



MULTISPECIES FUTURES

New Approaches to Teaching
Human-Animal Studies

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Neofelis

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Alexandra Böhm

Teaching Empathy and Emotions

J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*
and Human-Animal Studies

1. Introduction

Although J.M. Coetzee's animal narrative *The Lives of Animals* is fundamentally a text about empathy and emotions, most vividly embodied by the main protagonist Elizabeth Costello, it is far from a sentimental indulgence in the question of the animal – a common criticism of emotional approaches to animals by animal rights spokespeople such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan in the 1980s. As Lori Gruen and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey remind us in a recent publication on gender and animals, the traditional theorists of the animal rights movement were at pains to distance their cause from sentimental “old ladies in tennis shoes” who were fond of animals.¹ In his 1975 introduction to *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer claims that the

portrayal of those who protest against cruelty to animals as sentimental, emotional “animal lovers” has had the effect of excluding the entire issue of our treatment of nonhumans from serious political and moral discussion.²

If the animal cause is to be taken seriously, Singer and Regan argue, it needs to be firmly grounded in rationality. According to Singer, the application of basic moral principles is “demanded by reason, not emotion.”³ He makes it

1 Lori Gruen / Fiona Probyn-Rapsey: Distillations. In: Idem (eds): *Animaladies: Gender, Animals, and Madness*. London: Bloomsbury 2018, pp. 1–8, here p. 4. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501342189.ch-001> (accessed: January 24, 2022).

2 Peter Singer: *Animal Liberation*. New York: Avon 1975, p. ix–x.

3 Ibid.

clear to the readers of *Animal Liberation* that the book “makes no sentimental appeals for sympathy toward ‘cute’ animals.”⁴

Since the end of the twentieth century, an increasing interest in human-animal studies has led to the development of new perspectives, especially with regard to the concept of sympathy, which has become – along with its more recent term, empathy – one of the key concepts within an ecofeminist approach to animal studies.⁵ Specifically in animal ethics, but also in analyses of literature, film, and the arts, empathy has come to play a major role.⁶ Whereas animal rights ethics emphasize theory, principles, reason, and speaking for the animal, scholars who argue from a feminist care ethics position – for instance Carol Adams, Josephine Donovan, Brian Luke, and Lori Gruen – stress the role of emotions and the body in our relationship to nonhuman animals.⁷ Gruen firmly situates her concept of entangled empathy within this tradition of care ethics:

Entangled Empathy [...]: a type of caring perception focused on attending to another’s experience of wellbeing. An experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another’s needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities.⁸

4 Singer: *Animal Liberation*, p. ix–x.

5 See Josephine Donovan who argues for a sympathetic approach toward non-human animals (Josephine Donovan: *Attention to Suffering: Sympathy as a Basis for Ethical Treatment of Animals* (1994). In: Idem / Carol J. Adams (eds): *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics: A Reader*. New York: Columbia UP 2007, pp. 174–197; idem: *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals*. New York: Bloomsbury 2016). With reference to Jacques Derrida, Carol J. Adams stressed in 2007 our war against compassion that allows horrors such as genocide and species extinction to go on (Carol J. Adams: *The War on Compassion*. In: Idem / Donovan: *The Feminist Care Tradition*, pp. 21–38, here p. 32).

6 Lori Gruen focuses on empathy and animal ethics in her study *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals*. New York: Lantern 2015; more recently, Elisa Aaltola recapitulated similar arguments in *Varieties of Empathy: Moral Psychology and Animal Ethics*. London / New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2017. For empathy with the more-than-human world in film, see Alexa Weik von Mossner: *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP 2017. For interspecies empathy in literature, see my forthcoming study, *Narratives of Empathy: Literary Human-Animal Encounters from the 18th Century to the Present*.

7 See, e.g., Brian Luke, who argues for animal liberation from a decidedly anti-rationalist ethics of care position (Brian Luke: *Taming Ourselves or Going Feral? Toward a Nonpatriarchal Metaethic of Animal Liberation*. In: Carol J. Adams / Josephine Donovan (eds): *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*. Durham: Duke UP 1995, pp. 290–319).

8 Gruen: *Entangled Empathy*, p. 3.

Gruen uses several key words in her definition of entangled empathy that we should keep in mind when discussing Coetzee's main character, Elizabeth Costello: 1) a caring perception, 2) another's experience, 3) a blend of emotion and cognition, 4) being in relationships with others, and 5) being responsive and responsible. These terms also coincide with the core issues of care ethics: attentiveness, situatedness, relationships, responsiveness, particularism, and emotion.⁹ Both the complexity of Coetzee's semi-fictional text and Costello's imperative concern with empathy make *The Lives of Animals* particularly apt for a detailed and careful discussion of the concept, which current debates on ethical relationships between human and nonhuman animals use extensively but often quite vaguely. Published in 1999, Coetzee's novella preceded the animal turn – at least in Germany – by over a decade and counts as one of the foundational texts of human-animal studies – together with Jacques Derrida's ground-breaking essay *L'Animal que donc je suis (à suivre)* (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*), which was first published in the same year as *The Lives of Animals*.¹⁰

Originally, Coetzee presented his text at the renowned Tanner Lectures (founded in 1978) at the Princeton University Center for Human Values in 1997 and 1998. However, Coetzee composed his text not as a classical lecture; instead, he told the fictional story of an Australian writer, Elizabeth Costello, who was invited to (the fictional) Appleton College in the United States “to deliver the annual Gates Lecture and meet with literature students.”¹¹ The self-reflexive character of the text – both authors, Coetzee and Costello, are asked to give a prestigious lecture at an American university – opposes and fractures clear-cut generic attributions, such as fictive, real, public, private, and political.¹² Accordingly, critics have been uncertain whether the text is

9 For an overview of the core positions of care ethics, see Maurice Hamington: Empathy and Care Ethics. In: Heidi L. Maibom (ed.): *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*. New York: Routledge 2017, pp. 264–272.

10 The publication history of Derrida's text is complicated. The text first appeared in the context of Marie-Louise Maller's edition of *L'Animal autobiographique* (Paris: Galilée 1999), which presents Derrida's ten-hour lecture on the autobiographical animal at the Cerisy conference in 1997. As an independent text, Derrida's *L'animal que donc je suis (à suivre)* first appeared in David Wills' translation “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” in *The Critical Inquiry* from 2002.

11 J. M. Coetzee: *The Lives of Animals*, ed. by Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton UP 1999, p. 16.

12 For a discussion of the tension between ethical-political commitment and aesthetic autonomy in *The Lives of Animals*, see my article: „Anwalte“, Intellektuelle, Schriftsteller: J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* zwischen Engagement und Autonomie. In: *Journal for Literary Theory* 9:2 (2015), pp. 186–211.

a novella, an essay, or a disguised animal manifesto by the vegetarian author Coetzee. In his discussion of *The Lives of Animals*, the ethicist and moral philosopher, Peter Singer, for instance, takes Elizabeth Costello as Coetzee's *alter ego*. He and his coauthor Karen Dawn compared interviews by the author with statements made by his characters and concluded that Costello speaks with the voice of the author.¹³ There is indeed evidence that supports this assumption: both Coetzee's and Costello's surnames start with the same initial; both writers live in Australia; and both became famous with similar novels. However, this mirroring reduces the complex aesthetic structure of both the text and its protagonist, the enigmatic Australian writer who also plays a major role in other texts by Coetzee.¹⁴

In my experience teaching J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* in undergraduate as well as graduate courses, the novella quite often meets with confusion, perplexity, and even resentment.¹⁵ This is, I would like to suggest, due to several causes that concern the narrative's structure and content. First, Elizabeth Costello appears bizarre and eccentric, and offers little potential for reader identification. In addition, on the intradiegetic level, Costello earns empathy neither from her son John, the focalizer of the story, nor from her daughter-in-law Norma – although Costello is obviously a troubled old lady or, as the philosopher Cora Diamond describes her, a “wounded animal.”¹⁶ Another important obstacle is the multilayered narrative structure itself, which, in addition, is polyphonic and dialogic. Thus, students often feel perplexed and disoriented as they cannot make out an authorial voice in the text and easily lose track of who is talking.

13 Karen Dawn / Peter Singer: Converging Convictions: Coetzee and his Characters on Animals. In: Anton Leist / Peter Singer (eds): *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*. New York: Columbia UP 2010, pp. 109–118.

14 In 2003, Coetzee published *Elizabeth Costello*, a novel that consists of eight lectures and a postscript by the Australian writer.

15 This observation coincides with that of South African scholar Wendy Woodward, who commented on the “[s]trong emotions” *The Lives of Animals* excites in students (though, of course, she focuses on the specific South African situation of racism and post-apartheid). Woodward's contribution is part of a recently edited volume that deals specifically with the question of “How to teach Coetzee.” See Wendy Woodward: Pedagogies of Discomfort: Teaching Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*. In: Laura Wright / Jane Poyner / Elleke Boehmer (eds): *Approaches to Teaching Coetzee's Disgrace and Other Works*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America 2014, pp. 139–145, here p. 139.

16 Cora Diamond: The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy. In: Idem / Stanley Cavell / John McDowell / Ian Hacking / Cary Wolfe: *Philosophy and Animal Life*. New York: Columbia UP 2008, pp. 43–89, here p. 46.

In view of the question of how to teach human-animal studies – i. e., which texts, which methods, and which concepts can introduce students to an (ethical) engagement with the more-than-human world – I will present a practical didactic model for teaching Coetzee’s multifaceted, provocative, and difficult-to-grasp text in literature, human-animal studies, and gender and animals courses. With regard to empathy and emotions in *The Lives of Animals*, I will focus on questions such as:

- 1) How does the text provoke reader emotions? To what extent is the text based on a violation of emotional rules?
- 2) How does the vegetarian Elizabeth Costello represent an ethics of care for the more-than-human world? And how, in her position as a writer, does she demand an aesthetic that engenders, prompts, and provokes empathetic engagement with the “animal other” that counters rational approaches?¹⁷
- 3) Does the text ask the reader to feel empathy for Costello? How might text-generated emotions allow for an “encounter” with Costello, the “wounded animal”?
- 4) Finally, does the narrative support empathy on a metadiegetic level?

To answer these questions in class, I suggest two sequential modules for teaching empathy and emotions: one that deals with students’ emotional reactions to *The Lives of Animals* and one that focuses on the emotions represented in the text. As a didactic tool for the first part, I propose that students keep an emotions journal to document their responses while they read the text. The aim of keeping a journal is, on the one hand, to gain some distance from an overwhelming direct emotional response to controversial and provocative issues; on the other hand, to facilitate an awareness of the mechanisms and structure of the text that may allow access to its difficult protagonist. For human-animal studies, I suggest as a learning target texts that raise the students’ awareness of the logocentric tradition that denounces and rejects emotions, for instance, excerpts from Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. A further goal is to acquaint students with concepts of care theory, especially empathy and emotions, attentiveness, response, and responsibility, and to situate Costello within this context.

17 Care ethics often links vegetarianism and empathy; see, e. g., Lori Gruen: *Empathy and Vegetarian Commitments*. In: Steve F. Sapontzis (ed.): *Food for Thought: The Debate over Eating Meat*. New York: Prometheus 2004, pp. 284–294.

Next, I ask students to chronicle striking emotions in the narrative, i. e., to describe characters and their emotions on the diegetic level. In their journal, students should keep a record of their problems and ideas with regard to instances of empathic and rational knowledge. The goal here is for students to become aware of how the text associates empathic knowledge with the situational and bodily, whereas rational knowledge is associated with the abstract, mental, and general. As a further didactic tool, I then suggest the method of role-play. Students choose and discuss a conflictual situation, develop roles, and perform them in class. Acting out certain passages from the text is intended to lead to new perspectives and thus to enhance empathy. As a learning target for human-animal studies, I propose juxtaposing the different ways in which philosophy and empathic poetry access the animal other.

2. Documenting affective responses: The emotions journal

When teaching *The Lives of Animals*, I have repeatedly noticed the strong emotions the text excites. Accordingly, keeping an emotions journal seems particularly apt. The students' task here is to record their emotional responses in detail during the reading process. Preferably, this process takes place directly after reading the text since memories, emotions, and impressions are more detailed the shorter the interval is between reading and writing.¹⁸ In addition, the passing of time encourages reflective processes that might superimpose themselves onto immediate emotional responses. This is especially problematic when students feel the need to correct their reactions to events that take place in the narrative in accordance with culturally accepted social and emotional rules, thereby distorting their initial impressions and passions.¹⁹ The aim is to generate a range of emotions based on the students' initial responses to their reading, which, in a second step, they discuss and analyze in class. This part focuses not so much on understanding the text but rather on developing student competence. The learners and their reading experiences become the

18 Barbara Frieberthäuser: Anregungen zum Studieren mit einem Forschungstagebuch. In: *Uni Frankfurt*, n. d. https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/60356661/BF_Anregung_Forschungstagebuch.pdf (accessed: February 1, 2021).

19 For the cultural, historical, and political dimension of emotions, see Ute Frevert: *Defining Emotions: Concepts and Debates over Three Centuries*. In: Idem / Christian Bailey / Pascal Eitler / Benno Gammerl et al. (eds): *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling 1700–2000*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2014, pp. 1–31.

material that they evaluate together in a second step. In their analysis, they can ask meta-reflexive questions, for instance, about why a certain number of fellow students had similar emotional responses.

The benefit of keeping an (emotions) journal lies in the gradual approach to the text that it provides.²⁰ In the first instance, students are not only reading about the characters' emotions, but – in the process of writing – they become aware of their own sensibilities. Ideally, the journal will enable students to clarify their emotions and to take a reflective stance toward them, thereby challenging them to take responsibility for their own positions and perspectives.²¹ Teachers also benefit from the journal method as it spotlights ideas, questions, and problems that warrant further discussion. Furthermore, this approach significantly increases students' motivation to participate in classroom debates.

I will now discuss two examples that are likely to perplex students on the level of the narrative's diegesis and excite feelings of discomfort, unease, or even denial. Part of this response, I suggest, is due to the rhetoric of Costello's lectures, which works against what the philosopher Cora Diamond has called "deflection." Diamond uses the "notion of deflection, for describing what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem."²² Philosophy, in other words, deflects from unbearable or appalling issues, such as suffering or vulnerability, and transforms them into abstract moral problems. Costello, however, exposes and appreciates such "difficulties of reality" that run counter to our ordinary mode of thinking. According to Diamond, "to appreciate the difficulty is to feel oneself being shouldered out of how one thinks, how one is apparently supposed to think, or to have a sense of the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach."²³ Diamond's image of being

20 For a detailed description of the journal method, see Kersten Reich: Tagebuchmethode. In: *Methodenpool*, n. d. http://methodenpool.uni-koeln.de/tagebuch/frameset_tagebuch.html (accessed: January 28, 2021).

21 For the effects of keeping a journal, see: Friebertshäuser: Anregungen zum Studieren; Sabine Liebig: Ein anderer Blick auf Unterricht: Das Lerntagebuch. In: *Yumpu*, n. d. <https://www.yumpu.com/de/document/read/51436051/ein-anderer-blick-auf-unterricht-das-lerntagebuch-lo-net-2> (accessed January 14, 2021); Dietlind Fischer: Das Tagebuch als Lern- und Forschungsinstrument. In: Barbara Friebertshäuser / Annedore Prengel (eds): *Handbuch qualitative Forschungsmethoden in der Erziehungswissenschaft*. Weinheim / Munich: Juventa 2003, pp. 693–703.

22 Diamond: *The Difficulty of Reality*, p. 57.

23 *Ibid.*

“shouldered out” of one’s normal habits and ideas implies a forceful, surprising act that describes exactly what students with strong emotions of resistance or denial might experience during their reading. Diamond’s concept of deflection helps to explain and analyze those responses. When students come to understand the tendency of Costello’s rhetoric to thwart abstraction, they achieve one of the main learning targets. For instance, her talk repetitively alludes to bodily vulnerability, mortality, and creatureliness. Right at the beginning of her talk, she identifies with the wounded ape Red Peter from Kafka’s *Report to an Academy*. Her son John, a professor of astrophysics, who is both the focalizer of the narrative and the reader’s proxy, feels uncomfortable with what he calls his mother’s “death-talk.”²⁴ The narrative *mise en abyme* structure of John listening unwillingly and with “dis-ease” to his mother’s talk mirrors and metafictionally comments on the reader’s own reception of her talk. The “awareness we each have,” as Diamond writes, “of being a living body [...] carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them.”²⁵ This exposure Diamond sees as capable of panicking us.

In view of this general sense of great unease and discomfort when reading *The Lives of Animals*, I propose next taking a closer look at specific textual issues that might cause strong emotions. Here, the idea of threshold concepts is helpful. As Wendy Woodward claims in her insightful contribution on teaching *The Lives of Animals* at a South African university, Coetzee’s text operates with threshold concepts, which she sees for example in Costello’s notion that animals are souls.²⁶ As Jan Meyer and Ray Land put forward in their report on teaching environments, a threshold concept “is akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something.”²⁷ Moreover, they maintain that threshold concepts are transformative in that they contribute to a changed perception of the world. Meyer and Land further state that the “shift in perspective may lead to a transformation of personal identity, a reconstruction of subjectivity. In such instances a transformed perspective is likely to involve an affective component – a shift in values, feeling

24 Coetzee: *Lives*, p. 19.

25 Diamond: *The Difficulty of Reality*, p. 74.

26 See Woodward: *Pedagogies of Discomfort*, p. 143.

27 Jan Meyer / Ray Land: *Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Thinking and Practice within the Disciplines*. ETL Project. In: *Occasional Report 4* (May 2003). <http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/docs/ETLreport4.pdf> (accessed: February 2, 2021).

or attitude.”²⁸ However, this knowledge can prove troublesome as it might appear “alien,” “counter-intuitive,” or “incoherent” to students.²⁹ The acquired knowledge is also irreversible, meaning that the understanding of a threshold concept cannot easily be reversed once achieved.

Meyer and Land’s description of understanding threshold concepts in learning processes that force students into new perspectives and even to remodel their long-held assumptions is remarkably suitable for explaining students’ responses to Coetzee’s narrative. Here, I have identified at least two major threshold concepts on which the discussion in class should focus with respect to its potential for being “troublesome knowledge.”³⁰ Both threshold concepts relate closely to the notion of empathic engagement with the text. This is, firstly, the analogy Costello draws between the Holocaust and the industrial mass slaughter of animals. She likens the horror of the abattoirs and their disavowal by most citizens to the denial of the concentration camps during the Third Reich. For her, the crime in both instances is the pretense of not knowing: “They lost,” she asserts, “their humanity, in our eyes, because of a certain willed ignorance on their part.”³¹ Costello’s Holocaust comparison breaches the culturally accepted way of speaking about the Nazi mass murder of Jews, to which students will react with discomfort. Coetzee’s protagonist violates a taboo when she questions the uniqueness of the unfathomable historic event and its unrepresentability by implicitly likening industrially slaughtered animals to the victims of the Shoah. Again, the figure of the Jewish writer Abraham Stern, who is appalled by Costello’s comparison, serves as a culturally acknowledged intratextual reaction to her provocative analogy. Here it is interesting to compare students’ reactions with Stern’s answer to Costello. To understand the full nature of Costello’s argument, it is necessary to consider another passage, in which she returns to the death camps once more. “The particular horror of the camps,” Costello emphasizes, is not the animalization of the Jews that allowed their killers to treat them “like lice”³² despite their shared humanity.³³ For her, this intersectional argument

28 Ibid., p. 4.

29 Ibid., p. 5.

30 Ibid.

31 Coetzee: *Lives*, p. 20.

32 Ibid., p. 34.

33 See, e.g., Jobst Paul, who shows how different discourses use animalization for racial or ethnic discrimination in: *Das [Tier]-Konstrukt – und die Geburt des Rassismus: Zur kulturellen Gegenwart eines vernichtenden Arguments*. Münster: Unrast 2004.

is “too abstract.”³⁴ According to Costello, the monstrosity lies in the failure to engage with the other, to empathize with the victims:

The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, “It is *they* in those cattle cars rattling past.” They did not say, “It is I who am in that cattle car.” They said, “It must be the dead who are being burned today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages.” They did not say, “How would it be if I were burning?” They did not say, “I am burning, I am falling in ash.”³⁵

The crucial point here is to make students understand the way in which empathy works. Costello asks her audience to change perspectives, to see the world through the eyes of the other, the other who is not an object but a subject. In a discussion of this passage, the seminar can analyze to which extent Costello’s description matches the central criteria of care ethics: firstly, attentiveness and responsiveness instead of indifference; secondly, the acknowledgement of a relationship between the beings in the wagons and oneself (instead of drawing a demarcation line between the individual and the other); and thirdly, an insistence on the literalness of the image “I am burning, I am falling in ash.” This phrase not only emphasizes an embodied resonance with the pain of the other but also incites the reader to take ethical responsibility for the other’s suffering through perspective-taking. Costello demands the empathetic engagement with the other, irrespective of their species: “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another,” she claims.³⁶ This insight into one’s interconnectedness with and personal responsibility for multispecies others can act as troublesome knowledge for students, an emotion that comes with the threshold concept.

Students can now contemplate whether Costello’s disconcerting comparison is productive when it allows the mechanism of blocked empathy, which draws a line between a fictive “them” and “us,” to become visible at the heart of violent systems of power.³⁷ There might be room here for discussing other examples of the mechanism of blocked empathy, e. g., environmental concerns such as

34 Coetzee: *Lives*, p. 34.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

37 See Fritz Breithaupt on strategies of empathy blockade in: *Die dunklen Seiten der Empathie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2017, pp. 86–100.

species extinction or climate change. Students should, however, be reminded that Costello's propensity to empathize with the other also runs the danger of losing the self.³⁸ Coetzee's narrative points to this possibility in its unsettling final scene, in which the Australian writer suffers a breakdown of the border between inside and outside, between imagination and reality. She perceives signs of "a crime of stupefying proportions"³⁹ everywhere and asks herself whether she is mad.⁴⁰

The second example of a threshold concept in *The Lives of Animals*, which I suggest debating in class, is also about empathy and perspective-taking. Costello talks about Kafka's ape Red Peter and his supposed prototype, Sultan, from Wolfgang Köhler's ape colony on Tenerife, where Köhler was conducting experiments on apes on behalf of the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1912. When Köhler tested the apes' mental capacities, Costello implies, he was treating them as objects, as instinct-driven machines. Costello opposes this discourse, instead giving Sultan a voice with his own point of view. In her empathic speech, she shows Sultan as an actor who has a much more complex mind than Köhler's experimental set-up permits. Sultan's view of an experiment with crates and bananas goes as follows:

Sultan knows: Now one is supposed to think. That is what the bananas up there are about. The bananas are there to make one think, to spur one to the limits of one's thinking. But what must one think? One thinks: Why is he starving me? One thinks: What have I done? Why has he stopped liking me? One thinks: Why does he not want these crates any more? But none of these is the right thought. [...] The right thought to think is: How does one use the crates to reach the bananas?⁴¹

The Belgian philosopher and ethologist Vinciane Despret recently dedicated a whole book to the question of "What would animals say, if we asked the right

38 On potential "dark sides" of empathy like the loss of one's identity, see *ibid.*, pp. 44–78.

39 Coetzee: *Lives*, p. 69.

40 The notion of dissolving borders between inside and outside becomes especially salient in the "Postscript" to Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, which gives an imagined letter by "Elizabeth, Lady Chandos to Francis Bacon." The fictive wife, who is an intertextual reference to Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Chandos letter, writes: "But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how?" (J. M. Coetzee: Postscript. In: *Idem: Elizabeth Costello*. London: Vintage 2003, pp. 226–230, here p. 229.) Elizabeth posits similar questions as Costello – how can you go on living with this insight into things?

41 Coetzee: *Lives*, p. 28.

questions?” Despret argues that from an anthropocentric standpoint, human subjects cannot ask the right questions; these can only result from an interspecies attunement guided by an empathic openness to the complexity of the other’s situated being.⁴²

When analyzing this scene, students can relate their affective, situational approach to the text to two opposing ways of looking at the animal, which for Derrida are poetry on the one hand and philosophy on the other. The most common practice in scientific experimentation but also in everyday encounters – for instance, in zoos – is looking at animals. Scientists like Köhler claim that they know the animal by looking *at* it. What science forgets, however, is the animal’s capability of looking back. At this point, it might be productive to complement Coetzee’s text with Jacques Derrida’s *The Animal that Therefore I Am*. In his fundamental critique of Western metaphysics with respect to human-animal relationships, Derrida describes the unsettling experience of being looked at by his cat while standing naked in his bathroom. Insofar as the cat is a being *in front* of him, it can be looked at; however, and this is the crucial point, Derrida says, “it can [also] look at me. It has its point of view regarding me.” It is this fact, Derrida claims, that the philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Levinas has ignored.⁴³ The sudden awareness that animals can look back at us is transforming knowledge as described by Jan Meyer and Ray Land, who claim it “is like a portal opening up a new [...] way of thinking about something.”⁴⁴ This can be quite confusing for students as the recognition that animals are something other than objects or resources for humans to exploit and are instead beings who have their own perspective, needs, and desires fundamentally questions acquired habits and assumptions. Derrida also points to the primal significance of this understanding when he writes about recognizing the other as an agential subject: “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there.”⁴⁵ Derrida opposes the act of *thinking* to logocentric *knowledge*, which for him is in its nature arresting. Thinking, in contrast, connotes a poetic, dialogic, and potentially endless process for Derrida. Instead of knowledge’s “philosophical, social, and political naming and classification of *things*” and the humanist subject’s

42 Vinciane Despret: *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, transl. from the French by Brett Buchanan. Minneapolis / London: U of Minnesota P 2016.

43 Jacques Derrida: *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, transl. from the French by David Wills. In: *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002), pp. 369–418, here p. 380.

44 Meyer / Land: *Threshold Concepts*, p. 1.

45 Derrida: *The Animal*, p. 397.

confronting the world as a separate, inanimate object, poetic thinking implies a nonhierarchical relational “entanglement, a kinship, with ‘things.’”⁴⁶ The target of the journal method is to make students aware of their own emotions by writing down their affective responses to Coetzee’s text. Class discussion can range from negative or even hostile reactions to Costello and her animal discourse, to the notion of threshold concepts that contain troublesome knowledge. This notion enables students to understand and reflect upon their emotional response to Coetzee’s female protagonist. Finally, the class can debate whether Costello’s idea of empathy represents such a threshold concept as it stresses the ineluctable relational entanglement with other (multispecies) beings – a potentially troublesome awareness.

3. Emotions in the text: Role-play and empathy

The second part of the module for teaching *The Lives of Animals* addresses the representation of emotions *in* the text. The core question with regard to emotions in the diegetic world is what kind of feelings the characters develop for Elizabeth Costello. Do they empathize with her? What mechanisms and aspects block the other characters from empathetically engaging with her? And, more generally, how can empathy be enhanced?

First, students should focus on the character constellation in the text and find suitable passages with which to contrast the conflicting parties. There are two main responses toward Elizabeth Costello: from Costello’s family – her son John and his wife Norma – and from the academic audience. The text contrasts Costello with John, an assistant professor of physics and astronomy, and Norma, who holds a PhD in philosophy and specializes in the philosophy of mind. John and Norma value a rational take on the world. They dismiss everything associated with the body and its vulnerability, and everything that deviates from the norm makes them feel uncomfortable. This is especially true of Norma, whose name emphasizes the “normal,” an adherence to the “norm.” Costello, in contrast, points to her body quite bluntly. She not only refers to her age, but also to her vulnerability, to her wounded body, which she compares to the wounded ape Red Peter. Her speech is, at times, more of a rant, constantly violating norms as well as decorum.⁴⁷

46 Jodey Castricano: Rampant Compassion: A Tale of Two Anthropomorphisms and the “Trans-Species Episteme” of Knowledge Making. In: Idem / Lauren Corman: *Animal Subjects 2.0*. Waterloo, ON: Laurier UP 2016, pp. 249–268, here p. 260.

47 For a more detailed account of the text’s characters, see Böhm: „Anwältin“, Intellektuelle, Schriftsteller, pp. 201–202.

Costello's audience reacts much the same way as her family. The listeners, too, are uneasy and respond with incomprehension. The way she exposes emotions is not culturally accepted – at least not in an academic environment. She constantly violates “tacit rules which indicate what is regarded as an adequate expression of emotional responses in a specific culture and what is not.”⁴⁸ Students should realize that all characters show a total lack of understanding of, and hence empathy for, the Australian writer. A question from the audience after Costello's talk is indicative of their utter lack of comprehension: “What wasn't clear to me,” one of the listeners says,

is what you are actually targeting. Are you saying we should close down the factory farms? Are you saying we should stop eating meat? Are you saying we should treat animals more humanely, kill them more humanely? Are you saying we should stop experiments *on* animals? Are you saying we should stop experiments with animals, even benign psychological experiments like Köhler's? Can you clarify?⁴⁹

The man is obviously puzzled by her display of feeling that for him denotes a lack both of rational arguments and normative statements. Costello's supposed “inconsistency,” Sharon Payne writes, “is a challenge for students”⁵⁰ – not only for her fictive audience and family members. The frustration of not being able to discern clear ideological positions and moral guidelines governs responses in and outside the text. This is, however, due not only to the conflicting figure of the Australian writer but also to the text's narrative structure. A substantial part of *The Lives of Animals* is direct speech – either monologic in Costello's lectures or dialogic in instances such as the dinner at the Faculty Club, the student seminar, and the debate between Costello and the philosophy professor Thomas O'Hearne. The dialogism of the spoken word that dominates the text also shows in the structure of the two related parts “The Philosophers and the Animals” and “The Poets and the Animals.” Due to this structure, the text has a dramatic quality, making it especially suitable for its adaptation in role-play.

48 Vera Nünning: *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds: The Cognitive Value of Fiction*. Heidelberg: Winter 2014, p. 116.

49 Coetzee: *Lives*, p. 36.

50 Shannon Payne: Teaching Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* in the First Year Composition Class Room. In: Wright / Poyner / Boehmer (eds): *Approaches*, pp. 174–179, here p. 177.

As opposed to a more discussion-based approach, role-play allows students to analyze difficult situations or conflicts. By taking up different perspectives, students get closer to the characters, learn about their motives for acting, their emotions and ideas. Assuming the role of a character compels students to take a position; they cannot remain indifferent. According to didactics research, role-play significantly increases openness and empathy as well as the ability to observe oneself and others.⁵¹

Numerous situations in Coetzee's narrative lend themselves to reenactment. For example, students can either focus on Costello's dinner with her family, the discussion of her talk, the dinner at the faculty club, the letter from Abraham Stern, or the debate with Thomas O'Hearne. In groups, the class should discuss and analyze one of the central conflicts as well as develop and write their own scripts for the roles in specific scenes, which might also mean gathering background material and additional information. This promotes not only a broader understanding of Costello and what she opposes, but also students' reflection on their own attitudes. After students have worked on a specific conflict and have established their roles, they can move on to performing a given situation.⁵²

Critics have described the affinity between acting and empathy. Susan Verducci shows that dramatic acting can foster empathy. She argues that the same type of empathy that an ethics of care requires is needed to embody convincing characters on stage.⁵³ This is especially true of the technique of method acting, which the Russian actor Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) introduced to the theory of authentic, naturalist acting. For him it was important that fictional characters express real emotions, achieved by the actor's empathy that "allows the actor to see a character as if it were she (the actor) faced with the different circumstances that characterize the character's life."⁵⁴

51 See, e.g., Daniela Köster / Helley Fazli / Kersten Reich / Stefanie Nölke: Rollenspiele. In: *Methodenpool*, n. d. http://methodenpool.uni-koeln.de/rollenspiel/frameset_rollenspiel.html (accessed: January 30, 2021); Wolfgang Mattes: Rollenspiel. In: Idem: *Methoden für den Unterricht. Kompakte Übersichten für Lehrende und Lernende*. Braunschweig: Schöningh 2011, pp. 62–163.

52 It might also be worth discussing that, although the text has a strong dramatic quality, there do not seem to have been any significant performances of it so far.

53 See Susan Verducci: A Moral Method? Thoughts on Cultivating Empathy Through Method Acting. In: *Journal of Moral Education* 29:1 (2000), pp. 87–99, here p. 88.

54 Shaun Gallagher / Julia Gallagher: Acting Oneself as Another: An Actor's Empathy for her Character. In: *Topoi* 39 (2020), pp. 779–790, here p. 786.

When discussing students' performance in class, it is interesting to see whether the role-play – with its assumption of different perspectives – encourages an empathic approach toward Costello or whether students develop alternative patterns of action. In any case, the role-play tends to enhance students' ability to perceive not only themselves but also the other.

4. Conclusion

Scholars have profoundly criticized Coetzee's figure Elizabeth Costello for her sentimental views, her hysterical rants, and the inefficacy of her presentation. Costello meets with a particularly empathic response neither from the diegetic world nor from the reader of the text. Vera Nünning maintains that "the use of narrative conventions and aesthetic devices in fictional stories plays a role in encouraging or blocking empathic responses."⁵⁵ The most common aesthetic device to encourage empathy with a particular character is the internal perspective from which the reader gains direct insight into the character's thoughts and emotions. In *The Lives of Animals*, however, the reader's knowledge is strictly limited to the perspective of Costello's son John. When he is late for her poetry class, the reader misses the class with him. Also, John is skeptical of his mother and assesses her from a primarily rationalist, non-affective point of view. The narrative thus deliberately blocks, or at least hinders, an empathic response to its main protagonist. For critics of Costello, this is evidence that Coetzee meant to distance himself from his protagonist. Such an assessment, I suggest, is representative of an attitude that links female gender, animals, and maladies. Costello belongs to those gendered women who Lori Gruen and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey have recently termed "animaladies."⁵⁶ From a hegemonic male perspective, female characters who align themselves with the more-than-human world are often stigmatized as mad and overly emotional.⁵⁷

While the reading journal as a methodological tool helps assess students' emotional responses to the text, role-play enables them to assume a perspective potentially different from their own, thus allowing them to connect with the

55 Nünning: *Reading Fictions*, p. 108.

56 Gruen / Probyn-Rapsey: *Distillations*, p. 1.

57 Another prominent example from recent fiction is the female protagonist from Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2015), who affiliates with plants and resists violent and hegemonic systems of power. As a result, her social environment regards her as insane and finally sends her to a mental hospital.

characters and their emotions. Both teaching methods can encourage empathy and thus advance a deeper understanding of the text. This may allow students to encounter Costello from a new, empathic perspective.⁵⁸ Readers have no more access to Costello's thoughts and feelings than to that of Thomas Nagel's famous bat – there is only an external view that draws conclusions from signs, gestures, and words. Thus, Coetzee's protagonist asks readers to practice empathy irrespective of their species – not only with her lectures but also through the texts' representation of her character. This is our responsibility as readers.

58 "Encounter" in the sense of genuinely *seeing* the other, of being surprised and shocked into a new way of thinking. For this empathic sense of an encounter see Derrida: *The Animal That Therefore I Am*; Donna Haraway: *When Species Meet*. Minnesota: U of Minnesota P 2008; as well as the introduction to the volume *Animal Encounters*, which I co-authored with Jessica Ullrich: Introduction – Animal Encounters: Contact, Interaction and Relationality. In: Idem (eds): *Animal Encounters: Kontakt, Interaktion und Relationalität*. Berlin: Metzler 2019, pp. 1–21.