

University of Wollongong

## Research Online

---

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -  
Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

---

1-1-2008

### Caveats for the posthuman past

Michael R. Griffiths

*Rice University*, [michelg@uow.edu.au](mailto:michelg@uow.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

---

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Caveats for the posthuman past

### Abstract

If animal studies grew largely out of late twentieth-century concerns, then equally, scholarly address towards the prehistory of the posthuman considerations underlying this subdiscipline is an absolute necessity, and one beset by many challenges. The critical topos of the more radical developments in this field poses a unique challenge to scholars of earlier periods. A number of publications on the animal question in the eighteenth century have begun to bring into relief the indispensable genealogy of enlightenment humanism which finds its emergence in the eighteenth century, especially for British culture. At the latter end of the long eighteenth century—Romanticism and its precedents particularly—animal studies is already taken seriously: David Perkins's recent *Romanticism and Animal Rights* comes to mind. Here I would like not only to address Frank Palmeri's important and useful collection, *Humans and Other Animals in Eighteenth-Century British Culture: Representation, Hybridity, Ethics* (Ashgate, 2006), but also to put this edited volume into dialogue with broader methodological and disciplinary challenges which (should) preoccupy all critics interested in taking seriously the study of nonhuman animals in the eighteenth century.

### Keywords

caveats, posthuman, past

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

### Publication Details

Griffiths, M. R. (2008). Caveats for the posthuman past. *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 49 1-6.

# **Caveats for the Posthuman Past: Questions of Methodology in Eighteenth-Century Animal Studies**

**Michael R. Griffiths**  
**Rice University**

If animal studies grew largely out of late twentieth-century concerns, then equally, scholarly address towards the prehistory of the posthuman considerations underlying this subdiscipline is an absolute necessity, and one beset by many challenges. The critical topos of the more radical developments in this field poses a unique challenge to scholars of earlier periods. A number of publications on the animal question in the eighteenth century have begun to bring into relief the indispensable genealogy of enlightenment humanism which finds its emergence in the eighteenth century, especially for British culture. At the latter end of the long eighteenth century--Romanticism and its precedents particularly--animal studies is already taken seriously: David Perkins's recent *Romanticism and Animal Rights* comes to mind.<sup>1</sup> Here I would like not only to address Frank Palmeri's important and useful collection, *Humans and Other Animals in Eighteenth-Century British Culture: Representation, Hybridity, Ethics* (Ashgate, 2006), but also to put this edited volume into dialogue with broader methodological and disciplinary challenges which (should) preoccupy all critics interested in taking seriously the study of nonhuman animals in the eighteenth century.

At the outset, Palmeri's book should be congratulated for its scope, maneuvering back from the preponderance of emphasis on Romanticism through Jonathan Swift and John Locke, as well as archival interventions into such figures like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Having said this, the challenges to eighteenth-century animal studies far exceed questions of scope in textual address, or even access to the (human) archive, outside the canonical. Animality per se exposes commonplace historicist assumptions to question and unsettles the procedures of traditionally humanist literary history. Early modern animal studies scholars must confront not only the debates between historicism and theory, but also (and more radically) those debates within historical literary studies over--to name a few--the supposed decline of New Historicism, the recent resurgence of material culture, or the continued interrogations of the meaning and status of the archive.

The theorization of a posthuman archive is a necessary project *a venir*. Palmeri's collection confronts this problem implicitly throughout, with a diverse pod of analyses traversing theory and historicism in the long eighteenth century widely conceived, from 1660 to the end of the Regency (whose literary representation, here, remains largely Romantic).

The archive offers an access to materiality fundamentally necessary to animality in earlier periods. The animal is a radically other being, one that cannot inscribe itself in the literary paradigm in which literary studies directly deals. Materiality is, therefore, always a question for animal studies. As such, canonicity and the continued

reinvestigation thereof is an insufficient endpoint. However, while Palmeri's collection repeatedly returns to a selection of canonical works ( *Gulliver's Travels* , the poetry and prose of the Shelleys, and, to a lesser degree, Alexander Pope and Daniel Defoe figure prominently across the collection), the varying approaches and references--especially in the case of Swift--reveal in these texts multiple, holographic approaches to the question of animality, while simultaneously offering a sampling of the various methodological possibilities now on offer to eighteenth-century animalists. However, animal studies can only fully access the materiality of such past human-animal relations through the archive of events, intellectual debates, and orders and taxonomies of being that both veil and reveal the past and de-anthropomorphized dimensions of eighteenth-century British culture. Some of the most intriguing contributions intervene in the archive beyond the canon. Chi-Ming Yang gives an intriguing account of the shifting attitudes to metempsychosis in British culture and its effect on philosophies of diet and shifting human-animal taxonomies in debates about the place of the soul in late Renaissance "great chain of being" discourse. Similarly, Theresa Brauschneider and Cristina Malcolmson respectively reveal complex intersections between animality, gender, and race, by recourse to archival research. Brauschneider reveals how, for the travel writing of Lady Montagu, dog breeds operated as emblems of diversity equivalent to (and not merely allegorical of) human difference in "breed," complicating the relation between species and race prior to the emergence of full-blown racial pseudo-science. In such essays, archival research is employed in a concerted de-anthropomorphic register.

If the archive is necessary for animal studies, it also presents a seriously problematic anthropocentric risk. As thinkers of the posthuman should be quick to note, merely expanding the archival field to include consideration of the animal--even while portending the apparent de-anthropoc critical potential that the textual outside--equally threatens the reinscription of anthropomorphism precisely through the liberal humanism by which rhetorics of inclusion or simplistic pluralism justify their politics.

For scholars of the eighteenth century, such a problem is compounded by a dialectical reduction to the double bind presented when "theory" is consistently counterposed to "history." Palmeri's collection performs a sublation of this dialectic where, at shining moments, many of the scholarly voices within *Humans and Other Animals* provide fleeting glimpses of a multiple outside. By populating this outside with uncanny critical species such as Frankenstein's monster, a hybrid engineered--as Stephanie Rowe notes--"out of the parts of humans and various other animals" (138), the grotesqueries Arline Meyer explores in Thomas Rowlandson's later engravings, or John Gay's talking wolves and snakes that populate Palmeri's own contribution on fables, the collection begins to address this dialectical caveat.

However, if one avows archival research for eighteenth-century animal studies, it is certainly not with recourse to any extant archival practice. For very good reason, thinking back to the distant archive of previous centuries with animality in mind

necessitates a total methodological rethinking of the humanist project of historicism and archival research. Animality challenges the archive as much as the archive challenges the scholar of eighteenth-century animality. One of the most strident proponents of the continued intersection of posthumanism and animal studies, Cary Wolfe, has recently noted precisely this risk wherein, "just because we direct our attention to the study of nonhuman animals, and even if we do so with the aim of exposing how they have been misunderstood and exploited, that does not in the least mean that we are not continuing to be humanist--and therefore, by definition, anthropocentric."<sup>2</sup> If, as I have noted, the promise of archival research--even beyond the bounds of the canonical--justifies itself through an implicit pluralism, one would be advised to logically observe that merely directing our attention to animality, "without in the least destabilizing or throwing into radical question the schema of the 'human' who undertakes such pluralization," is insufficient.<sup>3</sup>

While *Humans and Other Animals* does not, in these terms, address the caveat which I have here underlined, in many instances, it goes a long way to taking seriously such challenges, through reference to cultural history, archival investigation, and overt engagement with the theoretical and ethical challenges posed by figures like Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas (see particularly Allen Michie's essay on hybridity and Lockean humanism in Swift; Richard Nash's consideration of animal nomenclature; and Palmeri's own analysis of the "Autocritique of Fables"). If, of representation, hybridity, and ethics--the book's three central categories--representation could be said to remain the most at risk of anthropomorphism, Palmeri admirably asserts from the outset that the central organizing issues underpinning "the question of representation by the works examined in this volume [are:] can representations of animals as figures of humans be avoided, and how might the language or perspective of animals be represented?" (5).

As I began by suggesting, animal studies began as a twenty-first century discipline. In this light, while rigorously contemporaneous research of past moments must be painstakingly undertaken, at the same time, emergent critics of eighteenth-century animal studies should be praised for the instances in which they refer past to present. *Humans and Other Animals*, as such, contains a final pairing of essays directed towards the present, which finds its emergence in the intellectual history of eighteenth-century ethics, science, and culture. In other words, questions such as Michie's interrogation of the Lockean property in the human body and its vicissitudes are central to unpacking the meaning of Enlightenment humanism and its blind spots. For those of us invested in the eighteenth century, questions of animality must subject considerations of methodology to a sustained deconstruction.

Jonathan Lamb considers the intersection of Swift's worrying of defamiliarization alongside the ethics of J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, while Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds argues that Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon* responds directly to eighteenth-century species taxonomies and their configuration of racial politics. Such essays

remind scholars of the stakes of historicist research, particularly when the past question is located in the empiricist moment wherein so many taxonomies of nonhuman difference began to coalesce. Where Coetzee is treated, Defoe is largely (and strangely) absent from the collection (a noted exception would be Nash's contribution, "Animal Nomenclature"). A question for the future, then, concerns Coetzee's metafictional revision *Foe*. Therein, it is a series of apes which supplant Defoe's goats, cats, and parrots. These apes look bewildered as Crusoe (Coetzee's spelling) and Friday carve out endlessly unproductive terraces in what is, one could argue, an implicit critique of seventeenth-century enclosure reform. Michie focuses, instead, on power relations within divergent modes of animal naming, a wide-ranging treatment which demands expansion by future scholars. Like Crusoe's barren terraces, the antecedents of eighteenth-century animals, their taxonomies, their figuration of land, culture, and identity, their hybrid threats: these are precisely the stakes that eighteenth-century scholarship has begun to rally and no less diversely than in Palmeri's collection.

The strength of any collection like Palmeri's must be assessed by recourse to the hydra-headed multiplicity of human-animal relations in the eighteenth century and its antecedents. Where Thomas Pfau has cautioned humanist historicism against autojustification in the "primitive accumulation of so many disaggregated voices," and Wolfe shows the humanist agenda of such a tautological politics, *Humans and Other Animals*'s shifting account of human-animal relations is most successful when it locates hybridities, ethical debates, and representational lacunae, with critical attention to the need for continually deanthropomorphized ends.<sup>4</sup> This success relies on the collection's making good on Palmeri's introductory promise to question where "representations of figures of humans [can] be avoided, and how might the language or perspective of animals be represented?"(5). Where the volume's contributors are less concerned with animals themselves, they do take seriously the extent to which categories of species fundamentally unsettle the domain of the human. Christina Malcolmson, in some moments, appears primarily concerned with the--no doubt crucial--question of shifting attitudes to "skin color" and "complexion." Such ethnographic description as was made by Charles Montague and the Royal Society laid the groundwork for subsequent racial pseudo-science. However, to insist that Malcolmson focus on the discourse of species over race would be to literal-mindedly misunderstand the project of posthumanism, particularly since this project is inextricably bound to the genealogy of humanism. Malcolmson's essay succeeds because it takes seriously the extent to which the discourse of species both enabled and challenged early empiricist accounts of difference. Such approaches as Malcolmson's are crucially important, especially where they (implicitly or explicitly) take seriously Giorgio Agamben's important claim that, for critical studies of race, "the anthropological machine of the modern . . . functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being for itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human."<sup>5</sup> As Yang notes in the collection's opening essay, the prevailing discourse of the soul frequently encountered the question of human exceptionalism, the turns which silenced the potentially subversive aspect of this

movement were late seventeenth-century theologians for whom "the challenge for theorists of organicism, Platonists, Churchmen and empiricists alike, is to situate the human, and the human body, within nature's cycles of intermixture and re-animation and yet maintain its unique identity against the potential threat posed by transmigration"(20).

Across *Humans and Other Animals*, Swift's satirical use of Gulliver's encounters with marvelous others--Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, and especially Houyhnhnms--operates precisely to critique the status of the "nonhuman within the human." Michie's excellent "Gulliver the Houyhahoo: Swift, Locke and the Ethics of Excessive Individualism" stands out particularly as it locates Swift's concern with cross-species hybridity as satirizing the prevailing Lockean humanism and theism by which ethics and personhood are evaluated.

To return to the methodological concerns that I have argued should be the focus of consistent reflexive evaluation for animal studies in the long eighteenth century, Palmeri's collection confronts the inevitable double bind between history and theory. We could now add between historicism and its automatic derision of presentism, the tenuous and difficult procedure that is perhaps most noticeably and vigorously attacked here. Risk addressing the antecedents of one's field, and one thereby becomes presentist. Refuse this risk, however, and animal studies, in the eighteenth century, may merely be tacitly accepting the function of the critic in the liberal western academy, whose apparent pluralism remains politically insufficient, dividing species into manageable and discrete categories like the edible goats, loyal dogs, and wild breeding cats in Robinson Crusoe's compound--or slaughterhouse. Palmeri's collection bravely refuses to simplistically or ideologically reify historicism's pluralism or theory's presentism. As Lamb argues towards the end of the collection, Swift's Lemuel Gulliver finds himself in an analogous position to Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello--each sharing an inability to adequately articulate their ethical alienation in the face of the humans amongst whom they live. It is no wonder then that Coetzee has Elizabeth Costello find herself in an invited seminar on poetry and animality, discussing Swift alongside such a twentieth-century poet as Ted Hughes.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in light of the shadowy alter that animality represents for what Derrida calls "the autobiography of the human species," this moment is not only poignant but, as I have been suggesting, a parable of a necessity for eighteenth-century studies of animality.<sup>7</sup> Coetzee knows better than any academic, historicist, or theorist that when Robinson Crusoe enters the late twentieth century, he is shadowed by metafiction of many kinds, as well as a plethora of strange apes which had seemed to be absent in Defoe's own confessional.<sup>8</sup> *Humans and Other Animals* is an important and critical study in a subfield that must continue to challenge the assumptions of the disciplinary divide which it inhabits and, at the best of times, cross-pollinates.

---

## NOTES

1. David Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights* (Cambridge, 2003).
2. Cary Wolfe, "'Animal Studies,' Disciplinarity, and the (Post)Humanities," forthcoming in *What is Posthumanism* (Minneapolis, 2009).
3. Wolfe, 2.
4. Thomas Pfau, "The Philosophy of Shipwreck: Gnosticism, Skepticism, and Coleridge's Catastrophic Modernity," *Modern Language Notes* 122, no. 5 (2007), 949-1004, cited in Wolfe, 5.
5. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, 2004), 37.
6. J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London and Sydney, 2003), 95-103.
7. Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002), 369-418.
8. Coetzee, *Foe* (New York, 2007).