

## Translating Endangered Nonhuman Worlds

Global warming demands new forms of linguistic and conceptual inventiveness that can alert readers to unfamiliar and counterintuitive scales. As ecocritic Timothy Clark has suggested, much environmental damage happens at a scale that cannot be fully expressed by traditional realist modes of literary representation. It is brought about by individual human actions which are not ecologically significant in themselves but which collectively, across space and over time, threaten much of what we value about humanity and the more-than-human world. In the context of the climate crisis, this relation between individual observable causes and vast global effects marks a stark challenge to familiar anthropocentric narratives: “Issues such as global warming or ocean acidification, so overwhelming in scale, can threaten to dwarf any individual or state action, even as both phenomena cannot immediately be seen, localised, or in many cases, even acknowledged”.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the success of concerted responses to the climate crisis depends on our ability to express and relate different scales and points of view, beyond what is revealed by immediate human perception. The Anthropocene, as Jeremy Davies points out, “is not an anthropocentric concept, nor one that separates humankind from the rest of nature”.<sup>2</sup> Extinction rates, for example, have grown disproportionately in recent decades, as a result of habitat destruction, pollution, invasive species, human population growth and overharvesting. Evolutionary biologists have warned that a mass extinction of species – only the sixth to occur in the 3.5 billion years of life on Earth – is taking place as a result of human activities.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, climate activists have struggled to convey a sense of urgency to wider audiences, because of the particular temporality of species extinction, which runs counter to established ideas of environmental collapse as catastrophic rupture. Anthropologist Thom van Dooren explains this as follows:

I have become acutely aware that extinction is never a sharp, singular event – something that begins, rapidly takes place, and then is over and done with. Rather, the edge of extinction is more often a ‘dull’ one: a slow unravelling of intimately entangled ways of life that begins long before the death of the last individual and continues to ripple forward long afterward, drawing in living beings in a range of different ways.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 76.

<sup>3</sup> See Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Knopf, 2004); Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt), 167.

<sup>4</sup> Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 12.

Similarly, political arguments about the need to protect endangered species have mostly evaded non-anthropocentric scales, and are shaped by a tendency to treat nonhuman animals as screens for the projection of human interests and meanings. As Ursula K. Heise explains, human compassion generally focuses on large, vaguely anthropomorphic mammals – “flagship species” or “charismatic megafauna” – that are also recurrent as cultural figurations of human communities and qualities. In the context of climate politics, this invites exclusive attention to the human relationship with nature and may prevent a more consistent engagement with unfamiliar scales and complex and intrinsically diverse ecosystems. According to Heise, “in literary, visual, and musical representations of extinction, biological crisis typically becomes a proxy for cultural concerns”.<sup>5</sup>

Cultural anxieties about vanishing species have become tied up with concern over the political and social consequences of modernization and globalization. Advocates of human climate justice have sought to disrupt the universalizing impulses of conventional environmental narratives and have employed the trope of species extinction to highlight the multiple threats faced by vulnerable human communities and individuals. Political efforts to promote a “green” global economy, it has been argued, must acknowledge the profoundly divisive inequities and injustices that have resulted from colonialism and from the growth of the world-capitalist economy.<sup>6</sup> Climate change, in this context, is not only seen as a trigger for urgent political action, it also calls for a radical re-orientation of ethical and aesthetic values.

The complexities of the Anthropocene highlight the dangers for ecocriticism of premature modes of intellectual containment and even of simplification. The most difficult challenge for critical reevaluations in the Anthropocene is represented by scale effects, that is, phenomena that are invisible at the normal levels of perception but only emerge as one changes the spatial or temporal scale at which the issues are framed.<sup>7</sup>

Anthropogenic global warming, according to Timothy Clark, is not a *problem* that can be *pictured* in conventional literary ways, but a vast, unfolding cluster of risks and threats that will put an end to familiar comforts and places. The environmental crisis demands new literary modes and different forms of scalar literacy, beyond the Romantic focus of place in traditional nature writing. Importantly, this emergent concern with scale is not only spatial but also temporal. As human geographer Andreas Malm explains, the global warming that is felt today is the result of human actions *in the past*: it is the effect of a particular, ongoing phase in

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<sup>5</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meaning of Endangered Species* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 49.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the ongoing discussions prompted by Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2011) and by Jason W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene of Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2016). See also Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 22.

human history – the birth and growth of the fossil economy – whose devastating environmental consequences are becoming deeper, clearer and more frequent over time. Similarly, political awareness of climate change, in the present, is necessarily directed *towards the future*, when the catastrophic impact of today’s actions will be more acutely felt, but when the chances for organized, collective resistance will have dwindled. Faced with this temporal discordance, Malm concludes that cultural production and political activism are best served by diachronic conceptual maps that mark out the colliding forces of nature and society across recent human history and in relation to planetary deep time:

There is no synchronicity in climate change. Now more than ever, we inhabit the diachronic, the discordant, the inchoate. [...] History has sprung alive, through a nature that has done likewise. We are only in the very early stages, but already our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural responses, even our politics show signs of being sucked back by planetary forces into the hole of time, the present dissolving into past and future alike.<sup>8</sup>

How can literary writing engage with these complex, disjunctive temporalities? The climate crisis demands an unprecedented ability to move between counterintuitive scales and to communicate the unfamiliar. This may cause some disorientation, as philosopher Timothy Morton points out: “The picture quality evaporates. Now you are close and personal with the rock. It stops being a nice background to your Paleolithic projects as an ancient human. It starts to become quite strange”.<sup>9</sup> Writerly attention to nonhuman subjectivity – a creative process that is also known as inter-species translation – marks a particularly important aspect of this new cultural and political agenda. Timothy Clark, for example, has explicitly linked scalar literacy to the political critique of anthropocentrism:

An intensified sense of the contingency of the scale that seems ‘natural’ to human beings may be crucial in developing an interspecies ethics. At a time when multiple extinctions are shredding the integrity of the biosphere, there becomes an urgent need for greater public awareness of the different modes of time and space that make up the ‘world’ of other creatures, and how their lives depend on distinctive and often fragile synchronies and patterns, speeds and slownesses, interwoven temporalities.<sup>10</sup>

Cultural theorist Michael Cronin similarly calls for greater attention to nonhuman subjectivity, and has stressed the significance of translation, beyond its linguistic origins, as a powerful metaphor for inter-species exchange.<sup>11</sup> Eco-translation, as defined by Cronin, foregrounds the

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<sup>8</sup> Andreas Malm, *The Progress of the Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018), xxxiii.

<sup>10</sup> Clark, *Value of Ecocriticism*, 51. Clark paraphrases the editorial introduction, “Telling Extinction Stories”, in *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations*, ed. by Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren and Matthew Chrulew (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Cronin, *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017).

importance of the more-than-human world, not as a mere backdrop or context for human stories, but as a co-constitutive presence that intersects with human culture and society in a single, volatile temporal force field. Translation, which “on the face of it appears to be a pre-eminently human activity”, thus acquires a wider meaning and comes to express extended forms of ecological relatedness.<sup>12</sup> Cronin’s position builds directly on his earlier work, which explored translation as a versatile category for aesthetic and social analysis.<sup>13</sup> Dramatic shifts in the common perception of distance, proximity and context, according to Cronin, are not only a persistent feature of cultural and linguistic translation: they also define our planetary habitat in times of anthropogenic crisis.

One of the challenges in the age of mass extinction and industrialised food production and anthropogenic climate change is the mobilisation of translation to construct a notion of animal subjectivity. That is to say, the exploration of different forms of animal communication with a view to the possibility of interspecies communication must be accounted an urgent task in terms of according other sentient beings not only the dignity of just or equal treatment but of developing a sense of post-anthropocentric relatedness.<sup>14</sup>

As a theory of knowledge, eco-translation rejects the abstract, interchangeable, autonomous individual of liberal moral-political theory and urges us to stretch the limits of human imagination towards different spatial and temporal scales. It aims to foster different structures of awareness and new forms of empathy, respect and sustainability. As a political movement, it is inherently relational and attentive to the interdependence of communities and markets, in a globalized and progressively more unequal world. As Cronin explains, eco-translation foregrounds the importance of site-specific practice and local sensitivity but rejects nativist fetishism. Instead of a topology of fixed identities, it promotes an ecology of flow, where chance encounter prevents the replication of the identical. This emphasis on relationality amounts to a radical critique of globalization, both in concrete, political-economic terms and, at a more philosophical level, by questioning the supposedly universal explanatory power of global perspectives. Cronin writes: “Translation as a global activity in the age of the Anthropocene must be apprehended in the specificity of its impacts in different locations over time rather than in terms of undifferentiated, systemic flow that describe much and explain little”.<sup>15</sup>

In what follows, I will examine inter-species translation through the dual disciplinary lens of world literature and Anthropocene discourse. Both fields are relevant because of their distinctive concern with spatial and temporal knowledge production and because of their

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>13</sup> See especially Michael Cronin, *Translation and Globalization* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); *Translation and Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006); *The Expanding World: Towards a Politics of Microspeciation* (Washington: Zero Books, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Cronin, *Eco-Translation*, 77.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 12.

continuous critical engagement with capitalist globalization. As I explain in the central part of my chapter, world literature studies and the “self-conscious Anthropocene” are best understood as interrelated and complementary scholarly practices.<sup>16</sup> I expand on this idea in the second half of my chapter, where I engage more specifically with the nonhuman animal and with literary practices of inter-species translation. Timothy Clark’s demand for *scalar literary*, I suggest, finds an unexpected, congenial response, across disciplinary demarcations, in fictional world theory, which is similarly attentive to multiple, conflicting scales and to the “information produced by various scalar relations”.<sup>17</sup> This leads me, in my conclusion, to challenge the idea of environmental collapse as catastrophic rupture: an apocalyptic coming-of-age of *anthropos*. Focusing on the vulnerability and value of human and non-human life on a warming planet, I suggest instead that the climate emergency must be understood as a dynamic opening: an invitation to re-think categories of place and space and to re-imagine the future not in terms of eschatological closure, but as a state of protracted uncertainty that necessitates new political and epistemic modes.

Why world literature? Since the turn of the millennium, this term has come into view as an influential generative concept in the arts and humanities, prompting unprecedented attention to the global production, translation and cross-cultural reception of genres and texts.<sup>18</sup> The study of world literature, in this emergent sense, is coeval with advanced capitalist globalization, but many of its practitioners have been critical of the totalizing perspectives that are commonly associated with the latter. The transnational circulation of goods and ideas, from the perspective of world literature, has enabled new forms of cosmopolitan belonging that are diametrically opposed to the political and cultural aberrations of narrowly bounded nationalism. “Contemporary globalization”, writes Pheng Cheah, “has created a genuinely transcultural zone that undermines the territorial borders of cultural and literary production, thereby leading to the emergence of a global consciousness”.<sup>19</sup> But the growing interconnectedness brought about by global markets has also perpetuated and enhanced inequalities between and within nations, cemented regimes of coercion and constraint, and erased meaningful cultural diversity. Attention to these negative trends, and to a wide variety of diverse geopolitical, cultural and temporal contexts, has established world literature as an important, dynamic site of transdisciplinary inquiry and cultural activism. Comparatists, as Sanja Bahun explains, have moved away from ideas of

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<sup>16</sup> Lynn Keller coins the phrase “self-conscious Anthropocene” to provide a term, distinct from the label for the geological era, for the cultural and political debate since the turn of the millennium. See Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>18</sup> For a summary of the debate, see Theo D’haen, *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011); Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (eds), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); Susan Bassnett (ed.), *Translation and World Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Pheng Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 23.

canonicity and transnational cultural value, and have started to explore the potential of world literature as “a metaphor as well as a means of expression; a concept, a discourse, a moldable pedagogical tool, and an ‘imaginary community’; a knowledge, a practice, a stance and an affect”.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the universalistic and Eurocentric inflections of mid-century comparative scholarship, researchers in world literature studies, since 2000, have openly questioned processes of capitalist globalization, conjuring and propagating new coordinates of spatial and political belonging.

Over the same two decades, the concept of the Anthropocene has reverberated powerfully across the arts and humanities, inspiring numerous publications and works of art.<sup>21</sup> Faced with the gravity of the unfolding environmental crisis, historians, philosophers and literary critics have turned their attention to Paul Crutzen’s and Eugene Stoermer’s neologism, first coined in 2000.<sup>22</sup> Anthropocene discourse – similarly to debates about world literature – has functioned as an important, transdisciplinary vector for the emergent cross-disciplinary framework that links comparative literature, critical theory and the modern languages. The Anthropocene marks a conspicuous challenge to the traditional humanities, as Jussi Parikka explains, but has also served as “a useful trigger for a variety of approaches that are interested in the nonhuman and post-human”.<sup>23</sup> Novelists and visual artists have turned their attention to environmental degradation, planetary deep time and ecological entanglement, and an increasing number of works have focused on natural processes and forms that are affected by human activities and impinge upon them: hurricanes, floods, unprecedented heatwaves, habitat destruction, pollution, human population growth, species loss, and so on.<sup>24</sup> As novelist Amitav Gosh points out, “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination”.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sanja Bahun, “The Politics of World Literature”, in Theo D’haen et al. (eds), *Routledge Companion to World Literature*, pp. 373-382 (373).

<sup>21</sup> See Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, translated by David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso: 2015); J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945*, (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> See Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene”, *Global Change Newsletter*, 41 (2000), 17-18. For an overview of recent trends in the environmental humanities, see Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur and Anthony Carrigan (eds), *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015); Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann (eds), *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA., and London: MIT Press, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Jussi Parikka, “Anthropocene”, in Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (eds), *Posthuman Glossary* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 52.

<sup>24</sup> See Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015). For an interesting recent example, see Amitav Gosh, *Gun Island* (London: John Murray, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Amitav Gosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9.

The contemporaneous emergence of world literature and the Anthropocene, both as objects of transdisciplinary study and as practices of scholarly inquiry, is not coincidental. Recent definitions of world literature and debates about the Anthropocene are similarly attentive to transnational chains of ecological, political and cultural interdependence. Researchers have employed the two terms in analogous ways to advance a radical critique of capitalist globalization. In the field of literary studies, Emily Apter, Pheng Cheah and Aamir Mufti, among others, have called for greater attention to global inequalities and have pressed the attack against naively celebratory visions of cultural globalisation.<sup>26</sup> Cheah, for instance, points out that “contemporary flows of money, especially humanitarianism and environmental and world preservation funds [...] violently destroy worlds despite their humanizing claims”, and argues that literature has a unique power to expose the destructive force of global flows of capital investment.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Mufti has criticized scholars of world literature for clinging naively to the utopian ideal of a “borderless world” instead of addressing the harsh realities of global inequity. Apter, meanwhile, contends that transnational chains of economic, cultural and political connectedness are not sufficient conditions for greater social justice, and that “translatability” – one of the ideals of an earlier generation of world literature theorists – has become associated, in the twenty-first century, with an “entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world’s cultural resources”.<sup>28</sup>

As Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimble have explained, world literary criticism, at the turn of the millennium, was characterised by a growing attention to international markets and by “a renewed appetite for addressing the question of literary totality”.<sup>29</sup> Inquiries into the transnational circulation of literary texts – by Franco Moretti, David Damrosch and Pascale Casanova, among others – notoriously emphasized the importance of globalization as a socially and culturally unifying force, and explained world literature as a necessary consequence of global market exchange.<sup>30</sup> In this context, “totality” did not entail a strong belief in cultural universalism, as Etherington and Zimble point out, but rather denoted an aesthetically and ethically neutral attempt to “bring to the fore the dynamic relationship between parts and whole; that is, the ways in which the interrelations and interactions of particulars cumulatively constitute a single intelligible entity”.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, totalizing methodologies quickly came under attack from critics, who questioned their usefulness as a

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<sup>26</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013); Cheah, *What is a World?*; Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Cheah, *What is a World?*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Apter, *Against World Literature*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> “Introduction”, in Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimble (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>30</sup> See Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, *New Left Review*, (2000), 54-68; David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Etherington and Zimble, “Introduction”, 4.

way of navigating and highlighting cultural diversity. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, the world literature debate of the late Nineties did little to challenge the lingering Eurocentrism of many comparative literature programmes.<sup>32</sup> Discussions rarely touched on non-European languages and cultures, and popular theories relied on a surprisingly small set of canonical literary examples. Spivak's idea of the planetary, as Emily Apter recalls, was conceived in polemical response to these trends and to a university curriculum that, according to her, continued to foreground the cultural concerns of a few "privileged emigrés".<sup>33</sup> Where theorists of world literature such as Casanova, Damrosch and Moretti focused on the characteristically modern and Western conflict between nationalism and liberal cosmopolitanism, Spivak demanded greater attention to "demographic, rather than territorial, frontiers that predate and are larger than capitalism" and to "the kind of collectives that belonged to the shifting multicultural empires that preceded monopoly capitalism".<sup>34</sup> Planetary thinking, in other words, was conceived as a conceptual tool for the study of relational and contingent spatial formations, but also as a practice of diachronic inquiry. For Spivak, it entailed attention to conflicting and discordant local practices, but also to the latent, historical temporalities that run counter to Eurocentric, teleological narratives of the modern emergence of nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

Similar political concerns have been voiced by researchers in the environmental humanities. Beyond the specific expertise of earth scientists, the Anthropocene has become a staging ground for controversies about environmental justice, the future of global capitalism and the political, economic and cultural causes and consequences of population growth, climate change and mass extinction.<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey's important contribution to the environmental humanities, for example, is suspicious of any narrative that presumes to speak for all of humanity, without sufficient attention to the inequities and injustices that divide people along axes of power. The propensity to periodize our age as a unique break in the human relation to the planet, DeLoughrey explains, can inhibit self-reflexivity and stand in the way of a necessary political critique of privileged nations, groups and classes: "The lack of engagement with postcolonial and Indigenous perspectives has shaped Anthropocene discourse to claim the novelty of crisis rather than being attentive to the historical continuity

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<sup>32</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 177.

<sup>34</sup> Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p. 15. Christopher Prendergast's response to Casanova further highlights the methodological limits of a comparative practice that foregrounds the national: "It is not that the national-competitive model is irrelevant; on the contrary, it can be made to do much useful work. In particular, it should be stressed that, unlike many of her precursors who deploy the competitive view, Casanova sees that, if the latter has any grip at all, it is at the level of the national, given that nation-state relations really do unfold historically as a field of rivalry. It is simply that in her hands it is made to do *all* the work, accorded such grand explanatory powers that it is effectively posited as capable of accounting for everything" (Christopher Prendergast, "Introduction", in *Debating World Literature* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), p. 11; author's italics).

<sup>35</sup> See Peter Barry and William Welstead (eds), *Extending Ecocriticism: Crisis, Collaboration and Challenges in the Environmental Humanities* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).



of dispossession and disaster caused by empire”.<sup>36</sup> In line with these theoretical orientations, De Loughrey’s own critical account of the climate crisis does not seek to obscure the reality of world-shattering change in the present age, but reaches out for perspectives that revitalize and reformulate the bonds between constellations that are frequently cast as disconnected and incompatible totalities: present and past, the global and the local, human and nonhuman nature. This is particularly evident from the author’s attention to postcolonial studies, a discipline that can shed light on the historical origins of our seemingly new, apocalyptic condition. From a postcolonial perspective, De Loughrey explains, the present “catastrophic ruptures to social and ecological systems have already been experienced through the violent processes of empire. In other words, the apocalypse has already happened; it continues because empire is a process”.<sup>37</sup>

Anthropocene discourse and twenty-first century world literature studies are thus best understood as closely related fields of inquiry, which are similarly rooted in a common political and ethical critique of advanced globalization. Beyond their immediate concern, respectively, with anthropogenic environmental degradation and with global cartographies of cultural production, they share a specific attention to state violence, involuntary migration and forced immobility, especially among those who are construed as aliens on the grounds of their class, ethnicity, gender or nationality. In light of such similarities and shared values, a more intensive dialogue between the two subject areas appears desirable and long overdue. In comparative literature, this challenge has been taken up with considerable vigour by Ursula Heise, whose numerous contributions map the growing transdisciplinary significance of environmental history, environmental philosophy and cultural geography, and their direct relevance to cultural and literary production.<sup>38</sup> Following Heise’s lead, Alexander Beecroft, Michael Cronin and Jennifer Wenzel, among others, have similarly explored the methodological and political influence of ecological thinking on world literature, from a variety of perspectives and – in Cronin’s and Wenzel’s case – with a specific focus on the complex and varied environmental pressures and conceptual challenges associated with the Anthropocene.<sup>39</sup> This growing interest from literary scholars, however, has not, until now, been reciprocated by environmental researchers in other disciplines, who have paid relatively little attention to world literature. The emergence of the Anthropocene as a distinctive reference point for cross-disciplinary dialogue therefore marks a particular challenge for comparatists, whose contribution, in Heise’s words, “arrived belatedly” and who have done

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<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> See especially Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); *Imagining Extinction: “Comparative Literature and the environmental humanities”*, in Ursula K. Heise (ed.), *Futures of Comparative Literature: ACLA State of the Discipline Report* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 293-301.

<sup>39</sup> See Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London and New York: Verso, 2015); Cronin, *Eco-Translation*; Jennifer Wenzel, *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature* (Fordham University Press, 2019).

little, until now, to prove the specific relevance “of their multilingual and cross-cultural research [...] for determining the scope, the limits, and the historically divergent implications of these emergent paradigms”.<sup>40</sup>

But let us return to the more specific issue of eco-translation. David Farrier’s recent, innovative study, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*, addresses environmental writing through three capacious poetic rubrics: intimacy, entanglement and swerve.<sup>41</sup> In the context of the present discussion, Farrier’s third and final category provides a particularly apt key to the critical understanding of more-than-human textual worlds. Indeed, Farrier frames his discussion of swerve as a response to Donna J. Haraway’s influential work on kinship, and endorses her claim that making kin is the most pressing ethical and political obligation in an era of haemorrhaging biodiversity.<sup>42</sup> But where Haraway has affirmed that “positive knowledge of and with animals might just be possible, knowledge that is positive in quite a radical sense”, Farrier contends that an emphasis on kinship risks to obscure the more complex and conflicting realities of the animal-human bond.<sup>43</sup> Reflecting on inter-species encounter in literature, Farrier remarks that “a turn towards the animal must also acknowledge and accommodate the fact that the animal other *turns away*, sometimes fleeing contact but always withdrawing into its impregnable *Umwelt*”.<sup>44</sup> In Farrier’s study, this gesture of turning away is described as the central, defining gesture of a particular form of Anthropocene poetics: *clinamen*. Any post-anthropocentric *longing* for the non-human others – in the extended sense that has been given to this term by Deborah Bird Rose – therefore finds its necessary counterpart, for Farrier, in the difficult self-awareness that is inherent to inter-species encounter: as we intentionally incline towards the other, we simultaneously perceive an irreducible difference.<sup>45</sup>

Tropes such as metaphor (in which an object is torqued into a new set of relations by the interplay of similarity and difference), apostrophe (whereby the speaker turns away to address another), or citation (which situates a poem in a chain of contiguous relations, some of which swerve away from their original contexts) – these forms of *clinamen* can provide frameworks for thinking about an intentional turn towards the nonhuman life that is also a turn back to the (newly strange) self.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ursula K. Heise, “Introduction”, in Heise, *Futures of Comparative Literature*, pp. 1-8 (6-7).

<sup>41</sup> David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

<sup>42</sup> See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, 89, author’s italics.

<sup>45</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, 90-91.

Like Cronin, in his work on eco-translation, Farrier explicitly positions his considerations in the context of the current, catastrophic scale of mass extinction. “More than any other environmental crisis”, he surmises, “extinction pitches us into deep time: into awareness of the richness of our inheritance from the deep past and the depleted legacy we will leave to the deep future”.<sup>47</sup> This means, for Farrier, that any notion of inter-species encounter must move beyond the naïve desire for a utopian commingling: difference always remains, and this difference is invariably tinged with the awareness of systemic and asymmetric relations of violence. Farrier reminds us that encounters with non-human others are increasingly experienced, by humans, as a dark and ominous marker of unfolding catastrophe. Species loss is occurring globally at an unprecedented rate, and marks a consistent threat to ecosystems, but also to human survival. In this context, eco-translation acquires a political and ethical urgency that exceeds the focus on mutual respect of Cronin’s study. The non-human animal is no longer a neutral figure of alterity, as David Farrier observes, but has become “a spectral presence [...] and the harbinger of a future haunting”.<sup>48</sup> Mass extinction requires us to re-think what we mean by “human” and “animal”, and to examine the history of this question, in human-animal studies.

What is it like to be a bat?<sup>49</sup> When philosopher Thomas Nagel asked this question, more than forty years ago, he wished to draw attention to the subjective character of conscious experience: the unique phenomenon that, for Nagel, is essentially connected with every single human and nonhuman point of view and that cannot be described in objective, physical terms. We all believe, Nagel remarks, that bats experience the world. And yet, their range of activity and sensory apparatus are so profoundly different from ours that it seems impossible for us to imagine what their subjective experience might be like. For how could we think and feel the world through different senses? “It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one’s arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one’s mouth”, writes the philosopher, or “that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one’s feet in an attic”.<sup>50</sup> Even if we were able to imagine this – and Nagel appears doubtful – then we would only be imagining what it is like, for *us*, to behave as a bat behaves: “To the extent that I could look and behave like a wasp or a bat, without changing my fundamental structure, my experiences would not be anything like the experiences of those animals”.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 121.

<sup>49</sup> Some of the discussion of Thomas Nagel that follows has been adapted from my contribution to Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan (eds), *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, *The Philosophical Review*, 83:4 (1974), 435-450: 439; now in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 179).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

There is something strangely suggestive about the idea of a distinguished philosopher performing the sensory habits of microchiroptera. Nagel's thought-experiment anticipates the grotesque, humanoid animal figures brought to life in numerous recent works of video and performance art: from Jan Fabre's *A Consilience* (2000), in which specialists at the London Natural History Museum dress as the animals of their research, to the melancholy bear-man in Mark Wallinger's *Sleeper* (2004), and from Marcus Coates' surreal stag-man in *Journey to the Lower World* (2004) to Edwina Ashton's two-minute video *Bat* (2005), in which a costumed human in the guise of the leathery-winged creature obsessively polishes the inside of a cramped, dusty broom cupboard.<sup>52</sup> Such apparent similarities, however, do not point towards a common purpose or shared understanding of the animal other: when it comes to eco-translation, Nagel is significantly more pessimistic than his playful, twenty-first century counterparts.

As cultural critic Ron Broglio observes, contemporary art often stages the relation with the nonhuman as a contact between radically different worlds: a troubling encounter at the limits of human perception, where "the friction and opacity of other ways of being" resists full assimilation into human language, but triggers "a sense of infectious wonder" that becomes the enabling condition for artistic creativity.<sup>53</sup> According to Broglio, creative engagement with nonhuman animal worlds is ethical, precisely because it transcends our ability to comprehend. "Absolute knowledge", he writes, "and full presence [are] denied to the viewer [but] we sense that there is something beneath the surface of the animal", and it is this opaque, incomplete awareness that reminds us that humans and the more-than-human world do not only interact but, more importantly, are co-constitutive.<sup>54</sup> Creative explorations of animal phenomenology, in other words, enable new forms of shared knowledge, beyond the familiar scaffolding of anthropocentric humanism. Their open-ended engagement with the more-than-human world "draws us into an endless progression of other questions about specific animals and their lives".<sup>55</sup> Nagel's critique of materialist theories of mind, by contrast, treats the interiority of animal experience, from a human point of view, as absolutely unintelligible: "Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited".<sup>56</sup> Pronouns are revealing, in this context. While the first person singular and plural are used by Nagel to denote humanity, without regard to historical or cultural difference, this sense of shared belonging is never extended to nonhuman animals.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jan Fabre, *A Consilience*, video, 2000; Mark Wallinger, *Sleeper*, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, performance, 14-22 October 2004; Marcus Coates, *Journey to the Lower World*, video, 2004; Edwina Ashton, *Bat*, video, 2005. For further discussion of some of these works, see Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000); *Artist/Animal* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xx and xxiii.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, xxii.

<sup>56</sup> Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", 439.

<sup>57</sup> On ecological pronouns, see Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), 3-4.

Nagel readily admits that there is some continuity of traits, including psychological traits, among closely related species, but rejects the idea that humanlike mental states may be inferred from humanlike behaviour. Humans regularly refer to nonhuman animals to exemplify values, experiences and fantasies, but such seemingly sympathetic representations of the nonhuman, for Nagel, are merely anthropocentric projections. Indeed, the philosopher remarks, human empathy and sympathy tend to focus on a relatively small group of large, vaguely anthropomorphic mammals: “I have chosen bats instead of wasps or flounders because if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all”.<sup>58</sup>

Nagel’s robust critique of anthropocentrism thus relies on a peculiarly anthropocentric contention: for Nagel, there cannot be any symbolic opening to the more-than-human world. The nonhuman animal is not literally without a language, but its darkness or muteness, for *us*, is absolute. Viewed from an ethical perspective, this “skeptical terror about the independent existence of other minds”, as animal trainer and poet Vicki Hearn puts it, appears to drive a problematic fantasy of essential difference that runs counter to actual experiences of human contingency and materiality, and to everyday interactions between creatures with vastly different phenomenologies.<sup>59</sup> Contemporary accounts of animality and humanity have mostly embraced Hearn’s position, and have sought to illuminate the numerous and profound relations between species. The challenge, as Paul Waldau puts it, has been to get beyond human-centredness and to develop multiple focal points, including an inquiry into “the actual biological, communal, individual, and even personal realities” of nonhuman species.<sup>60</sup> This attention to shared imaginative and ethical faculties, at the intersection of the human and the nonhuman, runs directly counter to traditional anthropocentric worldviews, in which the animal is depicted as having limited facilities, measured against every standard in which humans consider themselves superior, and dismissed as inferior to the human, or so foreign as to be untranslatable. Recent studies, by contrast, show that numerous nonhuman species possess the capabilities deemed necessary for subjectivity: self-consciousness, rational agency, the capacity to learn and transmit language.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, cross-species semiosis has been re-defined, no longer in terms of a more or less complete access to a single (human) ideological and linguistic system, but on the basis of affective patterns that are grounded in a shared prelinguistic or counterlinguistic sense of belonging. As Kari Weil explains, our superior scientific understanding of animal lives and cultures – through advances in biology, anthropology and ethics – has destabilized

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<sup>58</sup> Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, 438.

<sup>59</sup> Vicki Hearn, *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name* (New York: Random House, 1987), 223. Consider also Frans de Waal’s definition of “athropodenial”, i.e. the refusal to acknowledge meaningful similarities between nonhuman and human animals: Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 59-68.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Waldau, *Animal Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer (eds), *The Great Ape Project* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1993).

conventional ideas of the primacy of the human, but has also drawn attention “to the ways animals resist our tools of analysis even as they succumb to our invasive and dominating need to know”.<sup>62</sup> As a result, communication between species is no longer viewed as an asymmetrical relation that privileges the human, but explored through transdisciplinary metaphors of translation and mediation that have their origin in the comparative humanities.

In this context, Nagel’s question, too, has developed a cultural life of its own. Les Murray’s poem “Bat’s Ultrasound”, for example, makes a subtle effort to give voice to the seemingly inscrutable, winged protagonist of Nagel’s inquiry. Bewildering juxtapositions of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic onomatopoeia work here to erode conceptual boundaries, trigger complex and contradictory longings for attachment, and dislodge the reader from her supposedly objective standpoint, as can be seen from the following, profoundly lyrical exclamation:

*ah, eyrie-ire; aero hour, eh?  
O'er our ur-area (our era aye  
ere your raw row) we air our array  
err, yaw, row wry—aura our orrery,  
our eerie ü our ray, our arrow.*

*A rare ear, our aery Yahweh.*<sup>63</sup>

A similarly radical, but differently imaginative response to Nagel comes from the Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello: the fictional protagonist of J.M. Coetzee’s 1997 Tanner Lectures: *The Lives of Animals*.<sup>64</sup> Written in the form of two linked short stories, this hybrid text narrates Costello’s visit to a North American college, where she has been invited to give two public talks on nonhuman animal life. Foregrounding the tension between philosophical and literary perspectives, Costello proclaims that philosophical anthropocentrism, from a moral standpoint, is simply a failure of the imagination. Human exceptionalism – the belief that humans are essentially different from all other species – is a dogmatic slumber, that makes us oblivious to the demands of biosocial kinship. Against this tendency, Costello evokes the power of a sympathetic, creative imagination, which she believes can fully capture the experiences of different species: “If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed”, she declares, “then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a

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<sup>62</sup> Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 23.

<sup>63</sup> Les Murray, “Bat’s Ultrasound” (1992) in *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1998), 368.; author’s italics. The poem is also available at <http://www.lesmurray.org>, consulted on 9 April 2019. I am grateful to Gillian Beer, who first introduced me to this poem.

<sup>64</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. and introduction by Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). A revised version, without footnotes, was reprinted in *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2003).

chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life”.<sup>65</sup> And, in specific response to Thomas Nagel, she proclaims:

But he is wrong; or at least he is sending us down a false trail. To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat being in the first case, human being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is joy.<sup>66</sup>

What is it like to be an animal? To make sense of this question, Jacques Derrida surmises, we must think beyond the pseudo-concept of “the animal”, used in the singular, as though all nonhuman species from the oyster to the chimpanzee constituted a homogenous set to which human beings are radically opposed.<sup>67</sup> “The animal” in the singular, for Derrida, epitomizes our species’ logocentric desire for mastery, which he believes is embraced and taken for granted by Western philosophers from Aristotle to Martin Heidegger. As historian Aaron Gross intimates: “When the reality of animals becomes ‘the animal’ – that is, a foil and shadow of the human – an opportunity arises, which may or may not be actualized, to forget animals themselves”.<sup>68</sup> For Derrida, this potential “absenting of animals” – our actual, existing fellow creatures – finds its logical and moral counterpoint in a utopian desire for the absence of *the animal*, understood as an abstract category. At a lexical level, this utopian longing is marked by Derrida’s neologism *animot*: a word which, when spoken in French, recalls the extreme diversity of actual animals (*animaux*) that the abstract category erases, but that also makes us aware, in a typically Derridean shift of signification, that we inevitably depend on the abstract singular (*animal*) which is nothing more, precisely, than a word (*mot*).

Derrida’s robust critique of “carnophallogocentric” Western philosophy echoes profoundly in contemporary human-animal studies, and has inspired an influx of radical voices and visions, across disciplines, and a new idiom centred on companionship and shared vulnerability.<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Costello’s attack on anthropocentrism, in *The Lives of Animals*, is an integral part of this cultural project. As philosopher Cora Diamond has argued, Coetzee’s lectures articulate an existential “woundedness or hauntedness”: a painful awareness of the horror of what we do to animals, and an astonishment and incomprehension that this violence should be

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<sup>65</sup> Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 80.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>67</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, English translation by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>68</sup> Aaron Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 187-88.

<sup>69</sup> See especially Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to be Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); *Before the Law: Humans and other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013). For a summary of the debate, see Susan McHugh and Garry Marvin (eds), *Human-Animal Studies*, 4 vols, (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

inflicted on beings who are so capable of being our companions.<sup>70</sup> Costello, writes philosopher Ian Hacking, “is shattered by the meat industry, our callow inability to recognize and respect animal lives as lived, our creation of imbecile experiments on them, and our arrogant philosophies about them. She hates our incessant pointing at animals combined with our complete indifference to all but the pets”.<sup>71</sup> Hidden away in laboratories and factory farms, slaughtered at mass disassembly plants and transformed into sanitised packages of meat, nonhuman animals have become a focus for reflection in ethics, cultural and literary studies, sociology, anthropology and economics, because, paradoxically, they have ceased to be visible in the daily experience of most humans. As cultural critic Akira Mizuta Lippit points out, “modernity can be defined by the disappearance of wildlife from humanity’s habitat and by the reappearance of the same in humanity’s reflections on itself”.<sup>72</sup>

As the shared future of our damaged planet appears increasingly uncertain, it is time to ask whether the concept of the animal – with its rich and nuanced history of controversy around essence, vulnerability and the possibility of encounter – still offers a sufficient guide to ethical and artistic practice.<sup>73</sup> In this contribution, I have suggested that the rich theoretical legacy of human-animal studies continues to serve as an important methodological reference point, at the intersection of world literature and the environmental humanities. It enables us to re-think categories of humanity and animality and to re-imagine environmental threats, not as ominous signs of an apocalypse-to-come but as markers of the fundamental unpredictability of post-holocene societies and ecologies. Critical engagement with language as a problematic marker of human exceptionalism has been central to this ongoing debate. Discussions of world literature, until recently, were largely focused on symbols of global unity and interconnectedness. According to Michael Cronin, “as the images of the globe proliferate, often ironically to mobilize ecological awareness, the danger is that these images themselves distort our relationship to our physical and cultural environment by continually situating us at a distance, by abstracting and subtracting us from our local attachments and responsibilities”.<sup>74</sup> By contrast, the emergent paradigm of eco-translation resists this stance of detached spectatorship. For this reason, it answers the political and aesthetic demand, issued by anthropologist Tim Ingold, to shift our attention away from universalism and towards the fluid matrix of lived experience.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy”, *Partial Answers*, 1:2 (2003), 1-26.

<sup>71</sup> Ian Hacking, “Deflections” in Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond et al, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 139-172: 144.

<sup>72</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 2-3.

<sup>73</sup> I address this question in Florian Mussgnug, “Species at War? The Animal and the Anthropocene”, *Paragraph*, 42:1 (2019), 116-130.

<sup>74</sup> Cronin, *The Expanding World*, 25-26.

<sup>75</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 211.



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