

## Human-animal relationships in context: An omnibus review

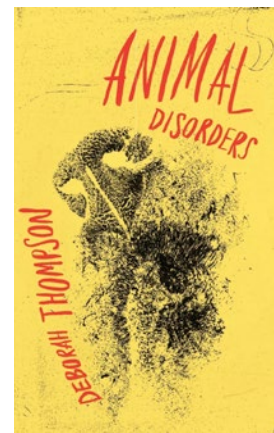
Camilla Brudin Borg, Rikard Wingård, and Jørgen Bruhn (eds.): *Contemporary Ecocritical Methods*. Lexington Books 2024.

Kristiina Taivalkoski-Shilov and Bruno Poncharal (eds.): *Traduire les voix de la nature / Translating the Voices of Nature*. Vita Traductiva, Éditions québécoises de l'oeuvre 2020.

Deborah Thompson: *Animal Disorders: Essays on Trans-Species Relationships*. Black Lawrence Press 2021.



CONTEMPORARY  
ECOCRITICAL METHODS  
Edited by CAMILLA BRUDIN BORG,  
RIKARD WINGÅRD, and JØRGEN BRUHN



Research on human-animal relationships can benefit from a wide-angle approach to the contexts for cross-species encounters and interactions. Indeed, because these encounters are shaped by the locales in which they unfold, it is imperative to study such interactions in light of their geocultural environments. Reciprocally, sites for acting and interacting are defined in part by their multispecies complexity, as has been underscored in fields

ranging from animal geography to research on biodiversity in the wildland-urban interface.

Three recent publications, taken together, highlight the advantages of focusing on the mutual influence of the settings for and textures of interspecies relationships. The three studies also demonstrate how accommodating differences of scale, methodology, disciplinary approach, and genre can empower

investigators working in this area, equipping them with a larger assortment of tools for engaging with multifaceted research questions. Borg, Wingård, and Bruhn's volume on ecocritical methods, with essays on topics ranging from econarratology and literary animal studies to climate change dystopias and post- and decolonial ecocriticism, operates at a variety of scales to situate cross-species interactions within planetary-level forces and patterns. Taivalkoski-Shilov and Poncharal's volume adds another methodological resource to a similarly multiscale mix of essays, bringing the lens of translation studies to bear on representations of animal subjectivity, the discourses of natural history, and other research topics. Finally, Thompson's collection blends scholarly and essayistic writing, interweaving cultural commentary, memoir, and other genres to relate the author's personal experiences to wider cultural and cross-cultural contexts for human-animal encounters.

In *Contemporary Ecocritical Methods*, Amelie Björck's essay on "Animal Studies: Metonymic and Zoopoetic Ways of Reading" situates literary animal studies within the larger domain of ecocriticism. As the author notes (162), animal studies and work in ecocriticism begin from shared premises: namely, that anthropocentrism has had a devastating impact on "the global diversity of life," and that work in the humanities

must contribute to ongoing efforts to counteract human-centric attitudes, institutions, and practices. Björck outlines two approaches to literary animal studies that keep broader ecocritical concerns in view. One approach, which the author labels metonymic reading, explores how literary representations of animal life relate to questions about human impacts on the environment, including climate change and the loss of biodiversity. The other approach, which Björck terms zoopoetic reading, considers how literary works can leverage human language to imagine other-than-human modes of communication and world building. In teasing out the methods and implications of these two approaches, Björck's essay broaches issues on which other chapters in the volume shed further light, from Rebecca Duncan's account of intersections between the institutions of colonialism, forms of representation, and extractive attitudes toward the earth's resources and inhabitants (93–113); to Johanna Lindbo's analysis of anti-anthropocentric storytelling techniques, which foster expanded attentiveness to the more-than-human world; to Katrina Leppänen's discussion of critical utopian energies in contemporary climate fiction (77–91). Collectively, these and other essays included in the book afford complementary perspectives on human-animal relationships in context. They profile cross-species encounters in terms of anthropogenic impacts

at a planetary level while also suggesting that, with a shift of scale, questions about (how to represent) a single animal's experiences and life history can take shape as a critical issue for ecocritical research.

Meanwhile, with its plurivocal title Taivalkoski-Shilov and Poncharal's volume on *Traduire les voix de la nature / Translating the Voices of Nature* signals from the start how factoring in the diversity of human languages opens new horizons for studying cross-species relationships in context. In her Introduction, Taivalkoski-Shilov draws on work by Michael Cronin to suggest that translation studies affords not just an additional perspective on but a paradigm for understanding *Homo sapiens'* interactions with the more-than-human world in general, other animals in particular. Given its concern with "the interrelatedness of cultural difference, otherness, and power relations," Taivalkoski-Shilov writes, translation studies offers "suitable tools for investigating interspecies communication—as long as we restrain [ourselves] from making uninformed analogies between cultural difference and species diversity" (6). By the same token, scholarship on translation can serve as a catalyst for anti-anthropocentrism. Take, for example, the polysemic concept of *voix*, which theorists have invoked for matters ranging from authors' and translators' writing styles to subject positions encoded in narrative structure. This concept is

not species-specific, so it can be adapted to encompass other animals' voices as well as interspecies communication (9).

Taivalkoski-Shilov's opening remarks underscore the relevance of translation as a paradigm for engaging with animals' modes of communication. In the volume as a whole, however, as in Borg, Wingård, and Bruhn's book on ecocritical methods, the contributors operate at a range of scales, collectively suggesting the indissoluble link between cross-species interactions and the larger settings in which they take place. On the one hand, in the section on "Animalité et subjectivité / Animality and Subjectivity," Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère discusses how Angela Carter's translational and rewriting practices work to counter human-centrism (77–99), while Bruno Poncharal explores the impact of semantic slippages in a multilayered translational act: namely, the 2017 translation into French of Charles Foster's translation of animal experience in *Being a Beast*, originally published in English in 2016 (101–122). Along similar lines, Agnès Whitfield and Wioleta Karwacka, in contributions included in another section, bring the resources of translation studies to bear on questions about animal voices and animal minds. Whitfield examines how different French translations of stories included in Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898) encode varying cultural attitudes toward animal worlds

(153–181); Karwacka studies ascriptions of intentions to animals in Polish translations of English-language popular science texts as compared with their source texts (183–203). On the other hand, contributors also discuss translations of texts with a wider-scope focus on more-than-human environments. For instance, Daniel Kato considers issues of cultural difference, and cultural appropriation, in a collaborative translation of a medieval Japanese text about a series of natural disasters (25–46). Mathilde Fontanet examines how various French translations of an 1856 German-language text by Gottfried Keller encapsulate different attitudes toward the natural world (47–74), while Taivalkoski-Shilov cross-compares two Finnish translations of Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring* (125–151). Her discussion shows how, in a 1970 book translation as compared with a 1963 translation that was published serially in a Finnish newspaper, the omission of key paratexts and other changes blunt the force of Carson’s arguments about the destructive impact of pesticides. Once again, given the governing trope of Carson’s book – that of a spring turned silent by the pesticide-caused deaths of songbirds, among other animals – Taivalkoski-Shilov’s essay foregrounds broader contexts for human-animal interactions. It also explores how different translations of Carson’s source text offer contrasting frames for understanding the contexts in question.

Like the two other volumes being reviewed, Thompson’s *Animal Disorders*, a compilation of essays by the author, engages in sometimes dramatic shifts of scale, offering multiple perspectives on the “disorders” that Thompson describes as follows in the Introduction: “unhealthy relationships with animals [involving] irreconcilable contradictions and impossibilities . . . that we otherwise manage to repress” (vii). Here the author mentions several examples, including people who condemn cockfighting but eat the carcasses of caged, debeaked chickens; vegetarians who nevertheless feed their pets meat; and laboratory experiments that “sacrifice” members of a particular species to develop therapies for other members of that same species (vii). In a way that mirrors the scope, variety, and pervasiveness of such contradictions, over the course of the volume the author not only shifts from personal to (trans)cultural frames of reference but also toggles between genres, leveraging the resources of memoir and testimony as well as reportage, the history and sociology of science, evolutionary biology, and ethnography, among other types of discourse. Thus the collection encompasses, along with other elements, a critical reevaluation of Thompson’s attitudes and actions while keeping hamsters as a young girl (1–11); reflections on her later experiences with the cats and dogs that have been under her care (21–33,

92–98); comments about anthropomorphism in nature documentaries vis-à-vis her father’s commitment to scientific rationalism, as he and the larger culture understood it (12–20); a meditation on the blue heron that appeared in Thompson’s yard after her husband’s untimely death from cancer, and that the author links to ideas from different cultures and historical epochs about human-into-animal transformations (34–49); a diagnosis of possible motivations behind the hoarding of non-domesticated or “exotic” animals, and how those motivations parallel, uncomfortably, the author’s own commitment to rescuing dogs in need (67–82); a discussion of animal experimentation via the beagles used in Colorado State University’s “Charlie lab,” a deceptively innocuous nickname for the Collaborative Radiological Health Animal Research Laboratory (83–91); and a closing testimonial (titled “A Bitchuary”) about the euthanization of Thompson’s dog Olive (99–101).

As this précis indicates, like the other two volumes under discussion, Thompson’s collection approaches “animal disorders” dialectically rather than atomistically, zooming in on human-animal relationships of which she has personal experience while also zooming out to reveal the contradictory attitudes, institutions, and practices surrounding such relationships more generally, in American as well as other cultures. At the same time, by writing in vivid, sometimes lyrical prose, in a register that will be accessible to nonspecialist readers as well as experts in the field, Thompson provides yet another tool that can empower investigators working in this area. She models a style that can be used to disseminate anti-anthropocentric insights to the widest possible audience, working to safeguard a multispecies future by diversifying the contexts in which that future can be imagined.

DAVID HERMAN

*animalcultures@gmail.com*

---

Cronin, Michael. 2017. *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene*. New York: Routledge.