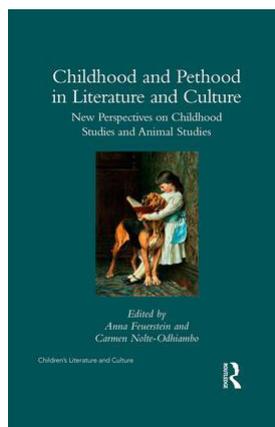


Review/Recension

ANNA FEUERSTEIN &  
CARMEN NOLTE-ODHIAMBO  
(RED.)  
**CHILDHOOD  
AND PETHOOD IN  
LITERATURE AND  
CULTURE**  
**New Perspectives on  
Childhood Studies and  
Animal Studies**

New York: Routledge, 2017 (275 s.)



From an environmental historical perspective the transition from an anthropocentric view of nature to an “ecocentric” or “biocentric” one took place some time during the previous century. Since then, at least two major discourses have interacted so as to produce today’s intersecting discourses of environmental ethics and awareness on the one hand, including ecocriticism and animal studies, and discourse of human emancipation on the other. The latter and pronouncedly older discourse goes back to the Enlightenment and the birth of the ideal of liberation and equality. The more recent discourse has produced awareness and knowledge of our (that is, humans) ambiguous dependence on the natural environment. The fact that this dependence has been continuously handled in many utterly destructive ways is part and parcel of present-day politics, popular culture, and public life, as well as of academic research in many fields. The outlook is becoming ever more pressing: some of the world’s most prominent scientists give humankind 35 more years on earth before life becomes unbearable, not to say impossible, for humans and other mammals alike. Interestingly, this perspective takes us back to an anthropocentric position (that is, a “we must save nature to save ourselves” position), but it also draws attention to a relation of proximity between human beings and many animals, and thus re-connects to the liberation discourse by proxy. The ideal of emancipation and the increasing amount of environmental knowledge consequently interrelate.

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Citation: Barnboken - tidskrift för barnlitteraturforskning/Barnboken - Journal of Children's Literature Research, Vol. 41, 2018 <http://dx.doi.org/10.14811/clr.v41i0.318>

Out of this context, new fields of research have subsequently appeared in the (environmental) humanities. One recent example of such research is Anna Feuerstein's and Carmen Nolte-Odhiambo's edited volume *Childhood and Pethood in Literature and Culture: Perspectives on Childhood Studies and Animal Studies*. The editors state that the volume is the first work that relates the study of "pets" to the study of children. The reason for this undertaking seems obvious: as the editors point out, children and companion animals often ambiguously occupy similar in-between positions in the Western world. Regarding popular companion animals such as dogs and cats as "furry children" undermines both animals and children and threatens to strip them of their respective uniqueness. Moreover, in doing so, both animal agency and children's agency become disregarded.

These initial acknowledgements give rise to a number of productive and valuable questions, which are skillfully and convincingly discussed in some of the individual contributions to the book. James Gillett's chapter "Adoption, Custody and Protection: The Childhood of Pets as a Critique of Legal Classification Systems" is remarkably clarifying in showing how the legal context in which companion animals are perceived and defined works as a mirror, reflecting the entire ambivalent status of animals in our culture. Another interesting contribution is Justyna Struzik's and Paula Pustulka's chapter "Transgressing the 'Luggage' Metaphor: Children and Pets as Migrants in the Context of Contemporary International Mobility from Poland to Norway", in which the position of companion animals and children are studied through the lens of transnational mobility. Also worth mentioning is Kelly Hübber's chapter "Mister Dog Is a Conservative: Representations of Children and/as Animals in Three *Little Golden Books*", which offers a flexible and varied reading of three stories in the popular children's series *Little Golden Books*.

Nevertheless, a number of contributions also produce some rather absurd terminology and conclusions. Whereas research into evolutionary biology and animal behavior shows that it is fully motivated to acknowledge animal agency, walking the line between human epistemology and animal behavior is indeed an act of tender balance. Yes, animal language needs to be translated into human language in order for humans to understand non-human animals, at least to some degree. But can we really talk about "an animal's beliefs", without some kind of scientific metatext?

Paradoxically, it must also be stated that many contributions to this volume is better than the volume as a whole. The starting-point outlined by the editors in the introduction is problematic because of its overly heavy dependence on Foucauldian terminology and

thought. While it is obvious that a critical discussion of relations between humans and non-human animals cannot avoid addressing issues of power, a rigid reliance on “power” in the name of a “cultural politics” produces dogmatic and sterile analyses and readings, which is often the case in this book. The idea of power is indeed blinding in *Childhood and Pethood in Literature and Culture*, and at times the concept produces explicitly stultified readings. Wishing for a more flexible study and therefore looking for the name of Gilles Deleuze in the index, one notices that it is missing, although a few contributors do use some of his ideas (even if not those of a more fluid kind). Perhaps this can be considered significant; the Deleuzian idea of “escape words” could have been productive in this context of human-animal relations. One obvious example is the cover image, which the editors analyze with no attention paid to the pictured dog’s inherent agency, providing the means of potential and immediate escape. The analysis of the image, to which the editors give great exemplifying power, is overall rather naive. Donna Haraway, on the other hand, is often present, but even more could have been made of her valuable *Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003).

Considering, as I do in this review, the wider context of severe environmental problems that threaten all of us, humans and non-humans alike, the Foucauldian perspective seems to a certain extent both dated, inflexible, and – tautological. Power is always with us so why always talk about it? This sentence could of course be reversed: Because power is always with us, we must talk about it. Exclusively analyzing power relations between humans and non-humans, however, is not enough at present. As we as humans can never entirely rid ourselves of a certain degree of anthropocentrism, power will always be displaced and supplemented by one more expression of power. In order to respond to the pressing demands of the Anthropocene, we need to shift the perspective and complement the analysis of power relations with ideas of interfaces, contact zones (a concept that does occur in the present volume), territories, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, acceleration, deceleration, shared space, refrains, mobility, escape words. Concepts such as these could well have complemented that of power as starting points for this particular study.

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