

Identitäten / Identities

Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven

herausgegeben von
Marlene Bainsczyk-Crescentini
Kathleen Ess
Michael Pleyer
Monika Pleyer

unter Mitarbeit von
Teresa Anna Katharina Beisel
Cosima Stawenow

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Anne Franciska Pusch

Literary Animals and the Problem of Anthropomorphism

1. Constructing Nonhuman Identities

Identity is not something that should exclusively be granted to humans. Humanists however make an effort to use it this way by explicitly denying reason to nonhuman beings and thus identifying 'human nature' in opposition to the non-identity of animals. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer write that "[t]he idea of man [...] is expressed in the way in which he is distinguished from the animal. Animal irrationality is adduced as proof of human dignity."¹ This sums up the main problem of human versus animal identity and illustrates how fundamental this discussion is for the humanities. Denying nonhuman animals reason and subjectivity, and hence identity, is a move that is marked by human dominance and human narcissism. In order to avoid this gesture, critical scholars in a wide range of fields discuss this anthropocentric outlook on other beings and try to find other ways of approaching the problem. One has to be quite explicit when doing so because, as Cary Wolfe reminds us in his contribution to the debate regarding the study of nonhuman animals as part of the humanities, "to put it bluntly, just because we study nonhuman animals does not mean that we are not continuing to be humanist – and therefore, by definition, anthropocentric."²

The topic of this essay revolves around nonhuman identities in fiction. Identity is closely connected to individuality and personality. According

1 Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and John Cumming, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 2010), 245.

2 Cary Wolfe, "Human, All Too Human: 'Animal Studies' and the Humanities," *PMLA* 124 (2009): 568

to the Oxford English Dictionary, it derived from classical Latin *identitas*, from Latin *idem*, meaning ‘same’³ and marks someone as essentially and particularly her/himself that can be recognized and distinguished from others. In the following, I will argue that there are non-anthropocentric ways of studying nonhuman animals, and that the key lies in taking animal identity seriously. Therefore I am very careful not to dismiss nonhuman characters as metaphorical or as subordinate to human characters. The main questions I am trying to answer with this contribution are closely connected to one of the key problems that Human-Animal Studies scholars engaged in taking animals seriously are trying to solve, namely how to deal with anthropomorphism⁴: How is it possible to talk about nonhuman others without overly anthropomorphizing them and thus, possibly, denying them their unique otherness, their animality, their nonhuman animal identity? Should anthropomorphism, as a concept as well as a frame of mind, be fully rejected within literary studies of nonhuman others, or not?

These are valuable questions not only for literary scholars but also for philosophers because fiction has the power to go beyond a person’s own imagination and thus is able to influence and inspire one’s thoughts and actions. There is fiction that takes nonhuman animals seriously, and there are fables, fairy tales, children’s books, or other works of fiction that do not make a tremendous effort of lifting nonhuman animal characters onto the same level as human characters. Especially nowadays, with the animal turn⁵ hitting academia with full force, deconstructing other-than-human identity from a non-anthropocentric or posthumanist point of view increasingly becomes the focus of attention within so-called Human-Animal Studies, or Critical Animal Studies.

In the following, I will draw on works by Jacques Derrida, Tom Tyler, Cary Wolfe, and others in order to find such a non-anthropocentric position from which to analyze fictional nonhuman characters. I am particularly concerned with what Tyler calls “first-and-foremost anthropocentrism”

3 Oxford Dictionaries Online, s.v. “identity,” accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.oed.com>.

4 Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics, emotions, or behavior to nonhuman animals.

5 The “animal turn” refers to an increasing scholarly interest in nonhuman animals. As “a new intellectual paradigm” that has evolved over the last two decades, it is “comparable in significance to the ‘linguistic turn’ that revolutionized humanities and social science disciplines from the mid-twentieth century onwards.” Laurence Simmons and Philip Armstrong, *Knowing Animals* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1.

or “epistemological anthropocentrism,” and which he questions on the grounds of its “presumed inevitability”: “Is one obliged to assert, as has so often been suggested, that humans are stopped up, as if within a bleak, restricting container, unable to access the wider world except through the translucent but necessarily distorting sides of their prison?”⁶ Fiction, I argue, can help to widen the perspective. This is where its power lies.

The novel that we will look at in order to get a glimpse of how fiction can challenge anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism is part of a corpus of contemporary dog novels⁷ that are critical to and aware of the constructed boundaries of ‘human/animal’, ‘nature/culture’, and ‘domestication/wilderness’. To be able to show how close reading of such novels can deconstruct these boundaries it is essential to point to the underlying politics of literary representation. I am doing this with the help of a reading from a critical posthumanist perspective. I understand critical posthumanism as a frame of mind one adopts in order to overcome human narcissism. I specifically want to refer to Stefan Herbrechter’s formulation of the term:

The major conceptual challenge is the idea of a post- or non-anthropocentric worldview that a critical posthumanism implies. Seeing the world and ‘ourselves’ no longer as the central meaningful entity in the universe, and challenging our ingrained habit to anthropomorphize everything that comes into human view – these are the main targets of a ‘critical’ posthumanism, which looks for points of articulation outside a necessarily human-centred discourse like humanism.⁸

The critical posthumanist perspective allows us to analyze identities that are constructed in fiction through interspecies contact that triggers self-reflection – thereby calling the human being into question, as well. From

6 Tom Tyler, *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 3.

7 In my dissertation, from which the ideas for this essay derive, I analyze relationships between humans and dogs in contemporary Canadian, Australian, and US American fiction. The focus lies on interaction, alternatives to speech, hybridization, techniques of de-domestication, and markers for co-domestication.

8 Stefan Herbrechter, “Posthumanism, Subjectivity, Autobiography,” *Subjectivity* 5.3 (2012): 333.

this position, it appears indispensable to ask whether anthropomorphism is a notorious ‘bad practice’ or an unavoidable mindset for talking and writing about nonhuman animals.

With the animal turn in the humanities and social sciences, anthropocentrism quickly acquired a negative connotation within the field of Human-Animal Studies. The challenge we are facing is this: How do we talk about nonhuman others in non-anthropocentric ways when all we have is the written word (undoubtedly coming from human hands)? What are epistemological and ontological questions underlying this dilemma and how do we, as scholars, deal with the gap between representation (of the nonhuman) and interpretation (from a human standpoint)?

2. Concepts of Language

I argue that we need to address these problems of talking about nonhuman animals in our discipline by integrating methods from other disciplines that can help to shift the focus away from the identity problem created by anthropocentrism, or by the preconditions of our ‘human nature’ per se. This also involves a redefinition of our terminology regarding clearly anthropocentric conceptions of human language, such as linguists define it. When we regard canine communication as a complex system of a different kind of language, we are one step closer to appreciating and recognizing in-between forms, and different degrees, of language in the novels.

In order to talk about nonhuman characters as individuals, one has to take into account the literal meaning of exactly this: talk. The ability to talk in a human way is naturally restricted to humans. This does not mean that there are no other concepts of language worthy of this label. That animal communication is a complex matter has been shown by many scholars in various fields, including anthropology, philosophy,

and ethology.⁹ Even though there is evidence that nonhuman animals possess language,¹⁰ the general conviction that they are less capable of communicating in complex ways remains strong and influential. There is a long tradition in philosophy whereby almost every major thinker (such as Aristotle, René Descartes, Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, Jacques Lacan, and Emmanuel Levinas, to name a few) claims that animals do not possess language. This is of course directly linked to humanist conceptions of human superiority.

Jacques Derrida objects to this claim. He argues in favor of a more nuanced way of perceiving language that is posthumanist in the sense that it challenges traditional humanist explanations and understandings of language.

The idea, according to which man is the only speaking being, in its traditional form or in its Heideggerian form, seems to me at once undisplaceable and highly problematic. Of course, if one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for what we call man, what is there to say? But if one re-inscribes language in a network of

9 For a critical discussion of language as a distinguishing marker between species and the problematic assumptions that arise from the absence of verbal language in animals, see for example (to name just a couple of sources) Barbara Noske's chapter "Human-Animal Discontinuities?" in *Beyond Boundaries* (New York: Black Rose Books, 1997, 126–160), where she also provides various examples for animal language in different species, or Cary Wolfe's chapter "In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion: Language, Ethics, and the Question of the Animal," in *Zoontologies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 1–57).

10 For instance, the research of linguist Con Slobodchikoff "shows that prairie dog colonies have a communication system that includes nouns, verbs, and adjectives. They can tell one another what kind of predator is approaching [...] and they can tell each other how fast it is moving. They can say whether a human is carrying a gun or not. They can also identify individual coyotes and tell one another which one is coming. [...] Slobodchikoff also found evidence that prairie dogs are not born knowing the calls, the way a baby is born knowing how to cry. They have to learn them. He bases this on the fact that the different prairie dog colonies around Flagstaff, Arizona, all have different dialects"; their communication is creative, productive, complex, and "allows for displacement" (Margo deMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2012], 366). DeMello lists a couple of such proofs for animal language in her book chapter "Animal Behavior Studies and Ethology" (349–373), among them the famous case of Rico the dog, who manages "fast mapping, the ability to learn new words" (367), as well as case studies including parrots, dolphins and apes.

possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes. I am thinking in particular of the mark in general, of the trace, of iterability, of differance [*sic*]. These possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, *are themselves not only human*. [...] And what I am proposing here should allow us to take into account scientific knowledge about the complexity of “animal languages,” genetic coding, all forms of marking within which so-called human language, as original as it might be, does not allow us to “cut” once and for all where we would in general like to cut.¹¹

In this passage from an interview, Derrida points to the anthropocentric bias and displays his advocacy of a more differentiated, open concept of language that takes into account non-verbal animal languages. If we translate this to the realm of the novel, re-inscription of language takes place in the imagination and opens up new possibilities and forms of understanding between human and nonhuman animals.

What remains as a crucial point for studying dog novels is that canines simply cannot respond in human spoken language. Hence, representing them as talking animals within the novels is not appropriate if one wants to take them seriously, as it overly anthropomorphizes them. Instead, I find it more enlightening to study such works of fiction where communication takes place in a realistic way, for example as sign language,¹² as emotional engagement, as forms of companionship with assumed mutual understanding, or simply through interspecies interaction where boundaries and needs are tested as the human-dog couples go along.

Overall, accuracy in the description of animals' experiences, such as in sequences where the omniscient narrator informs the reader about the canine's thoughts and feelings, does not need to be our dominant concern when it comes to defining language because this task is simply impossible. To underline this point, I like to mention Mojave Dan, a man described by

11 Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Weber, *Points: Interviews, 1974–1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 284–285 (emphasis original).

12 The boy Edgar Sawtelle and the Sawtelle dogs communicate via sign language in David Wroblewski's novel *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* (2008).

J. Allen Boone in *Kinship with All Life* who refers to the impossibility of accuracy as follows: “There’s facts about dogs, and there’s opinions about them. The dogs have the facts, and the humans have the opinions. If you want facts about a dog, always get them straight from the dog.”¹³ For the underlying concepts of language this means that the context, which in its literal meaning is text, needs to be taken into account. Fiction can only accurately represent human language because it is written by and expressed through our restricted experiences and outlooks on life.

3. Different Takes on Anthropomorphism

Despite these constraints, the fictional world is a world of opportunity. Especially intimate and everyday relations to domesticated animals can be narrated in a way that triggers rethinking of actual nonhuman animals’ existence and provides us with examples of how they might experience and see the world we share. Even if it is through human language and the written word, the process of rethinking functions on both sides: the reader and the writer can both empathize with the nonhuman protagonists. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari illustrate how ‘becoming-animal’ works and what impact it can have on the writer.

If the writer is a sorcerer, it is because writing is a becoming, writing is traversed by strange becomings that are not becomings-writer, but becomings-rat, becomings-insect, becomings-wolf, etc. [...] Writers are sorcerers because they experience the animals as the only population before which they are responsible in principle. [...] Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from humanity, if only for an instant, making one scrape at one’s bread like a rodent or giving one the yellow eyes of a feline?¹⁴

Deleuze and Guattari describe how writing can be a process of transformation where one is able to deeply identify with the animal other. This

13 J. Allen Boone, *Kinship with All Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 47–48.

14 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2008), 265.

is possible because that animal other has real representatives in the actual world. It is both a physical and a psychological experience which shows that literature has powers that we might yet have to release. This gives us an impulse to look for manifestations of affect and empathy regarding nonhuman life in the fictional texts. For example, a task can be to search the stories for displays of empathy, and for speciesist or antispeciesist views of nonhuman animals and their representations.

The move from speciesism to anthropomorphism in a critical posthumanist reading is not farfetched. The majority of animal rights inspired critics see anthropomorphism as reinforcing species boundaries and proposing a speciesist/anthropocentrist worldview. The matter is however quite complex, as we will see by taking a look at different opinions about anthropomorphism. As an antispeciesist, I tend to argue in favor of novels that reduce its use to a minimum. Furthermore, I believe that the more closely the fictional texts approach the ‘human/animal’ boundary and the more they engage with the nonhuman animal experience, the more the reader is challenged in the reading process and thus inspired to rethink humanist concepts of life. John Simons, as he writes in *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation*, holds a similar view.

It is clear that the more closely identified with the non-human the fictive world becomes, then the more its representational strategies will tend towards the blurring [...] of the boundary between the human and the non-human. Indeed, it might be said that in texts where this boundary is allowed to become porous there is a striving towards the impossible task of actually reproducing what it is to be an animal.¹⁵

When questioned about his approach towards literature that anthropomorphizes nonhuman animals, Simons goes so far as to suggest that anthropomorphism does not necessarily lead to reinforced boundaries between human and other animals. He believes that anthropomorphizing nonhuman animals can even foster animal rights.

15 John Simons, *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 140.

I take the view that anything that stimulates people to think more carefully and, therefore one hopes, more kindly about animals is a good thing and therefore I am very comfortable with anthropomorphism as a useful representational strategy. [...] I tend to be very pragmatic though and think that the animal rights movement should take whatever is on offer that is helpful.¹⁶

Does anthropomorphism as a pragmatic strategy really help the nonhuman animals to be accepted and respected for what they are? As Tom Tyler reminds us in his essay “If Horses had Hands,” there are more supporters (who are mostly coming from at least an animal welfarist position) of the idea that anthropomorphism is a helpful strategy. He looks at the psychologist Gordon Burghardt, who sees the potential in “critical anthropomorphism” as an “investigative tool,”¹⁷ as well as at various other thinkers, including for example John S. Kennedy, the author of *The New Anthropomorphism*, who argues that heuristic anthropomorphism should be understood as only valuable metaphorically.

Variations on this pragmatic approach are recommended by the primatologist Frans de Waal [...] and the philosopher Daniel Dennett [...]. Even Kennedy and [Stephen] Budiansky, who call it “mock anthropomorphism” [...] consider it a useful “metaphorical” mode of thinking about the development of particular species, or of the processes of evolution. All these writers issue stern warnings about the dangers of conflating anthropomorphic *language* with anthropomorphic *thinking*, however.¹⁸

I want to add that Frans de Waal argues “even though heuristic anthropomorphism may occasionally be anthropocentric, most of the time it will be animalcentric.”¹⁹ By animalcentric anthropomorphism he means

16 John Simons and Rod Bennisson, “Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation: Interview,” *ANTENNAE* 5.19 (2011): 17.

17 Tom Tyler, “If Horses Had Hands...,” in *Animal Encounters*, ed. Manuela Rossini and Tom Tyler (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 19.

18 *Ibid.*, 19.

19 Frans B. M. de Waal, “Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial: Consistency in Our Thinking about Humans and Other Animals,” *Philosophical Topics* 27.1 (1999): 170.

a method that is used to understand nonhuman animals on their own terms. In the context of literary studies, however, this does not seem to lead us anywhere near the nonhuman animal that is hiding (or hidden) between the lines, because the animal is there only in words and our interpretation. Animalcentrism according to de Waal's understanding cannot successfully be transferred to literary studies of animals because the fictional context does not fulfill the necessary conditions for such an adaptation.

Depending on the context, anthropomorphism appears to be either something to support or to challenge. How can this uneasiness with anthropomorphism, which I strongly experience myself, be explained? Tyler points to an important underlying problem in this regard, for which he refers to Heidegger.

Both the objections to anthropomorphism (that it denigrates human and animal) and the responses they have elicited (that it is inevitable and informative) are superseded, or rather preceded, by a more fundamental question. This concern, which renders problematic the very notion of anthropomorphism, has been articulated most clearly by Heidegger [...] [who] points out that, in order even to raise 'suspicions' (*Bedenken*) concerning anthropomorphism, one must assume that one knows 'ahead of time' what human beings are.²⁰

There we go: before we can even begin to discuss 'animal nature,' Heidegger and Tyler claim, the question 'What is a human being?' needs to be asked. This leads us back to the beginning and confirms my initial statement: nonhuman animal identity in fiction always raises epistemological and ontological questions. Studying literary animals, then, implies questioning the essence or identity of 'human nature.' Therefore, approaching literary animals with a critical posthumanist reading is essential if one wants to avoid the "'first and foremost' anthropocentrism, [the] species narcissism"²¹ that Tyler so vehemently criticizes.

20 Tyler, "If Horses Had Hands..." 20.

21 Ibid., 23.

4. Approaching Fictional Dogs

Let us now take a look at a fictional work that challenges the human/animal boundary and anthropomorphist depictions of dogs. Helen Humphrey's *Wild Dogs* is a Canadian novel that tells the stories of six human beings and how they lose their canine companions to the 'wilderness'. One characteristic of *Wild Dogs* is the attempt to avoid anthropomorphic description. This manifests itself in a peculiar way, namely by removing the canines from the setting. For a long time, they are absent from the present narrative thread. Therefore, the dogs appear to slip away on several levels: on the level of direct interaction with the human characters, on the level of the narration as manifested in the points of view and character focalizations, and on the meta-level of the text that discusses the absence of nonhuman animals from human lives. Only towards the end of the story do they appear in the present narration, when one of the human protagonists, Lily, enters the woods to join the pack of wild dogs. The following passage describes Lily's experience in the woods where she successfully joins the pack.

The dogs take me with them. They know where they're going and I follow them. Some of them still wear collars around their necks, and if I stumble on the ground, I can reach out and hold on to one of the collars. [...] I can't remember their names, but they don't need their names here. I can't make them do anything here using their names. Even Dog, who knows me, doesn't need to be mine like she had to be when she lived in the apartment and slept on the end of my bed. She is not mine here. I am hers. Lily is a dog. Lily is a dog. Lily is a dog.²²

Lily's decision to stay with the pack and adapt to their habits, as well as Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming-animal' quoted above, are both instances of impossibilities²³ of reproducing what it is to be an animal. These instances are situated in the context of the pack that brings humans and animals to eye level through the interaction within what can be called a network. Lily, the only human member of the pack,

²² Helen Humphreys, *Wild Dogs* (London: Maya, 2005), 145.

²³ See John Simons, quoted above.

shares with the canines what is neither uniquely human nor uniquely animal: vulnerability, the longing to live and survive, and a need for companionship. By stressing these elements within the narration, *Wild Dogs* manages to shift the focus away from hierarchies regarding species-belonging, as well as from spoken language as a marker for domination and human-centric representation.

Before Lily sets out to approach the pack, the loss of the dogs renders the other protagonists immobile. They feel not only left behind, but also insecure about their own identity, as is illustrated in the following quote, which provides us with the perspective of Alice, another former dog owner.

It is the strangest feeling to see my dog running towards me with no glimmer of recognition in her eyes. How can I still know her and she not know me at all? [...] Sometimes the dogs are so close that we can smell them. [...] But they don't return to us. We come out to the woods every evening and call to the dogs, and they never come back. And it is not about love, although we love the dogs fiercely. But the dogs didn't understand our love when they lived with us and certainly they don't understand it now. Whatever they felt for us then wasn't what we know of love. No, it is not about love. It is about belonging. Once we belonged with those dogs, belonged to them, and now that they've left us we don't know who we are.²⁴

Such passages where the protagonists experience a sense of loss of identity and belonging are numerous in this novel. Alice's rejection of an appreciation of human love by the canines can be read against the grain as revealing a posthumanist state of mind that shies away from jumping to conclusions or forcing phenomena into anthropocentric categories. I argue that Humphreys establishes this emotional boundary because she avoids anthropomorphist descriptions, which claim knowledge about nonhuman beings that cannot be known. *Wild Dogs* should not be misread as anthropocentric in the sense that it limits the capacity of having emotional relationships to human beings. Precisely due to the

²⁴ Humphreys, *Wild Dogs*, 12.

fact that the novel tells stories of companion species entanglement, it chooses a way around the trap of applying anthropomorphism. This is achieved, for example, by avoiding the explicit attribution of human emotions to dogs. Other protagonists also avoid claiming knowledge of what goes on inside the dogs' minds. That complex canine emotions remain hypothetical throughout the novel can be regarded as a positive or affirmative perspective. This should not be confused with the aforementioned "heuristic anthropomorphism" (Frans de Waal) used to predict behavior in animals, to which it stands in contrast.

That being said, here we are at a delicate moment where the problem of point of view merges with the problem of how to analyze this point of view. It is necessary here to question the type of the nonhuman response: What if we regard the canine as mirroring the reader, as simply returning their gaze? Do we project onto the dog our desires, our questions to the story and to the human protagonists? I believe we tend to do so, and that this can be a trap if we want to maintain a critical perspective. Regarding the canine as a hybrid being that is entangled in a network of human-animal relations can help us recognize and take seriously this new perspective. Whenever a canine voice is given in the text, be it through an omniscient narrator, free indirect speech, or dream sequences, we have a response. This allows for the dog to embody his or her own viewpoint in the narrative and be more than a mirror. In *Wild Dogs*, the strategy is a different one that relies on the unapproachability and otherness of the canines. This strategy communicates, not their voices, but rather their behavior and the descriptions of their shared lives with the human protagonists. As a result, they do not run the risk of becoming a mirror.

5. Conclusion

To complicate matters one last time, one might argue that canine voices that are given in novels are yet other human voices in disguise. Admittedly, the author cannot fully abandon their human predisposition, but one should not deny a gifted writer the ability to portray a completely other and unique character, as Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of becoming in writing suggests. Often, it is this struggle with language to depict the canine in an animalistic and yet poetic way that produces the most interesting and rich passages within a novel. In this struggle for clarity

of boundaries on the one hand and the canine as traveler between worlds and dichotomies on the other, we have brought up the difficult subject that it might still be impossible to write (poetically or critically) about animals without falling into the trap of anthropomorphism at one point or another. Consequently, we are left with the option to try our best by pointing at the in-between spaces of human-animal encounters because they often bear the most meaning and trigger the best discussion. Even if we cannot make things absolutely clear, we can ask crucial questions on our way towards a possible understanding of interspecies entanglements and find a way of dropping the mask of anthropomorphism.

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called “animal” offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself.²⁵

Here, Derrida reminds us that fictional texts that feature interspecies encounters do not only point to nonhuman animals’ experiences. They always also question human existence, human mortality, and the intertwining of human and animal lives. Cary Wolfe also draws on Derrida when he points out how a non-anthropocentric approach can uncover the fundamental similarities of human and nonhuman life.

Instead of recognizing the moral standing of animals because of the agency or capabilities they share with us [...], Derrida fundamentally questions the structure of the ‘auto-’ (as autonomy, as agency, as authority over one’s autobiography) of humanist subjectivity by riveting our attention on the embodied finitude that we share with nonhuman animals, a finitude that it has been the business of humanism largely to disavow.²⁶

25 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 12.

26 Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human,” 570.

This is again also the finitude that we find in novels such as *Wild Dogs*. When we analyze these fictional encounters from the point of view of humans who nevertheless see their existence as part of a network of different individuals that modify each other, we see that human identities become affected by or infected with nonhuman others that partake in this life. I argue that the mixture of approaches – critical posthumanism, close reading, and an overall non-anthropocentric outlook on nonhuman animals, including a redefinition of terminology such as language, communication, and codomestication – can be a way towards minimization of anthropomorphism in practicing literary criticism in the field of Human-Animal Studies.

It has been the mistake of many decriers of anthropocentrism to set about attacking it before they have really understood what it is. The primary task, therefore, is to lay bare the forms, sites and contradictions of anthropocentrism. Only once equipped with the awareness of its omnipresence, even and perhaps most disconcertingly in its denials, can the possibilities for an alternative even begin to be sketched. If [...] we must lay bare the ways in which anthropocentrism holds us captive, we may, in becoming aware of the captivity, see the impossibility of transcending it. We may observe, with Derrida, how the ‘centre’ makes discourse cohere, but at the same time remains analytically elusive.²⁷

Closing this essay with Rob Boddice’s remarks, I want to highlight that this can only be one approach among many. When, as critical literary scholars, we want to deconstruct nonhuman animal identities as they are constructed (and have been pre-constructed) in fictional texts, the literary encounter is the movement away from our anthropocentrist comfort zone and towards the (sometimes uncomfortable) process of self-questioning involved in close reading or other forms of engagement with the text. For every novel that is studied, underlying values, varying degrees or levels of anthropomorphism, possible purposes of anthropomorphist depictions, and, as a result, different interpretations have to be taken

²⁷ Rob Boddice, “Introduction,” in *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*, ed. Rob Boddice (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 5.

into account. Each study also needs to look at how nonhuman animal language is defined in the particular text, how the nonhuman identities are constructed, and which questions can be posed to the novel.

When we approach the nonhuman without the glasses of anthropomorphism, we already prevent ourselves from falling into the trap of human narcissism and may eventually be able to free ourselves from the cages of anthropocentrism. Questions arise, are posed, and might not be answered. Fiction then can answer some questions for us if we allow our imagination and empathy to cross boundaries. Above all, the critical posthumanist perspective most strongly points to these boundaries, lays bare these gaps, and draws the critics' attention to the power structures inherent in assumed and constructed knowledge.

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