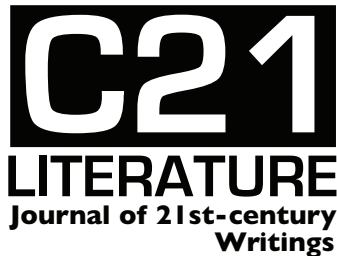




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Review

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REVIEW

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In *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, Timothy Baker examines how fiction's ability both to *represent* animals and *speak as* animals challenges the parameters of linguistic representation and destabilises the anthropocentric qualities of literature. Drawing upon a range of twenty-first-century fiction from around the world, Baker provides new insights into texts including Kij Johnson's *The Fox Woman* (2000), J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and Evie Wyld's *All the Birds, Singing* (2014), examining their animal characters and narrators to demonstrate the emergence of new narrative forms of expression. By entering these texts into a dialogue with a diverse range of theoretical approaches including animal studies, Western philosophy, and literary studies, Baker provides an original line of enquiry into how literature can 'offer possibilities for rethinking both material and linguistic divisions' between humans and 'nonhuman animals' (6). Thus, Baker interrogates the boundaries of binary opposites that underpin Western thought and reconsiders the place of humans within the web of animal life (6). Through drawing upon the ideas of foundational thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze

and Felix Guattari, as well as contemporary scholars including Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway and Kari Weil, Baker intervenes in the field of literary animal studies and develops the work of Catherine Parry, Susan McHugh and Robert McKay. In doing so, Baker creates new frameworks to tackle one of the main challenges faced by literary animal scholars: that the 'nonhuman animal cannot be anything other than represented, seen through a linguistic prism that it does not share' (3).

In the first chapter, Baker illuminates the role of experimental narrative forms and nonhuman animal narrators in challenging species hierarchies through their ability to enter humans and animals into a 'shared language game' (67). In this chapter, language is analysed through its capacity to communicate pain, and therefore, perform suffering. Opening with Ludwig Wittgenstein's dictum '[i]f a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it' (39), Baker maps debates surrounding inter-species communication and the nonhuman animal's ability to communicate pain, the key concept that is thought to differentiate between pain and suffering. By examining the work of Cary Wolfe and Vicki Hearne in their response to this statement, Baker outlines the general consensus that animals are ontologically different from humans and therefore are unable to express suffering although they feel pain. Through an analysis of Franz Kafka's 'A Report to an Academy' (1917), and its literary offspring including Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* and Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013), Baker adds to this debate, exploring human-ape relationships to examine similarities in human and animal approaches to language, particularly with regard to suffering. Through an analysis of both form and content, Baker makes the case that 'suffering is not only human' (43).

This chapter also provides an exploration of the limitations of language. In dismantling the human/nonhuman binary, Baker uses the texts as case studies to highlight the arbitrariness of using language to differentiate between humans and nonhumans. Due to the ongoing, intertextual nature of the texts, whose ape narrators speak back to Kafka's Red Peter in 'A Report to an Academy', Baker makes the case that representations of animals are 'a product of an already-established cultural engagement' (67). This is to say that, although language is not only limited

to humans, 'the constant reference point remains human' (67). By acknowledging these limitations within language, Baker reveals that the most effective way to 'give voice' to animals is through formal and generic experimentation that can challenge the racist and speciesist assumptions that underpin traditional linear narratives (67).

In the second chapter, 'Ladies into Foxes: Narratives of Transformation' Baker examines the relationship between language and bodies, drawing a parallel between the two: '[t]exts and bodies are always engaged in a process of transformation' (88). For Baker, the literary body and its transformative potential is a site through which new perspectives that decentre the human can be created and therefore 'challenge patriarchal, humanist narrative structures and presumptions' (92). This is because the body 'is frequently figured as a blank page onto which cultural texts are inscribed, either figuratively or literally' (87). This is to say that, if the body – whether that be human animal or nonhuman animal – can transform, then the cultural beliefs, values and ideologies that are projected onto the body can transform, too. It is this idea that leads Baker to make the case that 'metamorphosis is not a replacement of one identity for another, but a wholly new perspective' (86).

It is this concept of transformation, or metamorphosis, that is central to Baker's analysis as transformation 'illustrates the lack of fixity of all received notions, and the ideas of the self' (87). Baker examines transformation within two frameworks: first, the relation between physical and literary transformation, and secondly, psychological transformation. In the first section, Baker focuses on 'vulpine transformation' as foxes 'challenge binaries between symbolic and experience-based interpretation, between wild and tame, between living and dead' (77). Tracing the fox's literary history from Aesop's fables to Chinese and Japanese folklore, Baker examines the fox within a global context, explaining how the fox 'always retains something of the nonhuman, while at the same time being marked by its speech [...] the fox is neither wholly human nor nonhuman, but is frequently an index of both similarity and difference' (p.78). Beginning with an analysis of David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* (1922), and its contemporary rewrite, Sarah Hall's *Mrs Fox* (2013), Baker examines female fox transformations as a means of rethinking both species and gender roles. Building

upon the work of Braidotti and Deleuze and Guattari who suggest that “becoming-animal” is not a process of moving between one stable state and another, but of challenging the stability of given identities’ (80), Baker argues that becoming-animal ‘suggests new ways in which any such distinction can be overcome’ (81). By considering literary depictions of both physical and psychological transformation, Baker demonstrates the ongoing interconnectedness of embodiment and the environment.

In chapter three, Baker draws upon the work of Derrida, Heidegger, Braidotti and Weil to discuss the species boundary in relation to death and mourning. Invoking the words of Heidegger, Baker explains how language is central to the human understanding of death; that although both humans and nonhuman animals die, only humans can think of and speak of their own death in advance. To develop this scholarship, Baker turns to four texts wherein the death of a nonhuman animal forces humans to rethink their selfhood in relation to language, suffering, and causality (116): Evie Wyld’s *All the Birds, Singing* (2013), Yannick Murphy’s *The Call* (2011), Keith Ridgway’s *Animals* (2006) and Sara Baume’s *A Line Made by Walking* (2017). Through an analysis of Wyld and Muphy’s novels, Baker draws a parallel between textual form and human subjectivity, arguing that the dying animal narratives destabilise both textual representation and the subjective experience of humans. Within these texts, violence towards animals is textually disruptive due to the fact that it ‘makes casual, linear narratives impossible’ and ‘undoes the self and the narrative’ due to its shifting perspectives between both human and nonhuman, dreams and reality (122). Building upon the gendered readings in chapter two, Baker argues that these texts demonstrate the killing of animals as a ‘form of patriarchal control that is visited both on nonhuman animals and human women’ (122). Reading the novels together, both ‘position the death of the animal as a catalyst for rethinking the boundaries between species, the nature of violence, and the form of the narrative’ as within these narratives, ‘the death of the animal allows humans to share in the animal gaze’ (125).

In the second section of this chapter, Baker situates his analysis of Ridgway’s dead mouse within a global and temporally diverse context, drawing upon North American and Aztec mythology as well as Renaissance art to understand the mouse

as existing outside of the parameters of companion or wild animals, and as being read as a harbinger of death and the passing of time (127). By posing the mouse as an unknowable other, Baker examines the human response to its death within Ridgway's novel as a way of reflecting upon their own subjectivity and their place in the world, acknowledging that both human and mouse have a shared vulnerability and reliance upon the materiality of the body. Through the acknowledgement of these similarities across species, Baker is able to deconstruct species boundaries, arguing that if 'vulnerability, mortality, and fleshly life are shared [...] the fundamental opposition between human and other cannot be sustained' (129). By breaking down boundary between human and animal, Baker is able to reveal the possibilities of 'a new relationality that exists beyond narrative and linguistic conventions' (137).

The penultimate chapter examines how traditional Western forms of narration are 'ill-equipped to confront the enormous changes posed by climate change' or address the fluctuating position of the human as environmental concerns take precedence. In engaging with debates surrounding the Anthropocene, including the work of indigenous studies scholar Zoe Todd, Baker states the need to be critical of the Western view that sees humans and nonhuman animals as existing separately, and foregrounds the need to see humans and nonhumans animals as part of an 'interspecies community' (146). Baker states that within the context of the Anthropocene, 'any species hierarchy or division that places nonhuman animals within a natural world from which humans are separated is no longer possible' (146). Through an analysis of Lydia Millet's *How the Dead Dream* (2008), Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation to Acceptance* (2014) and Adam Roberts's *Bête* (2014), Baker highlights the importance of 'seeing precarity and vulnerability as essential to all creaturely life' and therefore foregrounds the need to eradicate the divide between humans and nonhuman animals (151). Whilst Baker draws upon a disparate collection of texts for this chapter, ranging from an American, capitalist perspective, an indigenous perspective, and fantasy fiction, he illustrates how all these writers deploy non-linear structures to imagine narratives that, like climate change, may 'exceed the simply human' (152).

Again, Baker embraces the limitations of his chosen medium, stating that whilst these texts do challenge Anthropocene and post-Anthropocene narratives, they 'gesture to the impossibility of moving beyond a human perspective and to the simultaneous need to incorporate a diverse set of human stories in order to reimagine the world' (176). Although literary texts can never evade their anthropocentric biases, Baker asserts that novels must, through 'both language and form, reach the possibility of a new way of writing' to try and access the perspectives that exist outside of and beyond the human (177).

In the concluding chapter, Baker examines the visual components of children's books to reveal how the tension between the visual and the textual raises questions relating to language and animal suffering. The texts under analysis, Patrick Ness's *The Knife of Never Letting Go* (2008), Ursula Vernon's *Hamster Princess* series (2015–present), Claire Barker's *Knitbone Pepper Ghost Dog* series, and Kate DiCamillo's *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* (2013), deploy both language and illustration to 'examine the phenomenon of writing animals' as a means of challenging the 'anthropocentric hierarchy of the written word' (189). Advancing the two preceding chapters, this final section develops Baker's emphasis on the importance of non-linear narratives in the resistance of dominant, anthropocentric narrative forms. By turning to children's literature alongside contemporary literature, Baker demonstrates that his ideas surrounding language, suffering, form and intertextuality are upheld across twenty-first century audiences.

In this concluding chapter, Baker asserts that fictional representations of human-animal relationships ultimately reveal the limitations of language. By highlighting these limitations, Baker explains how the world and its nonhuman inhabitants cannot be fully encapsulated through modes of human communication, and therefore makes the case that access to language does not render humans as a superior species or a 'privileged, sovereign state of being' as language, and fiction, will only ever reproduce anthropocentric ideas and assumptions (204). In decentering and limiting the human to our own language, and extending suffering to include animals, Baker encourages us to reconsider the lives of real animals, to be critical of species hierarchies and boundaries, and to reconsider the authority of the written word. Despite

this, Baker states that, 'as much as fiction may always be a human production, it can also be extend far beyond its limits' (205).

Although the aim of Baker's work is to position animals as the central object of study, Baker provides an equally complex analysis of the human, too. Whilst Baker establishes that fiction can never allow access to real animals, through focusing on human language and its limits, and the human relationality to animals, Baker does reveal how twenty-first century fiction *reproduces* Western assumptions and frameworks that exist when thinking about real animals. In doing this, Baker defamiliarises these assumptions and forces us to be critical about the way we either anthropomorphise animals, or force them into a state of Otherness as a means of forging understanding across species. Through looking at speaking animals, transforming animals, and dying animals, Baker closes the gap between animals and humans to destabilise Western binaries that seek to separate. Through an analysis of fiction, language, and suffering, Baker highlights that whilst there may be differences between humans and animals that make the animal inaccessible, it does highlight the reality of our shared world.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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