

M A R I A M O S S

“Their deaths are not elegant” – Portrayals of Animals in Margaret Atwood’s Writings

Zusammenfassung

Viele Werke von Margaret Atwood, literaturgeschichtliche sowie Lyrik und Prosa, kreisen um das Schicksal von Tieren – in der Wildnis, als domestizierte Haus- und Nutztiere und als Objekte in Versuchslabors. Obwohl in ihren Werken Tiere nie das Animalische verlieren, fungieren sie bei Atwood doch häufig als Symbol für die schwierige Identitätssuche Kanadas. Erst zu Ende des 20. und zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts scheinen Tiere in Atwoods Texten das Symbolhafte zu verlieren und eine eigenständigere Rolle zu spielen. Von nun an sind ihre Schriften nicht nur von der Verflechtung zwischen Menschen und Tieren geprägt, sondern auch von den jeweiligen gegenseitigen Abhängigkeiten. Um diese Entwicklung zu untersuchen, werde ich im vorliegenden Artikel drei fiktionale Texte von Margaret Atwood näher beleuchten: ihren frühen Roman *Surfacing* (1972), den dystopischen Roman *Oryx and Crake* (2003) sowie die Titelgeschichte ihrer Kurzgeschichtensammlung *Moral Disorder* (2006).

Abstract

Margaret Atwood, as both an influential literary critic and a highly accomplished writer of poetry, short stories and novels, concentrates in much of her writings on the lives of animals – in the wilderness, as domesticated pets or as laboratory objects. Whereas especially in Atwood’s earlier texts, animals frequently function as symbols of Canadian identity (or the lack thereof), Atwood starts focusing on the plight of animals apart from any notion of a Canadian identity crisis in her later writings at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Instead, she employs the fates of both humans and animals to demonstrate our mutual dependencies. By focusing on the formative roles played by animals in Atwood’s writings, I will analyse this development in three of her fictional texts which employ animals: her early novel, *Surfacing* (1972); the dystopian novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and the title story of her collection of short stories, *Moral Disorder* (2006).

Résumé

De nombreuses œuvres de Margaret Atwood, qu’elles relèvent de l’histoire de la littérature, de la prose ou de la poésie, traitent du destin des animaux: d’animaux sauvages, domestiques ou de ferme ou encore animaux de laboratoire. Bien qu’ils ne perdent rien

*de leur animalité dans ses œuvres, ils sont chez Atwood souvent le symbole de la complexe recherche d'identité canadienne. Ce n'est qu'à la fin du 20e et au début du 21e siècle que les animaux semblent perdre ce côté symbolique dans les textes d'Atwood et commencent à jouer un rôle qui leur est propre. A partir de ce moment, ses textes ne sont plus seulement marqués par l'enchevêtrement des liens existant entre êtres humains et animaux, mais aussi par leurs dépendances réciproques. Afin d'étudier ce développement, nous analyserons dans cet article trois textes de fiction de Margaret Atwood : le roman de ses débuts *Surfacing* (1972), le roman dystopique *Oryx and Crake* (2003) ainsi que la nouvelle éponyme de son recueil *Moral Disorder* (2006).*

In that country the animals
have the faces of people

...

In this country the animals
have the faces of
animals.

Their eyes
flash once in car headlights
and are gone.

Their deaths are not elegant.

They have the faces of
no-one.

(Margaret Atwood, "Animals",
in: *Selected Poems* 48-49)

Introduction

In her poem "Animals," Margaret Atwood points to the differences between the United States and Canada concerning the depiction of animals in mainstream literature. Whereas in US-American literature, Atwood writes, animals "have the faces of people," reflecting people's attitudes, morals, and emotions, in Canadian writings "animals/have the faces of/animals."¹ Although certainly a generalization, examples from US-American literature that suggest the truth of Atwood's poetic lines include, for instance, John Updike's "The Cats" and Richard Ford's "Puppy." In both short sto-

1 By assigning an entire line in her poem to the word "animals," Atwood further emphasizes the significance of animals in "this country," that is Canada.

ries, animals are mere “by-products,” reflecting mainly the protagonists’ emotional instabilities. With the notable exception of Jack London’s nineteenth-century stories and novels, portrayals of animals in US-American literature occur – if at all – primarily in Native texts, children’s stories or fables. It should come as no surprise that Canadian literature, abounding with descriptions of vast wilderness areas, would most certainly feature animals; yet, more importantly, these very animals are also considered subjects worthy of scholarly research.

Margaret Atwood, as both an influential literary critic and a highly accomplished writer of poetry, short stories and novels, concentrates in much of her writings on the lives of animals – in the wilderness, as domesticated pets or as laboratory objects. In all of her writings featuring animals they are foremost exactly this – animals; however, especially in Atwood’s earlier texts, animals frequently function as symbols of Canadian identity (or the lack thereof). It seems that only towards the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century does Atwood manage to focus on the plight of animals apart from any notion of a Canadian identity crisis. In more recent works, she employs the fates of both humans and animals to demonstrate our mutual dependencies. Human animals and non-human animals, it seems, have more in common than we normally realize.

By focusing on the formative roles played by animals in Atwood’s writings, I will analyse three of her fictional texts which employ animals: her early novel, *Surfacing* (1972); the dystopian novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and the title story of her collection of short stories, *Moral Disorder* (2006). I will examine to what extent she abides by the tenet she set for herself in her poetry as well as in her critical studies: That animals are living, breathing creatures and that the focus of stories featuring animals is on animals and not primarily – as so often is the case – on their ability to either affirm our human uniqueness or to shape and change human lives.

Animals in “this country”

When the two sisters and immigrant newcomers to Canada, Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie, began writing about their experiences in the New World in the mid-nineteenth century, it was still with the Victorian mentality of the Old World. However, while Parr Traill, who spent most of her life in Canada in rural communities, tried to overcome any apprehension towards her new environment by writing animal sketches and creating recipes for indigenous plants and vegetables, Susanna Moodie’s autobiographical wilderness text, *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), employs animals – frequently wolves – to externalize her fear of being devoured by the new and frightening world.

It was Charles G. D. Roberts who became the undisputed laureate of the animal kingdom towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In his 1902 publication, *The Kindred of the Wild*, Roberts writes: “The animal story is a potent emancipator. It frees us for a little from the world of shop-worn utilities, and from the mean tenement of self of which we do well to grow weary. It

helps us to return to nature, without requiring that we at the same time return to barbarism. It leads us back to the old kinship of earth ..." (28).² Both, Roberts and his contemporary, the nature writer Ernest Thompson Seton, were part of the romantic "back-to-nature" movement that swept through North America as a response to the growing industrialization and increasing rural exodus to the cities. John Sandlos observes that these authors' descriptions of animals as mindful and sentient, sometimes even rational, creatures, combined with their insistence on the natural kinship between humans and animals, eventually prompted "the creation of outdoor clubs, conservation groups, [and] the Boy Scouts" (77). In his introduction to *Lives of the Hunted* (1901), Seton states:

[M]y chief motive, my most earnest underlying wish, has been to stop the extermination of harmless wild animals. ... I have tried to stop the stupid and brutal work of destruction by an appeal – not to reason: that has failed hitherto – but to sympathy, and especially to the sympathies of the coming generation. (qtd. in Sandlos 81)³

Eventually, Seton's involvement with the animal world led him to become one of the most ardent advocates for animal rights: "Have the wild things no moral or legal rights? What right has man to inflict such long and fearful agony on a fellow-creature, simply because that creature does not speak his language?" (qtd. in Atwood, *Survival* 71).

While Parr Traill's and Moodie's writings almost a century earlier had featured animals as part of Canadian "local colour" for a Victorian audience in England, the early twentieth century narratives by Archibald Belaney, an English trapper who "went Native" and became Grey Owl, tell about his endeavour to rescue the beaver from certain extinction. Most notably *Men of the Last Frontier* (1931), a book which helped to change Canadian national policy, marks the beginning of animal-centred writings in twentieth century Canada. Just a little over thirty years later, Farley Mowat published his ground-breaking autobiographical text, *Never Cry Wolf* (1963), one of the great conservationists' writings of all times. Originally intended as a scientific government mission to locate and preferably exterminate Arctic wolves, Mowat describes his transformation from a hunter to a person who – through observation of a pack of arctic wolves – becomes increasingly attached to his intended "victims." Fascinated by their elaborate family structures and social networks, Mowat devoted his life to educating his fellow Canadians on the kinship that exists among wolves and other animals of the wild.

2 Roberts's other important publications include *Earth's Enigma* (1896), *Kings in Exile* (1910), and *Wisdom of the Wilderness* (1922).

3 Seton's other works include *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898), *The Tail of the Sandhill Stag* (1899), and *The Biography of a Grizzly* (1900).

In Canada, interest in the animal story as a genre worthy of scholarly attention arose in the 1960s and 1970s in the wake of the overall emergence of Canadian literary studies. Proponents of this movement were authors and critics such as Margaret Atwood, Northrop Frye, John Sandlos, James Polk, and Alec Lucas. Considered significant enough as a genre to be included in the *Literary History of Canada*, Alec Lucas's "Nature Writers and the Animal Story" outlines the Canadian fascination with animals in the romantic adventure story, the sentimentalized autobiography, and the realistic portrait. Lucas contends that as animals became less of a presence in urban landscapes, their appearance in literary texts increased, making them an even worthier subject of serious and devoted attention. In his 1972 publication, *Wilderness Writers*, Polk argues for the centrality of the animal story within Canadian literature, claiming that "the wilderness to us is more than just an empty place out there; it is a part of every Canadian's idea of himself and his country" (13-14). By employing animals in their fiction, Canadian writers, it seems, are not content to merely describe a moral dilemma or a social predicament; instead, they frequently acknowledge the creatures that share – and thus also constitute – their country.

In "Animal Victims," a chapter in her critical work, *Survival* (1972), Atwood acknowledges her indebtedness to Polk's analysis of the Canadian animal story and to their tragic endings that "tend to instil a certain fatalism in the reader ..." (55). Polk defined the sympathetic stance of writers such as Seton and Roberts towards the sometimes brutal fate of the "lives of the hunted" as a larger political allegory for Canada's colonial condition and "'victim' status as an American satellite" (qtd. in Sandlos 74). It is likely, Atwood agrees,

that Canadians themselves feel threatened and nearly extinct as a nation, and suffer also from life-denying experience as individuals – the culture threatens the 'animal' within them – and that their identification with animals is the expression of a deep-seated cultural fear. ... And for the Canadian animal, bare survival is the main aim in life, failure as an individual is inevitable, and extinction as a species is a distinct possibility. ("Victims" 79).

Atwood further posits that animals have always occupied a peculiarly central position in the Canadian imagination and that – unlike Europeans and US-Americans in their longer-settled and more densely-populated countries – Canadians have historically both cherished and feared their feathery and furry co-inhabitants. As opposed to British literature which features animals that are really "Englishmen in furry zippered suits, often with a layer of human clothing added on top [who] speak fluent English" or US-American literature which endows animals with symbolic qualities and features them mostly in Frontier-style hunting stories "with the interest centred squarely on the hunter" (Atwood, "Victims" 73), the Canadian animal story, Atwood claims, focuses on the animal, even if the stories result more often than not

in their deaths. These deaths, Atwood continues, are "seen as tragic or pathetic, *because the stories are told from the point of view of the animal.*" Consequently, "English animal stories are about 'social relations; American ones are about people killing animals; Canadian ones are about animals *being* killed, as felt emotionally from inside the fur and feathers" ("*Victims*" 74; emphasis in original).⁴

Marian Engel's *Bear*, published in 1976, marks one example of a novella featuring a bear that – as Fiamengo writes – refuses "to turn symbol" (5). Although depicted in realistic terms, the bear's presence is important only for helping the female protagonist, Lou, correct her warped sexuality. Having come to know the animal enables her to know more about herself and possibly even become more human. Musing on the function of animals in Canadian novels and stories, Lou – playing literary critic – reflects on their usually anthropomorphic depiction:

She had no idea what animals were about. They were creatures. They were not human. She supposed that their functions were defined by the size, shape and complications of their brains. She supposed they led dim, flickering, inarticulate psychic lives as well. [The bear], she saw, lay in the weak sun with his head on his paws. This did not lead her to presume that he suffered or did not suffer. That he would like striped or spotted pyjamas. Or that he would ever write a book about humans clothed in ursomorphic thoughts. (30)⁵

In the foreword to his collection of poetry, *The Broken Arc*, Michael Ondaatje, too, contemplates the role and function of animals in contemporary writings by exchanging the routinely anthropocentric view of animal depictions for an animal-focused perspective in poetry:

These are poems that look at animals from the inside out – not the other way round. We don't want to classify them or treat them as pets. We want you to imagine yourself pregnant and being chased and pounded to death by snowmobiles. We want you to feel the cage and the skin and fur on your shoulders. (6)

In his 2002 publication, "From Within Fur and Feathers: Animals in Canadian Literature," John Sandlos praises the moral and representational complexities of the Canadian animal story, viewing it "as a creative attempt to comprehend our rela-

4 For an overview of the differences between the treatment of animals in US-American and Canadian literature, see Atwood, "*Victims*" 73-74 and Polk 52-53.

5 Fisher claims that the bear in *Bear* belongs into a "postmodern animal kingdom" since he does not seem to respect the "boundary between the animal and the human" (259).

tionship to the other beings with which we co-inhabit the living world" (76).⁶ The Canadian tradition in animal writing is, he concludes, unique among world literatures and thus a "distinct achievement" (88). Animals, it is fair to say, have greatly stimulated the creativity of Canadian writers and the mentality of readers everywhere. Due to the abundance of novels and short stories dealing with animals and animal life, the animal story is the only literary genre for which a specifically Canadian origin has been claimed. "Animals are so fundamental to our writing," Janice Fiamengo states in her seminal work, *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination*, "that it might indeed be said that our literature is founded on the bodies of animals – alive or dead; anthropomorphized or 'realistic'; indigenous or exotic; sentimental, tragic, magical, and mythical" (5-6).

Additional interest in animal studies as a scholarly field slowly emerged in the last two decades of the twentieth century as the general interest in environmental issues – such as destruction of nature and threats to species – continued to grow, leading to numerous publications on a variety of ecological topics. The emergence of Critical Animal Studies (CAS) towards the end of the twentieth century marks a new chapter in animal studies worldwide. By seriously challenging the privileged status of the human, CAS attempts to reverse the earlier dictum that cognitive domains such as communication, emotion and tool use are reserved for humans only. By viewing animals as independent actors, CAS demand of us humans the ability to think beyond ourselves and examine the relationship between humans, animals and the environment.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin attempt an explanation for the ongoing interest in animal literature and animal studies in their 2010 publication, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. They claim that "[c]ontemporary humanity, having materially destroyed vast areas of wilderness [...] is now routinely configured as spiritually hollow, as lacking the essence of the human through the repression, withdrawal, destruction or absence, rather than latent threat, of the 'inner wild'" (134). However, destruction of natural habitats as the underlying driving force of both animal stories and animal studies does not seem to fit the vastness of the Canadian wilderness with its relatively low human population. Is it possible that Atwood's animal writings suggest a specifically Canadian reason – apart from animals as complex metaphors for humans and human situations, profound sites of empathy, or of a genre seen entirely in terms of the identity crisis of a nation?

In J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, the protagonist Elizabeth Costello, a famous novelist and an avid animal rights advocate, repeatedly points to the paradox of the totality of reason introduced by the philosophers of the Enlightenment: "[R]eason is simply a vast tautology. Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of

6 Sandlos gives two reasons why only few critics have thus far attempted a scholarly discourse on the animal story: First, it "may reflect an academic fear within the humanities that animals are a subject worthy of consideration," and second that there "may also be a fear of working with a form associated with children's literature" (footnote 1, 88).

the universe – what else should it do? Dethrone itself?" (25). There is still widespread denial that – both in terms of emotions and rationality – animals can lead complex lives, and the depiction of animals as emotional and rational beings always runs the risk of being dismissed as unscientific. "This situation," write Huggan and Tiffin,

is further complicated by two factors. First, hesitant as we are to accord complex emotions to animals, we are equally reluctant to admit our own involvement with them. We may acknowledge our love for particular pets ... but we *necessarily* disguise our feelings toward animals from ourselves. If we did not, the structure of most human societies, dependent as they are on animal products, would collapse. (194; emphasis in original)

At a point in time of mass species extinction, pervasive cruelty in factory farms and laboratory testing on animals, it seems necessary to confront the contradictions in our relations with animals who are often "both cherished family members and factory-raised and slaughtered food on the table – at times loved and wept over; at other times ignored" (Fiamengo 3).⁷ Indeed, increasingly incontrovertible evidence of both wild and domestic animal emotions and rational behaviors has led to scientific reconsiderations of our complex relationship to animals. This relationship is not only becoming more and more the subject of both stories and studies, it has also initiated controversy about the species boundary. If great apes are capable of serious reflection and social behavior, if dolphins enjoy an elaborate social networking system and if ravens and crows exhibit a degree of intelligence previously thought impossible, is it then still possible for us humans to consider them – animals – the "other"? Since Atwood's narrative strategy in her later works – focusing on the animal's point of view rather than viewing animals as complex allegories, as the mirror to human souls, or as proof for human uniqueness – would also mean a (however small) reduction of notions of anthropocentrism in Canadian animals stories, it might further be interesting to see if Atwood's specific representation of animal emotion and experience has managed to close the species divide – or at least to narrow the gap.

Animals in Margaret Atwood's Fiction

"This is a Christian world, you know. We only kill things that are useful or things we don't like."

"He doesn't mean Coyotes?" says Coyote.

"I suspect he does," says I. (King 196)

The "problem" with animals is that they can only be perceived and represented through our eyes, a fact which opens the huge can of worms called "anthropomor-

7 The focus on animal emotion and rationality, however, does not contradict the notion that an animal's capacity to feel pain – not its power to reason – should entitle it to moral consideration.

phism." It is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to incorporate animals into fictional texts without resorting to human structures of meaning when describing their emotions, thoughts and reflections. Yet, representation of some kind is necessary in order to incorporate animals into a work of literature (and into art in general). Speaking for animals in literature and literary criticism remains a formal and philosophical challenge and is always a double-edged sword: "both an exploration of the radical otherness of the animal and an intensely human, and human-centred, endeavour" (Fiamengo 2).

In earlier writings, Atwood – while employing realistic terminology and thus recognizing the reality of animals in Canadian writings – seems to judge their function as primarily allegorical or symbolic. In her 1972 novel *Surfacing*, Atwood not only addresses specifically Canadian concerns, but also confirms the crisis of humanism at large. The nameless narrator – a young, recently divorced woman – spends time with friends on a remote island in northern Canada when she observes a few young men in a canoe, fishing and drinking beer. She strongly suspects them of having killed the heron they had seen earlier, its wings spread on a bush like a Jesus-figure nailed to a cross. Identifying with the bird's fate while contemplating the helplessness of animals in our post-industrialized societies, the narrator is overcome by waves of disgust:

The innocents get slaughtered because they exist; I thought, there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience or piety; for them the only things worthy of life were human their own kind of human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks, laminated. It would have been different in those countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor or the child of a god, at least they would have felt guilt. (121-122)

Here, Atwood issues a warning to her fellow Canadians by employing an ironic twist to her story: The beer-drinking men are not US-Americans, but Canadians. The narrator feels disappointed, but nevertheless manages to justify her earlier prejudices:

It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the grain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. ... If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them. (123)

In these passages of *Surfacing*, Atwood echoes earlier concerns that any Canadian's "identification with animals is the expression of a deep-seated cultural fear" and

that "extinction as a species" – meaning both, animals and Canadians – "is a distinct possibility" ("Victims" 79). Thus, besides depicting the animal as victim, Atwood is also concerned with the description and destruction of colonialist attitudes, fictionalizing her concerns about Canadian independence and self-reliance.

When the female narrator compares the fishermen with "creatures from outer space, body snatchers injecting themselves into you dispossessing your brain, their eyes blank eggshells behind the dark glasses" (123), Atwood sets the tone for her 2003 dystopian novel, *Oryx and Crake*. Even more than *Surfacing*, *Oryx and Crake* features the limits of humanism by focusing on the suppression of both women and animals, thus echoing domination fantasies of "wild creatures" (or wilderness in general) previously considered untameable. In their posthumanist world, the Children of Crake (named after their egomaniacal creator) must live alongside other genetically modified creatures as well as a handful of desperate human remnants in a radically altered post-natural world. Reminiscent of Atwood's 1985 bestseller, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* provides a terrifying perspective on a future universe where new technologies are tested on unsuspecting victims in order to create a post-human race. In addition, animals are cross-bred in genetic engineering labs, resulting in terrifying new races:

The rakunks had begun as an after-hours hobby on the part of one of the OrganInc biolab hotshots. There'd been a lot of fooling around in those days: create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God. And a number of the experiments were destroyed because they were too dangerous to have around – who needed a cane toad with a prehensile tail like a chameleon's that might climb in through the bathroom window and blind you while you were brushing your teeth? Then there was the snat, an unfortunate blend of snake and rat; they'd had to get rid of those. But the rakunks caught on as pets inside OrganInc. They hadn't come in from the outside world ... so they had no foreign microbes and were safe for the pigeons (OC 51).

One of the few human-like beings in the novel is Crake, a modern-day Frankenstein who sees himself as an eco-warrior, trying to steer "the nature of nature in a direction more beneficial to those hitherto taken" (305). In reality, however, he does not shy away from infecting his life-long friend Jimmy – alias Snowman – with a deadly virus in order to complete his own ambitions of becoming master of a post-humanist universe, a universe where so-called science and rationality have eradicated all traces of the "natural":

"This is the latest," said Crake. What they were looking at was a large bulblike object that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of each

tube another bulb was growing. "What the hell is it?" said Jimmy. "Those are chickens," said Crake. "Chicken parts. Just the breasts, on this one. They've got ones that specialize in drumsticks too, twelve to a growth unit." "But there aren't any heads," said Jimmy. He grasped the concept – he'd grown up with *sus multiorganifer*, after all – but this thing was going too far. At least the pigeons of his childhood hadn't lacked heads. "That's the head in the middle," said the woman. "There's a mouth opening at the top, they dump the nutrients in there. No eyes or beak or anything, they don't need those." (OC 202)

Atwood describes a universe where exactly those characteristics that supposedly distinguish the realm of animals from that of humans have managed to dissolve, thereby eradicating even the last traces of nature. The visible results of this "warped eugenicist fantasy" (Huggan/Tiffin 210) are the Children of Crake, hybrid products of the latest form of technological purism. Their natural innocence has been artificially created, and their non-competitive habits have, once and for all, driven destructive instincts out of the ancient primate brain. Whereas Crake is the mastermind behind this new technology, *Oryx* is a young Asian girl sold off by impoverished parents and later – after a "career" as a sex slave – shipped via sex trafficking routes to North America.

Alice Walker has commented on the combination of postcolonial and eco-critical perspectives that also inform *Oryx and Crake*. The processes prevalent in the enslavement of black people (and, by implication, other enslaved groups such as child prostitutes like *Oryx*) and the enslavement of animals, she claims, work according to the same dynamics. In each case, the denigrated group inhabits the margin: The same way animals are being "othered," people of colour are being denied agency, that is status as fully human. Walker points to the analogy between cruelty to animals and slavery, maintaining that animals, just like Blacks or women, have been (and are being) mistreated on the grounds of morally irrelevant physiological differences:

It is a comparison that, even for those of us who recognise its validity, is a difficult one to face. Especially if we are descendants of slaves. Or of slave owners. Or of both. Especially so if we are responsible in some way for the present treatment of animals – participating in the profits from animal research (medicine, lipstick, lotions) and animal raising (food, body parts). In short, if we are complicit in their enslavement and destruction, which is to say, if we are, at this juncture in history, master. (qtd. in Huggan/Tiffin 136)

By addressing colonial situations and comparing the fate of animals to that of marginalized and suppressed humans, the novel posits animals as valid subjects for

inclusion in both – ecocritical and postcolonial – discourses. *Oryx and Crake* thereby successfully creates not only a basis enabling a re-theorising of the place of animals in relation to humans and human societies, but succeeds in narrowing the gap separating our species.

Postcolonialism does not play a role in Atwood's title story of her 2006 collection of short stories, *Moral Disorder*. To the contrary, at first the world of rural Canada seems as beautiful as it can possibly get, deserving of attributes such as cheerful, lovely, and graceful: "There's never been such a lovely spring," Nell, girlfriend of Tig, thinks. They recently bought an old farmhouse and now enjoy their natural paradise: The "hawthorn bushes and the wild plums and the neglected apple trees came into bloom, and an uneven row of daffodils planted by some long-vanished farmer's wife thrust up through the weeds and dead grasses beside the drive. Birds sang" (145). While relaxing on their patio, Nell and Tig observe an owl teaching her young to hunt:

For practise they were using the twelve ducklings Tig had bought and installed on the pond. ... The owl swooped down in silence down [sic] over the surface of the pond where the ducklings ignorantly paddled, snatching a duckling a night, carrying each one up to the cavity in the dead tree where she had her nest, then rending the duckling apart and sharing it out to the young to be gobbled down, until all twelve ducklings were gone. (146)

While these events might at first sight be considered normal occurrences in a natural environment, they are really not. While the owl's behaviour is certainly natural, it is not natural for ducklings to be motherless, and the reader cannot help but suspect that Tig bought them for just such experiments. Tig's reaction at the end of twelve days, "Such grace" (146), reveals the distinction he makes between "wild" – and thus real – animals (the owl) and "domesticated" – and thus unreal – animals (the ducklings). By buying motherless and helpless ducklings, presenting them as "fast food" to the animals of the wild and watching the "spectacle" from the safety of a deck chair, Tig has become a killer of the innocent and unsuspecting. Similarly, when one of the two geese Tig bought injures its leg, Nell gives it to a neighbour. While she vaguely hopes the farmwoman will apply a remedy to heal the wounded leg, Nell isn't in the least surprised when the goose comes back, packaged and ready to be eaten. Since it would confirm the image Nell has of herself, she pretends to care; in reality, however, she does not. She only notices that the "remaining goose ... wandered around for a while, looking sad" (156). Nell's reaction perfectly matches the observations made by Huggan and Tiffin mentioned earlier: We need to hide our involvement with animals from ourselves; if not, we run the risk of not only endangering the structure of society, but also the structure of our own involvements.

Like in many of Atwood's novels and stories, the cruelty towards animals (sometimes intended, sometimes unintended) is mirrored with cruelty (sometimes intended, sometimes unintended) towards women. Tig, for instance, keeps buying household and garden equipment, disguising them as "gifts: a trowel, a ball of twine, a roll of plastic mulch" (153). While Tig enjoys time out with his two sons and farmers from the nearby community, Nell is busy with the garden: She "didn't go along on these jaunts; she wasn't invited. The rule of the farmers' coffee group was men only. This was not stated, it was a given" (153). Instead, Nell increasingly drifts off into a "vegetable" world all her own: "She wanted generosity, abundance, an overflowing of fecundity, as in Renaissance paintings of fruitful goddesses – Demeter, Pomona – in flowing robes with one breast bare and glowing edibles tumbling out of their baskets" (157).

When one February the recently added ewe population had babies, one mother rejects the smallest one of three lambs, and Nell takes it into the house: "Day by day the lamb grew stronger. Nell cradled it in her arms while feeding it; she was embarrassed to find herself rocking it and singing to it." However, she "wasn't going to fall into the trap of naming it" (170). Nevertheless, the lamb attaches itself to Nell, and while this attachment grows, the lamb gets increasingly hostile towards Tig. At one point, the now fully grown lamb attacks him: "'He thinks it's a contest,' said Nell. 'He's in love with you,' said Tig. 'I'm glad somebody is,' said Nell" (171). This short conversation delineates the benefits and dangers of anthropomorphic representations: Although it might be an exaggeration to speak of the animal's "love" for Nell, the lamb's obvious aversion towards the man of the household and the actions it takes cannot be denied. Nell, whose response "I'm glad somebody is" denotes her distrust of Tig's affection, cannot, however, take the next step – trusting the animal's emotional wisdom. Instead, Tig and Nell tie up the lamb, put him into the trunk of their car, and drive the badly bleating animal towards Anderson's Custom Slaughtering. He's doomed, Nell thinks, "for no crime except the crime of being himself" (174). A few days later, the lamb is delivered "in a white oblong cardboard box." Beside the "tender pink chops" Nell also discovers "two little kidneys, and a delicate heart" (177).

Nell now knows that in order to maintain her relationship with Tig she will need to pay a price. She will need to become cunning, she will need to roll up "her sleeves and dispense with sentimentality, and do whatever blood-soaked, bad-smelling thing had to be done." She will have to become "adept with axes" (177). In the story, there seems to be only one being – four-legged and woolly – who instinctively feels Nell's dilemma and tries to protect her, thereby conclusively proving both the limitations of the human and the humanity of the animal. It seems Nell chose the wrong being to dispense of; thus, her "moral disorder" is far from over.

By focusing on the plight of the lamb, Atwood manages to free her writings from the animals' previously inaccessible otherness as either already dead (as in *Surfacing*) or as an artificial sci-fi monstrosity (as in *Oryx and Crake*). In addition, by avoid-

ing the full spectrum of anthropocentrism (although Nell cuddles the lamb, she does not name it and even agrees to kill it), Atwood demonstrates both the incapability of humans to understand animal behaviour *and* the capability of animals to understand human behaviour. Thereby, she manages to narrow the species divide. Moreover, with Tig and Nell Atwood paints a picture of contemporary society: We all know what is going on, but participate – sometimes consciously, sometimes unthinkingly – in the continuation of the animals' plight. By not looking away – as does one of her protagonists, Nell – but instead focusing on the animal as an individual, Atwood shows the animal as a morally intact victim and its human co-inhabitants and caretakers – and by implications most of us – as morally corrupt.

Conclusion

The dead beast, turned up
(brown fur on back and white
on the belly), lay on the roadway,
its paws extended in the air –
worn-out attitude of prayer.

It was beautiful on the well-travelled roadway
with its dead black lips: God help me,
I did not even know what it was.
I had been walking into the city then,
early, with my own name in mind.
(John Newlove, "The Well-Travelled Roadway";
qtd. in Atwood, *Survival* 71)

Her earlier novel, *Surfacing*, still echoes many of Atwood's thoughts as presented in her scholarly work on Canadian literature, *Survival*. Both published in 1972, the focus concerning the presence of animals is not mainly on the plight of animals, but on the dilemma of a nation trying to find its identity or, at the very least, not losing the however fragile feeling of self-esteem. *Oryx and Crake*, as did *The Handmaid's Tale* almost two decades earlier, marks Atwood's move away from the narrow focus of a Canadian identity crisis to concerns with global ecological ramifications. By focusing on a wide array of topics that involve both humans and animals such as marginalization, genetic engineering and alternative creationism, *Oryx and Crake* manages to intertwine the fates of both humans and animals. Atwood thereby emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging our furry, feathery and scaly co-inhabitants not as the "other," but as – in many instances – the "same."

In her story of a young couple, "Moral Disorder," Atwood focuses on specific animals to point to a variety of accepted behaviors towards animals on a farm in rural Canada. Although a concern for patriarchal structures is still noticeable, the female protagonist Nell is seen as largely responsible for her own fate. She had her help-

mate which – unlike in many other Atwood novels and stories – was neither another woman nor an understanding soul mate, but a lamb.

In her analysis of the animal story in Canadian literature as focusing – rather than on human states of mind – on the animals' point of view, Atwood carves out a special place for the animal story within Canadian literature as well as for Canadian literature among world literatures. What accords Atwood a special place among many of her contemporaries is her repeated insistence, both as novelist and scholar, to neither neglect the animals' perspectives nor leave out their fate – however gruesome that might be. By constructing the actuality of the animal rather than hiding it behind a shield of symbolism and metaphor, Atwood challenges the role of the oftentimes marginalized other – and thus power structures in general – in favour of privileging negotiations between differing perspectives. By offering animals a place in her fiction, she offers her readers both the aesthetic and the humanistic experience of a connection – always desired, but hard to achieve.

Northrop Frye's notion of the "garrison mentality" and Atwood's "Nature the Monster" in her *Survival* collection can easily be understood as discourses geared towards separating culture and nature or – at the very least – keeping nature at bay. However, unlike writings in other parts of the world (especially texts by their neighbour to the south), Canadian intellectual history has not *consistently* been constructed against the wild, savage and animalistic. Maybe it is the combination of Canada as a country with vast stretches of wilderness, where animals are necessarily present, and the construction of Canada as the "other" on the North American continent that provides Atwood – and Canadian writers in general – with a specifically Canadian reason for providing animals with a life of their own.

By largely dispensing with notions of anthropocentrism in her writings, Atwood manages to move the species boundary which – as Huggan and Tiffin point out – "is not fixed at all, but always temporally and politically contingent, continually constructed and policed by the processes of representation itself" (HT 135), towards a middle ground from which a more objective assessment of human-animal relations might be possible.

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