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Pamela Banting
University of Calgary



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PAMELA BANTING

***From Beowulf through Virginia Woolf
to the Coastal Wolves of British Columbia:
Animals, Interdisciplinarity and
the Environmental Humanities***

Animals are good to think, as Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote, but for the most part universities are dominated by a single suborder: simians. And simians who also happen to be humanists (and by humanists I am referring not only to those in Humanities faculties but to the professoriate at large) can be resistant to discourses about species other than our own, except in faculties, departments, and sub-disciplines such as biology, ethology, primatology, or veterinary science. If, as John Berger has argued, other-than-human animals can no longer return the human gaze, is it equally true or a simple corollary that humanists cannot return the gaze of the animal?

Theorizing 'the animal' from within an English department can meet with additional obstacles. Within such a context, animals (if they are thought of at all) are almost always treated as symbolic. In his essay "Poetic Animals and Animal Souls," Randy Malamud writes: "In Western culture, generally, interest in animals rings hollow. It is rote or symbolic, possessing a diminutive cultural currency. Animals and animal imagery are ubiquitous, but the importance we accord them is shallow. Politically, aesthetically, and sociologically, animals are perpetually subaltern" (269). To me, symbolic animals are less good to think than the animate ones.

Ironically, English departments are both architecturally and functionally modelled along the lines of a zoo or a natural history collection, stocked as they are with two or three representative 'specimens' per literary period, ranging from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf and beyond. Some of the specimens, the professors, have individual rooms with a view while others, sessional instructors and graduate students, are often housed in shared internal spaces with no view and no natural light. The creatures best adapted to the small cages and artificial light and routines thrive while some others, like the tiger or the hyena at the zoo, can end up pacing back and forth in psychological disarray.

In the classroom, teaching texts about animals is often inflected by the fact that many contemporary urban students seem to have had a fairly limited range of experiences of wild animals. The point Robert Michael Pyle makes in his essay "A Local Connection" – that with

local extirpations or extinctions of species comes a corresponding extinction of human experience – seems to be borne out in the classroom. For some students, their primary and often their sole referent for live animals is their family pet, so much so that some find it difficult to put him or her into the background while we read texts about wild animals. In a graduate seminar I taught, one student decided that it would be a great idea to deliver his entire seminar presentation from the point of view of a paper bag puppet representing his dog. Even while reading philosophy, theory, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry about wild animals, he seemed almost helpless to set the family dog aside for a while.

Another challenge comes in doing interdisciplinary work without having been trained in interdisciplinary methodologies. Although many Canadian universities have adopted interdisciplinarity as a pillar or post of their mandate (such metaphors are often architectural and privilege the built as opposed to the natural world), they seldom provide tangible support for such work. In my observation from within a former Faculty of Humanities (now Arts), interdisciplinary research is often interpreted to mean work within a single discipline but carried out across a couple of different languages, not work that actually traverses disciplines. Faculty with genuinely interdisciplinary degrees and research tend to be regarded as neither fish nor fowl by those with more traditional degrees.

At times epistemological divides can seem like yawning and slippery glacial crevasses. In their essay “Hybrid Vigor: Interbreeding Cultural Studies and Human-Animal Studies,” Annie Potts and Philip Armstrong discuss the interdisciplinary potential of hybridizing cultural studies and human-animal studies. They encapsulate the differences between cultural studies and scientific methodologies:

One of the main challenges in teaching and learning CS [Cultural Studies] is the depth and durability of the split between scientific and humanistic forms of knowledge. Humanities disciplines place a high value on interpretive, speculative, critical, analytic, textual, and historiographical work. In contrast, the sciences and social sciences seek to reduce the speculative and interpretive elements of knowledge production in favor of the accumulation and analysis of empirical data according to more or less orthodox methodological protocols that are designed to eliminate interpretive variables. CS seeks to span this major epistemological divide. (8 -9)

My own research over the past several years has been on literary nonfiction by park wardens and former guides and outfitters who became environmental activists. Writing about texts by Andy Russell, Charlie Russell, Sid Marty, Karsten Heuer, and others has presented me with trepidations I have seldom encountered in any of my other research. Partly as a result of such difficulties, along with the general neglect in Canadian universities both of animals and of literary nonfiction other than life writing by and about simians, little to no scholarly work has been published on books by writers who have spent vast amounts of time outside in wilder places. As a result, in most cases, one is starting from scratch, though this can be both a disadvantage and an advantage.

Working in ecocriticism and animal studies can induce an entirely novel form of the anxiety of authorship. Having done my doctorate on the history and milieu of the long poem, and then having made a very deep and broad foray into ecocriticism, I ask myself a lot of questions as I venture again and again into examining literary nonfiction about grizzly bears, black bears, wolves, whales, tigers, cougars, and salmon. Unfortunately, the high school I attended was too small and had too few resources to hire a biology teacher. Because I lacked any high school courses in biology, when I went to university the only science credit I was allowed to take was Earth and Planetary Sciences (Rocks and Stars). Because I lack any training in biology, one significant risk is that, even with extensive research, I might write something truly stupid about animals. The spectre of personal and professional embarrassment rears its ugly head. However, I take both caution and consolation from poet and essayist Gary Snyder who writes that “Perhaps one should not talk (or write) too much about the wild world: it may be that it embarrasses other animals to have attention called to them” (21).

Compounding one’s fears of making serious errors is the fear of theorizing about such animals on the basis of one’s own relatively scant experience with them. Bracketing childhood visits to the nuisance grounds to watch the black bears plough through human garbage, my own personal encounters with bears tally so far at three black bears and one grizzly. How can such a person possibly do justice to accounts of bears by people whose bear experiences and encounters number in the thousands of hours? By what right and with what credentials exactly do I analyze these writers’ texts? What if I lead myself or someone else astray with regard to these occasionally dangerous creatures as I move across areas of research involving philosophy, literary theory, textual analysis, biology, psychology, anthropology, and semiotics?

Further amplifying individual, cultural and species blind spots, I would suggest that researchers’ natural fears of large predators like tigers, bears, and wolves may infiltrate such work. It can be difficult to think ‘objectively’ about a tiger that kills and eats a poor Russian peasant, even a poacher, as in John Vaillant’s *The Tiger: A True Story of Vengeance and Survival* or a grizzly that half-kills a couple of hikers because it thinks they are competition for its food cache as in Patricia Van Tighem’s *The Bear’s Embrace: A True Story of Surviving a Grizzly Bear Attack*. Such narratives remind us powerfully of our own animality and even, in such cases, of our status as potential prey. These are not feelings or responses with which one usually has to contend while working on the lyric, the dramatic monologue, or the Petrarchan sonnet. Texts about grizzly bears and Amur tigers require that analysis be monitored to guard against blind species loyalty and personal dread. While ethics and etiquette, along with FOIP legislation and Ethics Review Boards, may protect members of vulnerable groups when it comes to researchers writing about human Others, where is the safety net for animals when it comes to informed, fair, and non-exploitative representations of more-than-human others? Unconscious processes such as projection and transference are not out of the question just because a text is about a more-than-human animal, and they can be particularly difficult to detect, identify, and take into account.

There are also conundrums when one attempts to theorize animal subjectivity and points of view. For example, while working on an article about Sid Marty’s nonfiction book *The Black*

Grizzly of Whiskey Creek, many chapters of which are written as if from one of two bears' points of view, one of the nodes I wanted to explore was bears' olfactory sensibilities in relation to sense of place. Other than Marty's own text, it was difficult to find research beyond the statistical about bears' sense of smell, but I found some delectable research material on humans' sense of smell. Applying what I found on humans' senses of smell would not be appropriate, however, given that bears can out-sniff humans by an exponential factor and their ideas of what smells good (e.g. carrion, rotting garbage, outhouses) are generally the opposite of what humans find appealing.

The outpouring of recent research on the ontology and epistemology of more-than-human animals has taken us a long way toward increased understanding of our fellow creatures' lives. However, explorations of such animals' own being and knowledge (and not just *our* relationships with and knowledge of them) often run aground on the shoals of charges of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. If a more-than-human animal trait is one shared with humans, then contrary to logic and common sense that trait is often regarded either as *exclusively* human or one that it is simply impossible to know animals share. As Marcus Bullock writes, "That steadfast refusal to see expressiveness anywhere [other than in humans] merely becomes another species of anthropomorphism, should we turn so intently against the other temptation as to insist on hearing only silence and seeing only empty matter in the language of animal forms" (112). While in many instances human intentions and human emotions can also only be inferred and sometimes too they can seem incomprehensible or bizarre (I would add that it is another form of anthropocentrism to hold as one's premise that the psyches of other humans are understood), nevertheless more-than-human animals typically function as a limit-case when it comes to ontology and epistemology: we do not and cannot know anything about their *umwelten*. Or, to put it another way, there be dragons.

But one of the most daunting, though exhilarating, challenges for the animal studies researcher is the fact that every species is distinct and plays a different role in the ecosystem in which that species lives. Moving in one's research from, say, the poetry of one writer to that of another — even across national borders or historical timelines or from critical studies in poetry to a focus on fiction — is not as time-intensive or intimidating a transition as that of spending a few years working on grizzly bear narratives and then switching to narratives about wolves. Doing a lot of research on bears leaves one more or less completely unprepared to work on a text about wolves.

When Western-educated humans think about more-than-human animals we tend to think of them in terms of their unique identifying traits: their physical appearance and a set of observed and scientifically validated characteristics and behaviours. We think of them occupying specific habitats or ecological niches and going about their utilitarian business — being born and raised, leaving the burrow or nest, and then reproducing and raising their own young in turn — within the confines of ranges that supply no more than the essentials of life. That is, as any field guide or nature documentary demonstrates, we tend to think of other animals' lives and occupancy of the earth mostly as restricted to maintaining access to the simple, bare necessities of water, food, safety, shelter, and reproduction. In terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we reserve

“sense of belonging” and other higher needs for ourselves: we seldom think of animals as having a sense of belonging or a sense of place. Anthropocentrism is operant too in this tendency of ours to think of more-than-human animals solely in terms of relatively abstract notions such as space, habitat, range, territory, and ecological niche but not in terms of their having a sense of place, even though it is probable that most non-human animals have a far greater knowledge of the particularities of their respective territories than we do of ours. It is as if we deploy abstract or scientific notions of spatiality as a way of rooting them out of and appropriating for ourselves the fields, meadows, fens, coulees, mountainsides, swamps, and especially the prime real estate they occupy. Through manoeuvres such as this, we draw them out of their geographical places and into rhetorical places and scientific-philosophical spaces in our own minds. As I discovered while researching animals’ sense of place, even a significant number of articles in the field of animal geographies that contain the word ‘place’ in their titles or abstracts tend to treat animals’ use of places as symbolic and/or ideological placements rather than material, physical locations.

The obverse is also true. That is, anthropocentrism also comes into play in our assumption that our own sense of place is *not* related to nurture or satisfaction of our basic Maslovian needs. While knowing the particulars of one’s territory is not necessarily tantamount to possessing a sense of place, which implies feelings of belonging in or to that zone constructed out of associations, memories, and stories, I think there is sufficient cause to extrapolate from animals’ superb navigational and threat-avoidance capabilities based on their knowledge of the geographies they inhabit to consider the possibility that they may also have a sense of place. Consider how often a bear trucked or transported by helicopter sling far away from their home range into unfamiliar territory returns like the repressed within forty-eight to seventy-two hours.

A corresponding absence in most of our figurations of animals is the notion of the specificity of individual animals’ lives, a lack I would attribute to our scepticism about their senses of place. Our species chauvinism causes us to imagine our furry and feathery compatriots living lives rendered typical, almost allegorical (a Richardson’s ground squirrel lives a species life, not the life of a Richardson’s ground squirrel in Calgary or one in Grasslands National Park in Saskatchewan). We believe that it is only emplaced lives in which history, event, or context can develop. Even those who recognize that humans have profound and differential historical effects upon other animals’ lives —through hunting, slaughter, factory farming, habitat depletion, fencing, neutering, and many other practices —and critique such practices tend to strand them in the zones of the typical and the timeless. Bear Awareness pamphlets, for instance, tell us what to do in the event of being approached or attacked by a black bear as opposed to a grizzly. While there is much validity to such categorizations and avoidance tactics, individual bears’ distinct histories and circumstances also shape their characters, their lives, and those of their offspring, and condition their responses to situations.

It is possible, I think, without imposing the doctrine of individualism (another form of anthropocentrism) to acknowledge that not just every species but individual animals differ from one another. As Charlie Russell in *Grizzly Heart: Living Without Fear Among the Brown Bears of*

Kamchatka and Sid Marty in *The Black Grizzly of Whiskey Creek* show, bears, like humans, have different experiences, histories, personalities, and moods. In an interview for the BBC Radio program R3 Arts, oceanographer Sylvia Earle states that even fish show traces of individuality. When she was growing up in Florida, she says, there were so many more creatures in the ocean. Groupers, she says, would follow you around like puppy dogs when you were snorkeling, and she realized that they are as much individuals as cats and dogs and horses are. Every fish is different, she states; they have not just different faces, different arrangements of spots, stripes, and other markings, but they actually do have independent personalities. Some, for example, are more curious than others, some are more aggressive.

In short, there are a lot of intellectual and emotional challenges in working on animals and animality, most of which when taken into account yield rich insights. Training in literary analysis and cultural studies prepares one to analyze texts and, given the poststructuralist extension of the notion of textuality beyond the book to other cultural phenomena, researchers in the humanities or the arts can make valuable contributions to our understanding of more-than-human animals. Other-than-human animals have been the subjects of a wide range of texts and oral discourses including but not restricted to the following: Indigenous song, prayer, chant, story, pictograph, and petroglyph; the journals and diaries of so-called explorers and naturalists; extinction narratives; accounts of life with a pet or other domestic animals; memoirs of lives lived very close to nature such as narratives of backcountry living, the recollections of guides and outfitters, and adventure narratives; anecdotes of first-hand encounters; campfire stories; artistic expression such as poetry, photographs, paintings, literary nonfiction, and the realistic wild animal story; newspaper stories and accounts of sightings, encounters, and attacks; public safety pamphlets; cartoons and comic books; and medical and healing narratives, all of which are susceptible to a text-based analysis. Working on animals from within an arts/humanities discipline or across disciplines allows one to address such documents, few of which scientists can afford to incorporate into their research without drawing the suspicion and censure of *their* disciplinary colleagues. Textual, anecdotal, or narrative evidence is typically avoided by scientists on the grounds that it cannot be quantified or the results replicated. But what is an anecdote except an account of one's field observations, and while one must certainly be vigilant against bias and personal agendas, sentimentality, the presence of the experimenter in proximity to animals, and other dangers mentioned above, a great deal of knowledge can be obtained through anecdote, story, or narrative.

Conversely, a great deal of knowledge can be lost through denigrating, bracketing, or ignoring such material. As Dean Bavington, author of *Managed Annihilation: An Unnatural History of the Newfoundland Cod Collapse*, has shown in his work about the differences in perception between fishers and fishery scientists with regard to the numbers of cod off the East Coast, there are instances where folk knowledge in the form of anecdote is more reliable than scientific reports. As Bavington notes, "The local ecological knowledge (LEK) of inshore cod fishermen, once dismissed by fisheries managers as unscientific and anecdotal, is increasingly embraced by and integrated into new forms of cod fisheries management" (73). While it may be objected that researchers in the arts can only work with representations of more-than-human animals, so too our colleagues in fields such as biology, zoology, ecology, environmental

studies, and environmental history work with representations of them. In addition to field observations, even biologists —whose research may be based on some combination of fur, tooth, hair, blood, or scat samples; DNA; tracks; photographs; and video images —are working with documents or representations of animals. The hair of the bear is not the bear *itself*. It is a part or fragment of a bear, a metonymy, specifically a synecdoche, but it is not a bear.

To take another example, radio or satellite tracking of a more-than-human animal creates representations of its spatial movement. In *Wired Wilderness: Technologies of Tracking and the Making of Modern Wildlife*, Etienne Benson writes that

Originating around 1960 at the unlikely intersection of wildlife management and military surveillance technologies, the use of miniaturized radio tags and collars to keep track of individual animals became virtually a sine qua non of wildlife research by the 1980s, dominating the pages of professional publications such as the *Journal of Wildlife Management* and serving as a symbol of modern wildlife conservation for observers of the field (2).

Not only do radio-tracking devices chart the movements of animals: they loop back upon and track the tracking of the scientists too, thrusting them into an epistemology based on transmission signals, graphs, maps, DNA analysis, and other technologies of representation. At the same time, the tracking devices and interpretive practices become signifiers of science, conservation, and management. Just as the device reveals, for instance, that a grizzly grazed on grain spilled from a boxcar, it simultaneously transmits that science was practiced here.

However, just as reading animal behaviour is not confined to science and scientists neither is such semiosis confined to humans. In his book *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*, Paul Shepard writes that

We [humans] were latecomers in a well-established process that had gone on for fifty million years. The four-legged carnivores and their prey had long since learned that an animal, watched long enough, gradually dissolved into signs. It left the marks that came to represent it: footprints, urine, secretions, feces, molted antlers, scratchings and rubbings, gnawed stems, bones, feathers, beds, diggings, nests, tracks, and bits of fur as well as an immense range of sounds and smells unavailable to us (24).

This is more or less a précis of what biologists do: observe an animal long enough for its signs to become evident and assemble them in order to construct a thesis and argument, a likely story. Shepard's thesis is that it was through observation and mimicry of other animals that humans developed survival tactics, including language and art. Other animals themselves were both proto-scientists and artists. Indeed, maybe 'the animal' is the link between science and the arts.

As Ian McAllister describes in *The Last Wild Wolves: Ghosts of the Great Bear Rainforest*, researchers chose not to tranquilize, capture, radio-collar, or touch any of the coastal wolves they studied. Instead they collected only hair and scat samples for DNA analysis, took

photographs and video, and compiled journal entries. While admitting that some of the evidence of wolf and grizzly bear movements obtained through radio telemetry is “fascinating,”

McAllister advocates for a less invasive approach to study: “All that money spent on helicopters and planes could have gone to field researchers, and when you have people in the field, gathering data by direct observation, important information is gleaned that no transmitter on an animal’s neck can duplicate. And regrettably, some bears died for the cause, killed in the snares used to set the collars on them. It doesn’t get any more invasive than that” (167). Using non-invasive techniques, the wolf researchers were able to track and identify individual wolves and packs and to observe significant cultural differences among the various packs, something one would be very hard pressed to do using helicopter surveillance and invasive methods. This kind of research is much closer to research in the arts.

Many theoretical, political, disciplinary, practical, and personal challenges emerge as one attempts to think with wild animals. From the methodologies of interdisciplinary scholarship and the dangers of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, to relatively scant personal experience with the wild animals in question, and a lack of basic training in biology or zoology, researching and teaching about animals can be a formidable task, especially if one wishes to slip the leg-hold trap of disciplinary limits in order to learn more about the lifeways of wolves and bears on the basis of textual representations. However, pursuing this work is intensely rewarding—even potentially transformative—and yields the basis for potential action and activism on behalf of the wild. What kinds of knowledge about wild animals do literary nonfiction accounts by naturalists, biologists, park wardens, and guides and outfitters generate? How best can we learn to think not just about but with more-than-human animals? An important area of discussion and debate about animals within both science and philosophy is the question of animal minds: are animals capable of representational thinking, and can they think about thinking? If assembling disparate signs into evidence of the presence or absence of food, safety, relationship, home range, and other variables constitutes representational thinking, as I would suggest it does, then doing science would be, in important ways, very similar to being animal. Thinking *is* animal.

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PAMELA BANTING teaches environmental literature and animal studies in the English Department at the University of Calgary.