



MULTISPECIES FUTURES

New Approaches to Teaching
Human-Animal Studies

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Roman Bartosch

Dying to Learn

Teaching Human-Animal Studies in an Age of Extinction

At heart, every educational endeavor is an optimistic one. Education is grounded in the conviction that learners can be empowered and should be allowed and encouraged to grow, and it seeks to foster agency, autonomy, and well-being. Sustainability-related education or pedagogies in the context of climate change are no exception: here, too, hope is, as David Orr puts it, an imperative.¹ This rather general inclination toward “hope” has a programmatic and institutionalized match in curricula and policy documents where “competence orientation” – despite various and often justified points of critique – underlines the educational belief in a learner’s eventual ability and autonomy when it comes to solving problems and employing sets of skills for a good life, however defined. And yet, such compulsory optimism begs a number of questions. One key question has to do with the instrumentalist and anthropocentric nature of educational hopes in the context of this volume’s interest in the teaching of human-animal studies, particularly with regard to the catastrophic dimensions of extinction in times of climate change and the radical loss of biodiversity. Against the backdrop of unfolding catastrophes, we have to interrogate the nature of educational hopes based on notions of competent progress, which, in the modern imaginary, constitutes a core educational value in and of itself, even though it always links autonomy and subjectivation with mastery and anthropocentric hubris.

1 David W. Orr: *Hope Is an Imperative: The Essential David Orr*. Washington: Island 2011.

Current work on posthumanist education and critical pedagogies of different vantages are concerned with this branch of critique and provide helpful and much-needed recalibrations of educational theory and practice in this regard.² Despite the reformatory thrust of these interventions, however, the traditional story of education by and large remains unchanged as far as basic plotlines are concerned: education can make learners and the world better; it can refine their sensibilities, provide them with the knowledge necessary for a better political, social, and personal life – and not least enable them to become critical, engaged citizens.³ While acknowledging the relevance of such aspirations, this chapter therefore asks: What are educators to make of pedagogy’s foundational dogma when its basic promises no longer hold? What, in other words, can we hope for in times of extinction? In the drastic phrasing of Lee Zimmerman, we have to think about the steps necessary “to prevent global warming from reaching a tipping point where less fucked turns into more fucked”⁴ while clinging to the hope that education matters. Educators thus have to ask themselves what educational vision might look like when climate change and large-scale, global extinction events suggest a whole generation of learners (and many more to come) might be “more fucked” than previous generations. Put less bluntly: we have to rethink an educational practice built on the conviction, no longer tenable, that the future will be the same as the present, only better. As educators, this might mean that we take seriously Roy Scranton’s memorable phrase that we have to “learn to die in the Anthropocene.”⁵

2 See Nathan Snaza / John A. Weaver (eds): *Posthumanism and Educational Research*. London / New York: Routledge 2015. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315769165> (accessed: January 24, 2022); Roman Bartosch / Sieglinde Grimm (eds): *Die Materie des Geistes: Der material turn im Kontext von Literatur- und Bildungsgeschichte um 1800*. Heidelberg: Winter 2018; Roman Bartosch / Julia Hoydis (eds): *Teaching the Posthuman*. Heidelberg: Winter 2019; David Gerlach (ed.): *Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik: Grundlagen – Ziele – Beispiele*. Tübingen: Narr 2020.

3 See, e. g., Michael Byram: *From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship: Essays and Reflection*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters 2008. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847690807> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

4 Lee Zimmerman: *Trauma and the Discourse of Climate Change: Literature, Psychoanalysis, and Denial*. London / New York: Routledge 2020, p. 2. Zimmerman here refers to a discussion sparked by geophysicist Brad Werner. For an insightful discussion of the consequences of such forthright estimations in the public discussions around climate and catastrophes, see John H. Richardson: When the End of Human Civilization Is Your Day Job. In: *Esquire*, July 20, 2018. <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a36228/ballad-of-the-sad-climatologists-0815/> (accessed: December 15, 2020).

5 Roy Scranton: *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. San Francisco: City Lights 2015.

**Learning to die, dying to learn:
Extinction events and communities of practice**

In light of this dire context, an honest discussion of education in times of extinction could well begin by reflecting on the sixth extinction event in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the new millennium. And it might recount and assess the many challenges (not only) for formal educational contexts. As the scholar and film critic E. Ann Kaplan puts it, anxiety about future developments against the backdrop of runaway climate change is currently exacting new psychological taxonomies that include not just post-but also pre-traumatic stress.⁶ Confronted with an “increasing number of futurist dystopian worlds in film and literature”⁷ and steeped in building levels of hopelessness in the face of the expectable deterioration of economic, social, and environmental standards, learners are put at increasing risk of unprecedented anxiety about the “coming barbarism.”⁸ It is because of this mismatch between existential crises and the disturbingly jolly lingo of educational policies of sustainability that Isabelle Stengers sharply criticizes the current fashion of greenwashing educational practice, writing that extant educational frameworks and institutions only reproduce narratives of progress and solutionism, lacking significantly when it comes to engendering transformative and collaborative capabilities:

Where, in schools, are the modes of working together that would create a taste for the demands of cooperation and the experience of the strength of a collective that works to succeed “all together” against the evaluation that separates and judges? [...] [Instead individual competition] keeps coming back, again and again, like a refrain, and it asks us to pretend to believe that things will end up sorting themselves out, and that [...] we would do the same thing, and that our own task is limited to insulating our houses, changing our lightbulbs, etc., but also to continue buying cars because growth has to be supported.⁹

6 E. Ann Kaplan: *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP 2015, p. 2. <https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813564012> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

7 Kaplan: *Climate Trauma*, p. 1.

8 Isabelle Stengers: *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. London: Open Humanities Press 2015. <http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/in-catastrophic-times/> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

9 *Ibid.*, p.31.

Similar criticism has been levelled at theories and practices of education for sustainable development by scholars and teachers working on pedagogies of global citizenship and education for sustainability and the environment. Malin Ideland, for instance, writes about what she calls the “eco-certified child,” arguing that what current educational practice is concerned with is a very specific – conscious, rational, and cosmopolitan – subject, whose disciplining relates to individual consumer choices rather than political consciousness and agency.¹⁰ Any discussion of education that takes sustainability or non-anthropocentrism seriously must therefore engage with the tendency inherent in pedagogic policy and research to uncritically endorse an optimistic notion of action and activity as the main educational focus and objective. In particular, it has to challenge its actionist subtexts and inquire if they feed into a potentially outdated or damaging narrative of mastery and progress, or if notions of agency can be readjusted so as to sustain communities of practice and resilience in the face of widespread and recognized vulnerabilities. Taking my cue from Hannah Arendt’s famous distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*,¹¹ I want to probe the potential meanings of such a reconsideration and suggest formal education as a school for “contemplative action” in multispecies societies at risk. In order to spell out more clearly what I mean by contemplative action, let me begin by recalling a different extinction event currently under way. Before COVID-19 necessitated digitized and remote educational engagements, the streets were awash with pupils demanding transformative action and their right to learn the right things: Fridays for Future and the Extinction Rebellion, among many other initiatives and action groups, have given the lie to the idea of an apolitical youth with almost unprecedented clarity and insistence, and instead pointed a finger at the apoliticality of current educational systems, unable and unwilling to tackle the most pressing concerns of the present and future. In a remarkable twist in the established narrative that says that educators know which competences are needed and how to support their acquisition, it is from the mouths of pupils that teachers, politicians, and global economic players are now being reprimanded for excessive, fatal inaction and for ignoring the need to finally change our ways.

10 Malin Ideland: *The Eco-Certified Child: Citizenship and Education for Sustainability and Environment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2019.

11 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*. Chicago: U of Chicago P 1958.

The crucial – and somewhat painful – questions educators have to ask themselves are these: Why is such a forceful movement built on *absence* from schools?¹² Have pupils already acquired sufficient transformative, communicative, and media competences that they now can become game-changers and turn their thoughts into sustainable action? Or are these demonstrations and movements putting to shame yesteryear’s educational reforms, our established standards of assessment, and the “professionalization” of teachers as mediators of efficient instruction while overlooking the fact that the kids were *not* alright because they saw, and understood, how former generations simply ignored scientific facts and shunned their responsibility? For better or worse, it seems obvious to me that students are indeed “dying to learn” – and that we need educational theories and practices that acknowledge and address both this unambiguous demand for meaningful pedagogy and the potential that this demand holds for formal education.

This observation is not only a call for greater awareness of sustainability or the import of scientific literacy in the current or future curriculum, but is also forcing me, as someone working in the field of English language teaching and the teaching of literature and culture, to better explain what we bring to the interdisciplinary table.¹³ My suggestion of “contemplative action” is an attempt in this direction and intends to combine the strengths of humanist education when it comes to historicizing and diversifying perceptions and interpretations of crises with the prerogative of communicative agency in language and culture pedagogy (such as multiliteracies and symbolic competence).¹⁴ With regard to the looming threat of extinction for supposedly autonomous learners and the enduringly optimistic enterprise of education, I suggest we up our interest in the creative dimension of literary and cultural learning, and try to understand learning groups as inclusive “communities of practice” whose focus is on relative and relational agency in the specific environment of the classroom. When Harald Welzer speaks of

12 See, e.g., Jürgen Budde: Die Fridays-for-Future-Bewegung als Herausforderung für die Schule. In: *Die Deutsche Schule* 112:2 (2020), pp. 216–228.

13 I have sketched some ideas concerning such a conversation in Roman Bartosch: What If We Stopped Pretending? Environmental Catastrophe and the Limits of “Education for Sustainability.” In: *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 32:3 (2021), pp. 157–171. <https://doi.org/10.33675/ANGL/2021/3/13> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

14 See Bill Cope / Mary Kalantzis: *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. London / New York: Routledge 2000; Claire Kramsch: *Language as Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108869386> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

Handlungsspielräume,¹⁵ I am tempted to take him quite literally to mean “playing fields” of distributed agency that we should seek to cultivate with learners eager to grow in an increasingly devastated world. My interest in distributed agency could help us to refrain from associating agency with autonomy, and action or activity with impact on a global scale, popular in much of the work being done on education for sustainable development. It instead underlines the import of meaningful engagements in times of helplessness and waning hopes for an “improved” future.

Creative catastrophe communication?

In order to spell out what such a revised focus on agency means in the context of a frightening present and a precarious future, I want to understand the communities of practice organized around literary education as a playing field of collaborative action and, from this angle, explore what we have to offer, as literary pedagogues and educators more generally, to those who have understood that they do not have a future but want to transform it. This includes an acknowledgment of those affects and concerns usually relegated out of sight in pedagogical debate or confined to the margins of a “dark pedagogy”¹⁶: hopelessness, anger, vulnerability – and, eventually, flourishing in the ruins of a soon-gone civilization. As Jem Bendell reminds us, hopelessness may indeed lead to “emotional and even spiritual growth.” In his influential call for “deep adaptation,” he avers that in his own work with students, “inviting them to consider collapse as inevitable, catastrophe as probable and extinction as possible, has not led to apathy or depression. Instead, in a supportive environment, [...] something positive happens.”¹⁷ Whether or not “something positive” happens is, according to Bendell, closely tied to the “supportive environment,” the creation of which is part of every teacher’s responsibility. It challenges us to rethink opportunistic conceptions of agency when powerlessness and apathy abound in the world for which we are supposedly

15 Harald Welzer: *Selbst denken: Eine Anleitung zum Widerstand*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2013, p. 222.

16 Stefan Bengtson / Martin Hauberg-Lund Laugesen / Jonas Andreasen Lysgaard: *Dark Pedagogy: Education, Horror and the Anthropocene*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19933-3> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

17 Jem Bendell: Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy. In: *IFLAS Occasional Paper 2* (July 27, 2018). <https://mahb.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/deepadaptation.pdf> (accessed: December 16, 2020).

educating young learners. If educators find themselves in a position where students are explicitly and vocally demanding sustainability, our task is to understand the valence of these demands – and to see them as calls for engaged and meaningful education or, at least, the honesty of taking despair and outrage seriously.

Asking what kind of support and what kind of positive outcome we should be working toward, I want to bring Bendell’s demand for “deep adaptation” into dialogue with what educator Greg Misiaszek calls the “broadening” and “widening” of understanding.¹⁸ Thus reconceived as something that can adapt to the demands of a precarious future, learning is about enriching our understanding of and eventually inhabiting a precarious planet by literary and cultural means. Instead of reinforcing the primacy of an “active” life over and against a “reflective” one, I suggest in particular that our strength lies in “contemplative action”: communicative, reflective, and creative learning that refrains from burdening learners with the onus of transformative change that we supposedly know how to bring about because climate catastrophe and biodiversity loss are problems waiting for a clear-cut solution. Modelled around Gregory Fuller’s concept of “serene hopelessness,” my notion of contemplative action instead builds on the insight that we have yet “to learn to let go in our – species’! – hour of death” and reframes the imperative of hope as one of fruitful tension with the more existential questions of living and dying in times of extinction.¹⁹

When it comes to the teaching of human-animal studies, this means that we should not expect students to actually “do” something “about” extinction processes but to recognize and relate to them. This kind of relating entails cognitive and affective as well as creative processes; it does not preclude political (or individual) action, but instead of simplistically expecting literary learning to lead to predetermined forms of action, it is geared toward bearing witness, ruminating on its meanings, and thus repositioning oneself within a larger web of ecological and semiotic diversities under threat. This is what closely engaging with texts and creative ways of working through and with them can offer – and it is an intellectual and affective lesson not to be discarded lightly

18 Greg William Misiaszek: *Educating the Global Environmental Citizen: Understanding Ecopedagogy in Local and Global Contexts*. New York: Routledge 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315204345> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

19 Gregory Fuller: *Das Ende: Von der heiteren Hoffnungslosigkeit im Angesicht der ökologischen Katastrophe*. Hamburg: Meiner 2017, p. 108 (transl. R. B.).

as if it were not central to all meaningful engagement with what is happening and will continue to happen. Of course, this approach draws on prior work on the role and potential of literary learning in the contemporary educational system, also and especially in contexts of sustainability.

Literary fiction's specific potential when it comes to bringing home the further realities of animalities has long been recognized. Yet for a comprehensive account of what animal fictions mean in the educational settings of late modernity, we have to better understand its double nature between presentencing and distancing. Let us begin with such literary presences. Bart H. Welling and Scottie Kapel remind us that our task is

presenting animals to students in the sense of making them *present* in literal, literary, bioregional and scientific terms, and by equipping students with analytical tools with which to make sense of the contemporary flood of visual animal imagery, essentially re-presenting these representations.²⁰

Indeed, they concede, “it may seem woefully naïve to herald the return of non-human creatures under present conditions, when they are worse off than they have been in some 65 million years.”²¹ But given the ubiquity of animals in human imaginaries as well as their role, as some would argue, in the emergence of writing and meaning,²² it is more than reasonable to look at the specific ways in which animals abound and reappear in human minds, and to formulate teaching objectives geared toward mobilizing these literary potentials.

For this endeavor, and with an eye to the insoluble ambiguities at the heart of human attempts to grasp the nonhuman animal other, various concepts have been proposed: some have suggested the “creaturely” and argued that this

20 Bart H. Welling / Scottie Kapel: The Return of the Animal: Presenting and Representing Non-Human Beings Respons-ably in the (Post-)Humanities Classroom. In: Greg Garrard (ed.): *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, pp. 104–116, here p. 105 (emphasis in original). https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230358393_9 (accessed: January 24, 2022).

21 Ibid., p. 104.

22 Roland Borgards / Catrin Gersdorf / Frederike Middelhoff / Sebastian Schönbeck (eds): *Texts, Animals, Environments: Zoopoetics and Eco-poetics*. Freiburg: Rombach 2019; Rodolfo Piskorski: *Derrida and Textual Animality: For a Zoogrammatology of Literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51732-8> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

notion helps us get “beyond the human-animal divide”²³; others have begun to critically rethink the links between animality and vulnerability.²⁴ Matthew Calarco suggests we move from paradigms of sameness and difference to a notion of indistinction, writing that indistinction changes the “*direction* in which such continuity [between humans and other animals] is thought.”²⁵ In contrast to thinkers concerned with sameness and human-animal continuity, “indistinction theorists attempt to develop ways of thinking about human beings, animals, and ethics in a manner that radically displaces human beings from the center of ethical reflection” – indistinction is, in other words, a question of “the specific ways in which difference is articulated in and through the human / animal distinction.”²⁶ Calarco’s proposal resonates with pedagogical tenets and methodologies, especially those informed by disability studies, and gender or queer studies, where techniques of dramatization and de-dramatization have been used to think differences differently.²⁷ Instead of arguing for or against ontological differences, we require teaching methodologies that both stress and leave behind a certain line of difference and, in doing so, do better justice to the fundamental ambiguity of literary animality while also sensitizing pupils for the contexts of its articulation.

And yet, in my estimation, education sells itself short if it views its prerogative as one of “presencing” alone. When teaching human-animal studies, we cannot ignore that we are teaching *literary* animals – and that the mediating processes that engender literary animals in the first place are exciting and important. In order to map the imaginative cartographies of literary semiodiversity,

23 David Herman (ed.): *Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-51811-8> (accessed: January 24, 2022); Roman Bartosch / Dominik Ohrem (eds): *Beyond the Human-Animal Divide: Creaturely Lives in Literature and Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-93437-9> (accessed: January 24, 2022); *European Journal of English Studies* 19:2 (2015): Modern Creatures, ed. by Virginia Richter / Pieter Vermeulen.

24 Michael Lundblad: *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-Era U. S. Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199917570.001.0001> (accessed: January 24, 2022); Timothy C. Baker: *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03880-9> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

25 Matthew Calarco: *Thinking through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction*. Stanford: Stanford UP 2015, p. 49 (emphasis in original). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804796538> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

26 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

27 See Jürgen Budde: Dramatisieren – Differenzieren – Entdramatisieren: Männlichkeitskonstruktionen im Unterricht. In: *Der Deutschunterricht* 1 (2006), pp. 86–91.

animals need to be read and recognized in texts in more just and alert ways. This is especially the case in K-12 classroom situations that are different from the academic ones in which the above suggestions have been formulated. It might be hard to convince academics of the ethical importance of human-animal studies and the relevance of reading animals not as metaphors or symbols but *as* animals. But it is a different matter when it comes to pupils and their conviction that animals are worthwhile topics as well as real presences in fiction. In my experience, pupils always find the topic relevant and never have any difficulty in accepting animal presence. On the contrary, they might find it difficult *not* to since they are only at the beginning of a socialization process that eventually produces the kinds of anthropocentrism human-animal studies is writing against. This is not to romanticize children but to pay attention to their forms of reception and to the idea that an identificatory reading might be enriched by pointing to the complexity of the semiodiversity within which human and nonhuman animals are enmeshed.

As Ursula Heise, writing about the plethora of computer-generated animals in popular film and video games, reminds us:

Not infrequently, electronically and genetically engineered animals in literature and film appear alongside humans whose bodies and minds have been altered by similar techniques, and thereby raise complex questions about the relationship between humans, animals, and machines and their respective status in worlds where little that is purely “natural” is left.²⁸

My concern here is not the implications of this messy situation for “cyborg environmentalism”²⁹ but taking it as a cue for processes of literary learning that take full(er) advantage of the semiotic richness of natural/cultural environments by getting pupils to understand the complex mesh of meaning in which they are always situated. While Rosi Braidotti suggests “neoliterary readings” for academics long convinced there is nothing outside of a text, communities of practice in K-12 education might instead need to engage with the multitude of literary meaning in the first place.³⁰

28 Ursula K. Heise: From Extinction to Electronics: Dead Frogs, Live Dinosaurs, and Electric Sheep. In: Cary Wolfe (ed.): *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. Minneapolis / London: U of Minnesota P 2003, pp. 59–81, here p. 60.

29 Ibid., p. 74.

30 Rosi Braidotti: Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology. In: *Theory, Culture & Society* 23:7–8 (2006), pp. 197–208; idem: Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others. In: *PMLA* 124:2 (2009), pp. 526–532.

Inasmuch as biodiversity loss and the climate crisis are confronting us with the impoverishment of life, thinking about approaches to teaching “semiodiversity” and to finding pathways to literary and cultural enrichment is a small but meaningful measure against imaginative impoverishment. Literary education might therefore see as its main task the cultivation of an interest in acts of relating animality and textuality in ways that open up ambiguity and, thus, imaginative spaces for potential conviviality and flourishing. In order for this to come to fruition, we have to turn away from texts that render animals “more real” and learn to make sense of those that deliberately refrain from doing so.³¹ Max Porter’s *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015),³² for instance, is all about a crow – however, this crow isn’t made of flesh and blood alone, but comes with a splendid plumage of intertextual and cultural allusions that help to resist compartmentalization into either the zoological or the symbolic. In literature’s in-betweenness lies a wealth of creative responses that are much needed in times of extinction and impoverished lives. Let us now ponder the promises such in-betweenness holds for teaching processes by looking at a literary example and its creative take on animality.

Exploring semiodiversity with Crow

Max Porter’s 2015 experimental novel *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers* tells the story of a family ravaged by the death of the mother. A slim volume of a good hundred pages, the novel’s lyrical and multiperspective narration render it both challenging and rewarding. The loss and grief around which the story revolves are explored from the perspectives of “Dad” and two “Boys,” and processes of trauma and healing are instigated with the perspective of “Crow,” who simply appears at the door one day: “*I won’t leave until you don’t need me anymore*” (GTF, p. 7, emphasis in original). Part trauma-therapeutic externalization, part familiar and literary fantasy, Crow thus enters the lives the Boys,

31 In this context, I have pointed to several other ways in which animality and creativity can inform educational practice, see Roman Bartosch: Augmented Animality: Immersion and Participation in Digital Environments. In: Christian Ludwig/ Claudia Deetjen (eds): *The World Beyond: Developing Critical Environmental Literacies in EFL*. Heidelberg: Winter 2021, pp. 143–162. For the inspirational potential of digital *animaux*, see Gretchen McCullough: A Linguist Explains the Grammar of Doge: Wow. In: *The Toast*, February 6, 2014. <https://the-toast.net/2014/02/06/linguist-explains-grammar-doge-wow/> (accessed: December 15, 2020).

32 Max Porter: *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*. London: Faber & Faber 2015. Hereafter cited as GTF.

who have no problem accepting this otherworldly appearance as reality, and Dad, who happens to be a literary scholar writing on the crow symbol in Ted Hughes's poetry and has a harder time accepting the strange appearance of the mysterious Crow: "I wished I wasn't lying terrified in a giant bird embrace in my hallway" (GTF, p. 9). The text suggests that Dad had been "obsessing about this thing just when the greatest tragedy of [his] life occurred" (ibid.) – so his interest in symbolic crows coincides and is being linked to the fatality at the center of the narrative. At the same time, it is precisely the literary ambiguity of Crow that engenders healing. Ambiguities are thus the name of the game but seem to have an easier time with the Boys: it is they who sometimes still see their deceased mother and who cannot even be distinguished easily as characters themselves, which is made clear by the fact that their perspective is always rendered in the double focalization of "Boys." Even before Crow enters the family abode, we encounter some intertextual foreshadowing: the novel's title alludes to Emily Dickinson's poetry, and the narrative includes an epigraph of said poetry, graphically redesigned so as to make space for this naturalcultural beast:

That ~~love~~ *CROW* is all there is,
 Is all we know of ~~love~~ *CROW*;
 It is enough, the ~~freight~~ *CROW* should be
 Proportioned to the ~~groove~~ *CROW*.

Emily Dickinson

(GTF, epigraph)

The insertion of *CROW* here certainly presents the animal. However, it does not do so realistically but more in the manner of a highly stylized rearticulation of crow's "kraah-kraah-kraah" sound, which occurs repeatedly in the subsequent narrative as well.

None of the characters can really make sense of Crow, who, at times, is an allusion, a trickster, a fantasy to heal trauma – or even another human character, it seems. In one scene, the Boys listen to Crow, but the reader wonders if it is not Dad they hear:

Dad has gone. Crow is in the bathroom,
 where he often is because he likes the
 acoustics. We are crouched by the closed

door listening. He is speaking very slowly, very clearly. [...] he says SUDDEN. He says TRAUMA. He says Induced... he coughs and spits and tries again, INDUCED. He says SUDDEN TRAUMA INDUCED ALTERATION OF THE ALERT STATE. (GTF, p. 23)

It is through (Crow's?) croaky voice that the unspeakable is processed and Dad's book project, "Ted Hughes's Crow on the Couch: A Wild Analysis" (GTF, p. 27) takes shape. The point is, of course, that the text does this very self-consciously, mixing the obviously literary with the unsettlingly ambiguous, thus inviting readers to reflect on the unstable boundary between "real" animals and human cultural production.

Timothy Baker looks at this in-betweenness of Crow by focusing on the enormously productive tradition of animal figures onto which humans have projected emotions and suffering. He writes that "unlike such figures in many other texts, who exist entirely in relation to the human protagonists, Crow revels in this anthropocentric interpretation: he both accepts and exploits his enforced tradition."³³ By consciously foregrounding its intertextuality, Crow invites reflection on the semiodiversity that always underlies animal narratives but only rarely turns out to be a starting point for pedagogical interventions. In this case, interrogating culture through the slippery figure of the animal also reveals the limits of anthropocentrism, as Baker suggests:

The central paradox of Porter's novel is [...] that Crow is not "real" in any traditional sense, yet is successfully able, in both comic and horrifying ways, to guide the family through their grief. Literary texts cannot straightforwardly grant access to non-human consciousness as anything but a construct, but for Porter this is not a failure: rather, the nonhuman animal, when known in relation to the human, reveals something new and distinctive about human ways of imagining.³⁴

33 Baker: *Writing Animals*, p. 21.

34 Ibid. For a more detailed analysis of such literary agency, see Rita Felski: *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. Chicago / London: U of Chicago P 2020. <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226729770> (accessed: January 24, 2022); Roman Bartosch: Forms of Agency, Agency of Forms: Reading and Teaching More-Than-Human Fictions. In: Bettina Burger / Yvonne Liebermann / Judith Rahn (eds): *Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2021, pp. 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79442-2> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

One approach to teaching texts such as *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* would therefore be less concerned with zoological birds than with cultural nesting.³⁵ As Baker notes, the tradition of nesting animality within complex language games “stretches back to Aristotle.”³⁶ Given this productivity and abundance, a semiodiverse environment does not even have to be confined to single literary examples. The contemporary internet culture of memes in particular provides a fertile niche for playful hybrids of languaged and cultured animals that can be encountered in multimodal, mixed-ability classrooms, and that can further enrich learning environments with and through literary animality. Joela Jacobs rightly points to the “playful approach to language” and “ungrammatical utterances of animals” we find in “doge” memes – very syntax! so linguistics! many spelling! – and thus suggests how both contemporary and traditional texts can be integrated into a larger ecology of cultured ways of (re-)thinking animalities in education.³⁷ Such ecologies of meaning might also help to address a prevailing problem of scale. Porter’s novel, like many others, is primarily concerned with an individual death and its implications for family members and lovers. However, thinking extinction requires a different scope and different narratives, sometimes referred to as focusing on a “species scale.”³⁸ It is therefore necessary to reframe it within its semiodiverse environment and to reconsider our take on species when reading for animalities. I am much indebted to the newly emerging field of extinction studies in the environmental humanities when

35 Anthony Lioi: Teaching Green Cultural Studies and New Media. In: Greg Garrard (ed.): *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, pp. 133–143. Drawing on educational suggestions made by Joni Adamson, Lioi describes nesting as a practice “in which literary materials from the traditional canon are radically recontextualized through connections with contemporary media” (ibid., p. 136).

36 Baker: *Writing Animals*, p. 8.

37 Joela Jacobs: The Grammar of Zoopoetics: Human and Canine Language Play. In: Kári Driscoll / Eva Hoffmann (eds): *What Is Zoopoetics? Texts, Bodies, Entanglement*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2018, pp. 63–79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64416-5> (accessed: January 24, 2022). See also McCulloch: A Linguist Explains the Grammar of Doge.

38 See, for instance, David Farrier: *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. Minneapolis / London: U of Minnesota P 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2019.1639973> (accessed: January 24, 2022). The demand for species scale can be found in David Herman: *Narratology beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2018, p. 249. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190850401.001.0001> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

I speculate about how thinking about species scales plays out in the contexts of primary and secondary education.³⁹ If serene hopelessness in the classroom requires active contemplation and should be geared toward collaborative, creative means of engaging semiodiversity, one such avenue for finding common communicative ground is talking about literary experiences. Instead of interpretive readings that either domesticate animal characters into trite symbols or neoliteral readings that excitedly unearth animal remains in literary fiction, the main task would be to create textual environments not for animals but for the ubiquitous *animot*.⁴⁰ Conducting research on beloved animal characters would, then, not just mean checking on biological sites or carrying out a transnational habitat comparison, but looking out for and including in any presentation as many cultural references as possible, much in the sense of Porter's naturalcultural crow.⁴¹ Because aesthetic experience is an exercise in relating,⁴² talking about literary texts and the way they nest within media ecologies ought to be conceptualized as the task of giving voice to such relationalities. It is when pupils understand the ubiquitous nature of these relationalities that they begin to explore semiodiversity on a species scale.

A second conclusion also pertains to creativity and collaboration, and draws on Robert Macfarlane's idea of a "desecration phrasebook." In these unprecedented times, Macfarlane contends, we lack "a lexicon recording the particularities of the environments and phenomena that our actions as a species are bringing into being."⁴³ His claim that we need terms for "a heavily harnessed or drastically deranged 'nature': a 'Desecration Phrasebook', as it were," already sounds like a task for environmental learning as conceptualized here:

39 See Deborah Bird Rose / Thom van Dooren / Matthew Chrulew (eds): *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death and Generations*. New York: Columbia UP 2017. <https://doi.org/10.7312/van-17880> (accessed: January 24, 2022); Genese Marie Sodikoff (ed.): *The Anthropology of Extinction: Essays on Culture and Species Death*. Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana UP 2012.

40 As per Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet, transl. from the French by David Wills. New York: Fordham UP 2008).

41 For more examples, see Bartosch: Augmented Animality.

42 Felski: *Hooked*, pp. 121–163.

43 Robert Macfarlane: Desecration Phrasebook: A Litany for the Anthropocene. In: *New Scientist*, September 15, 2015. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22830523-200-desecration-phrasebook-a-litany-for-the-anthropocene/> (accessed: December 15, 2020).

Is there a word yet for the post-natural rain that falls when a cloud is rocket-seeded with silver iodide? Or an island newly revealed by the melting of sea ice in the North-West Passage? Or the glistening tidemarks left on coastlines by oil spills?⁴⁴

To work on such a desecration phrasebook in the context of *animots* and their uncountable ways of extinction and attempts at de-extinction, and genetic and memetic revival, brings us closer still to the question with which this article began: What do we in literary and cultural education have to offer in times of extinction? How can we help learners to rethink what it means to “learn to die” in these perilous times? Maybe one way is to sit together and ponder what we have lost and are about to lose – in order to rein in denial but, most importantly, to also bring learners’ demands for meaningful content and pedagogical demands for meaningful communication into fruitful conversation. This might entail putting our languages and narratives to work: What do we call the last remaining specimen of a soon-to-be-extinct animal? How do we refer to those genetically brought back from the dead? And how might extinction *feel* for the last Kaua‘i ‘ō‘ō bird, singing its mating song for no one? Does that song have a name?⁴⁵

Such potential forms of creative pedagogical engagement are extinction learning in a twofold sense. In line with research in behavioral psychology and the neurosciences, extinction learning can be described as a way of unlearning – the letting-go of outdated information or the reassessment of prior knowledge in new and more complex reconfigurations. It is clear that what some call the Anthropocene requires exactly such kinds of reassessment and unlearning, and the same is, of course, true with regard to human-animal relationships, ontologies grounded on human exceptionalism, and the violent hierarchies of human / nonhuman binaries in everyday social and cultural practice. Secondly, extinction learning could and should be actively reframed as an effort to “[tell] extinction stories”⁴⁶ – not in the sense of fetishizing impoverishment but by aiming at surprising entanglements instead. Just think of Latour’s ANT “work-nets” that Felski mobilizes for classroom practice.⁴⁷ Constructions of

44 Macfarlane: *Desecration Phrasebook*.

45 Recordings of this song have found their way onto YouTube and can be accessed there.

46 Deborah Bird Rose / Thom van Dooren / Matthew Chrulew: *Telling Extinction Stories: An Introduction*. In: Idem (eds): *Extinction Studies*, pp. 1–17.

47 Felski: *Hooked*, pp. 143–146.

complex, naturalcultural webs of meaning in the classroom can be modelled upon such efforts to take into full consideration the complexity of the more-than-human (and human!) world.

The end of competence acquisition

As we move from individual deaths to the scale of extinction, we must call into question the notion of education, especially its individualist, optimist, and anthropocentric bias. Existing critical works on the omnipresent and powerful notion of competences in education have pointed to the limitations of the concept when it comes to individual and enduring learning processes that cannot be structured on the premises of observable action and problem-solving.⁴⁸ The short-sightedness of measuring performance in order to get to the heart of learning is powerfully underscored in the context of learning in times of climate catastrophe and extinction. There is just not much that most individual children can do about the agency of humanity as a whole. But learn they must, and they are dying to learn more. This, however, must not be taken as a call for greater complacency or giving up in the face of imminent disaster. After all, youth movements *are* making a difference, and it is indeed individual and collective agency that will do the trick. When we ask about the specific contours of teaching human-animal studies in the face of extinction, however, serene hopelessness is and will become, as I have argued, just as necessary as engaged activism.

But the nature of such learning processes may no longer be operationable under the moniker of competence orientation. It is radically subject-specific (in the twofold sense of catering to individuals and building on knowledge and practices in literary hermeneutics, philosophy, and pedagogy) as well as all about collaborative flourishing and play instead of measurable and problem-solving output. Over and against extant notions of more instrumentalizing forms of competence, this kind of flourishing is closer to the ideas that Jem Bendell sketches using the phrase “doom and bloom,”⁴⁹ or what

48 Richard Kahn: Towards Ecopedagogy: Weaving a Broad-Based Pedagogy of Liberation for Animals, Nature, and the Oppressed People of the Earth. In: Antonio Darder / Marta P. Baltodano / Rodolfo D. Torres (eds): *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*. London / New York: Routledge 2008, pp. 522–540.

49 Jem Bendell: Doom and Bloom: Adapting to Collapse. In: Extinction Rebellion (eds): *This Is Not a Drill: An Extinction Rebellion Handbook*. London: Penguin 2019, pp. 73–80.

Martha C. Nussbaum has discussed, together with Amartya Sen, under the heading of a “capabilities approach.”⁵⁰ The core capabilities Nussbaum refers to – life, bodily health, and integrity, sense and imagination and so forth – are by no means restricted to *homo sapiens*, and her concern for convivial relationships with other species underlines this point. Capabilities, resilience, and multispecies flourishing might advance as key terminological and conceptual cues for sustainability education in perilous times. Such education needs the literary imagination and aesthetic play.

In his magisterial *Narratology Beyond the Human*, David Herman charts a future path for narrative analysis “at species scale”: “Multiscale storytelling [...] has the potential to foster keener recognition of our inextricable interconnectedness with the larger biotic communities [...] on whose survival [...] our own survival depends.”⁵¹ And he concludes by saying, “Maximizing that potential is the overarching goal of [...] the project of developing a narratology beyond the human.”⁵² With his insightful study as well as many others in the field of literary and cultural human-animal studies, and with an ever-growing library of research publications in educational fields interested in “the animal question,” I hope it will become possible to rephrase Herman’s words with an eye to classroom practices. Maximizing the potential of storytelling is the overarching goal of the project of developing a pedagogy beyond the human.

50 Martha C. Nussbaum: *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2000; idem: *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2006, pp. 69–81.

51 Herman: *Narratology Beyond the Human*, p. 294.

52 Ibid.