

# Introduction: Animality and Ecocriticism

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I have often claimed that the two major paradigms within the field of ecocriticism are “place” and “animality.” It is possible, of course, to argue that there are various other themes and concerns in environmentally oriented literary scholarship, ranging from the human capacity (or incapacity) to apprehend phenomena of extreme scale and the ecological implications of our sensory and cognitive limitations for the politics of natural resource exploitation in industrialized and developing nations, to name only a few. But if we’re trying to identify over-arching concepts, our relationships to places of all kinds, small and large, and our understanding of what it means to be alive and to exist in relationship to other living beings may well be the overarching aspects of our “environmental experience.”

Much has been written about sense of place in literature throughout the world. There is, to my knowledge, no literary tradition in any country that is devoid of attention to locality: landscape, climate, vegetation, travel, neighborhoods, country-city tensions, and so forth. Urban writing, and even narratives set entirely indoors, are engaged with the experience of place. At a key moment in his 1848 essay “Ktaadn,” American writer Henry David Thoreau exclaims, “*Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we!*” This famous utterance suggests that human identity (who we are) and physical location (sense of place) are fundamentally intersecting issues. It makes sense that our writers should explore the human experience by looking closely at the contexts in which we spend our lives.

But, I would argue, much the same can be said about our physical-animal selves and our relationships with other living beings — the complex of phenomena that I tend to describe as “animality.” Not all scholars who study the human body or the meaning of nonhuman animals in literature and the other arts would identify themselves as “ecocritics” per se. The fields of “body studies” and “critical animal studies” are also well developed and important academic disciplines. But I believe there are powerful affinities between ecocriticism and these sister disciplines. In her 2008 article “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature,” published

in the book *Material Feminisms*, Stacy Alaimo powerfully launched an entire sub-movement within the field of ecocriticism by demonstrating how bodies intersect with the physical environment through the movement of substances from the body out into the world and from the world into all bodies — this is perhaps an over-simplified statement of the idea of “trans-corporeality,” the movement of material phenomena across and through bodies. What is also convincing in Alaimo’s formulation of a new material emphasis in critical responses to the literary, visual, and performing arts is her sense that there is an unavoidable *ethical* dimension to these processes — what we humans do to the natural environment has consequences for the nonhuman realm and for human beings. We have an ethical obligation to weigh these impacts when we make decisions about how to act. Alaimo focuses her discussion, in the 2008 study, on the connections between trans-corporeality and human health (or, more specifically, human *illness*).

But this emphasis on the body goes beyond a concern for *human* bodies, and the articles collected in this special cluster of articles demonstrate a broader sense of “animality” in ecocritical and allied scholarship. I am delighted to offer here a varied gathering of articles by a stellar group of animal-oriented humanities scholars.

Diana Villanueva Romero, from the University of Extremadura in Spain, begins the cluster with her study of xenotransplantation (transplanting an organ from one kind of animal into another) in American author Brenda Peterson’s novel *Animal Heart*. This essay adopts a “material ecocritical” approach to a literary text that questions the ethical shortcomings in two different “dispassionate forms of science”: experimental medical procedures and military testing of active sonar in the marine environment. What is particularly interesting, as Villanueva Romero argues, is how Peterson depicts a kind of communication that seems to occur between the baboon whose heart has been removed and the human host whose life has been saved by the transplant, a material communication that instills in the human recipient a new sense of ethical obligation to other species.

The second contribution to this special cluster comes from Wendy Woodward, of the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, and extends Villanueva Romero’s body-centered approach to trans-species relationships by adopting a posthumanist angle that seeks to illuminate the entanglements and commonalities between human beings and other species (in this case, dogs) by focusing on shared vulnerabilities among “disabled” characters. She quotes Lennard Davis’s line from the introduction to *The Disability Studies Reader*: “To have a disability is to be an animal, to be part of the Other.” This implies that humans whose bodies are somehow different than “normal” have a unique capacity to be sensitive to their own animal bodies and to appreciate the subjectivities of other humans and nonhuman beings. Taking as her

literary texts the Mozambican author Luis Bernardo Honwana's short story "We Killed Mangy-Dog" and the novels *Timbuktu* and *Wild Dogs*, by American authors Paul Auster and Helen Humphreys, respectively, Woodward situates her discussion not only in the context of Cary Wolfe's posthumanist theory and the disability theories of Davis and Ato Quayson, but within the new ecocritical movement, led by such scholars as Elizabeth A. Wheeler and Matthew J.C. Cella, that meshes disability studies and environmental analysis.

While not focused on the body per se, Michael Lundblad's analysis of Mark Doty's memoir *Dog Years* does engage provocatively with questions about illness and death. As Lundblad, who teaches at the University of Oslo in Norway, explains, the American poet raises troublesome "biopolitical questions" in recounting the illnesses and deaths of his human partner and his two dogs. These questions, as presented in this study, revolve around citizenship and activism, particularly asking when it is appropriate to engage in social resistance and when it is necessary to accept one's social or biological condition, including illness and death. Of particular relevance to this special cluster of articles, Lundblad critiques Doty's assumptions about "the inner lives of dogs" and their supposed tendency to live in the present, neither regretting the past nor hoping for a particular future. He is especially critical of Doty's narrative of the decision to euthanize one of his dogs after reading a look on the dog's face: "How is it possible [...] to tell the difference between a look that means 'I don't want to live' from 'I don't want to be in pain,' or, 'I am afraid of death,' or even, 'I want to live,' or 'please don't kill me?' [...] I must [...] question the assumption that we can 'read' dogs so confidently and propose universal lessons from them." This article also presents a subtle distinction between "animal studies" and "animality studies": animal studies, argues Lundblad, challenges "speciesist thinking" in order to improve the way humans treat nonhuman species; on the other hand, the discipline of animality studies focuses on how human and nonhuman lives, including human and nonhuman identities and biologies, are represented textually.

Much as Lundblad considers the biopolitics of our relationships with fellow human beings in comparison with our relationships to companion species (and perhaps other species in general), Aaron Moe, from Washington State University in the United States, also explores how literature helps readers understand the political presence of nonhuman species within a broadly conceived "zoopolis" (a term used by contemporary animal rights theorists Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka), which suggests that animals possess not only rights, but citizenship. Moe argues that poets Emily Dickinson and Brenda Hillman reveal how the American poetic tradition offers a "foundation" for a more inclusive "polis." This project highlights the capacity of nonhuman species to be "makers," not only passive entities that are represented

by human artists, by human agency. The granting of poetic (making) capacity to nonhuman species is a fundamental aspect of what Moe calls “zoopoiesis.” This concept shifts the power relationship between human and other species, suggesting that humans derive their own ability to use language from what they receive from other animals.

If Moe suggests that human language owes its essential vitality to our interactions with other species, Karla Armbruster, from Webster University in the United States, argues in her essay that we enhance our basic ability to engage with the world — to be aware of our surroundings — when we do something as simple as take walk with our dogs. She focuses on Henry David Thoreau, one of the central authors in the tradition of American environmental writing, with particular emphasis on his 1861 essay “Walking,” which highlights the idea that true walking is a way of deeply experiencing the vivid wildness of existence. Armbruster uses the scholarly technique known as “narrative scholarship” to analyze Thoreau’s ideas about walking and several examples of “dog memoirs” in the context of her own life as a dog walker. Many readers of Thoreau’s classic essay have wondered how it might be possible to achieve the elevated “sauntering” he describes, appreciating the sacred richness of ordinary life. According to Armbruster, dogs not only manage to draw our attention to physical nature, but “they also have a unique capacity to help us tune into the unseen, to recognize the existence of an entire world that is literally beyond our senses and wild in the ways it exceeds our capacities to grasp or express it.”

It is fitting that this cluster of extraordinary articles on topics pertaining to animality and ecocriticism (or, more broadly, animality and the environmental humanities) should end with the troubling and “enlivening” exploration of the potential for shared “goodness” in the lives of human beings and flying-foxes. Deborah Bird Rose, who’s based at the University of New South Wales in Australia, aspires in her contribution to this special issue to “enliven our ethical sensibility toward the goodness that is being evicted from the world through human impacts as they directly and indirectly break into and diminish the lives of others.” While she focuses her discussion on flying-foxes, Rose explores much broader questions that undercut, or “disturb,” the idea that prevails in modern, western societies “that the nonhuman world is a place not only lacking mindfulness, but also lacking goodness.” She argues that humans are not the only species that possesses or creates “culture” or “cultural narratives” — that “human cultural naratives are but one type among many.” Although this essay, which concludes the special issue, does not analyze human literary texts in quite the same way as the other articles collected here, Rose dramatically contemplates the lives and narratives of flying-foxes, showing how their stories of “symbiotic mutualism” intersect with other life stories in the Australian

forests.

Perhaps one of the fundamental motivations of the ecocritical attention to the many permutations of animality is the urge to overcome what Rose, echoing philosopher Val Plumwood, calls “the hyperseparated binaries that assert that humans are separate from the rest of the living world.” I hope that readers of all six of these articles will come away from this work with the strong feeling that our human lives are profoundly interwoven with the lives of other species across the planet.

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