry; Squier's exploration probes how 'each agricultural model, like each kind of encounter with chickens, generates its own distinct capacity for fellow-feeling, and its own specific notion of community' (p. 136).

As Squier notes in her conclusion to the book, 'Zen of the Hen': 'This book ends, as it began, with sitting' (p. 198). She understands her return to sitting as 'something closer to what the Buddhists call beginner's mind' (pp. 198–199). This concept of the 'beginner's mind', 'the lack of preconceptions, eager openness, and anticipation with which a student approaches a new subject' (p. 198) is contrasted with the expert mind and is essential to the form of her monograph. She compellingly demonstrates the kinds of thoughtfulness that can emerge from and be cultivated through meditative engagement with the mundane.

I return here to Squier's orienting question—Why chickens?—with the hope that *Poultry Science, Chicken Culture* (and my discussion of it here) convinces readers of the generative quality of this seemingly simple inquiry. As Haraway argues, 'Chicken knows that producing better accounts of animal doings, with one another and with humans, can play an important role in reclaiming livable politics' (2008, p. 271). In this monograph, Squier herself produces a hybrid object—a multi-purpose breed, if you will—simultaneously attentive to scholarly analysis but not limited by it; it is focused but open-ended, interconnected in both form and content, and deeply concerned with an ethics of knowing. Thus, Squier's chicken abcedarium, much like the gallinaceous subjects of the book itself, is good to think with, offering a lively exploration of what 'science as culture' might look like through interdisciplinary inquiry and mutually constitutive multispecies encounters.

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