Through thick and thin: the romance of the species in the anthropocene

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Abstract The emerging field of animal studies has a curious relationship with environmentalism. Instead of fitting comfortably in the latter’s capacious tent, animal studies has chafed at environmentalists’ commitment to holistic communitarianism best represented by Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic.” The land ethic approaches the biotic community as a pyramidal ecological system that turns on the relations between producers and consumers and between predators and prey rather than as an egalitarian moral community. Animal rights activists have thus repeatedly clashed with conservationists in an internecine fight poignantly dramatized in T.C. Boyle’s novel When the Killing’s Done (2011). In this paper, I argue that environmental justice cannot be secured solely from the third-person perspective of the deontological argument underlying animal rights or the utilitarian argument often used to justify the land ethic. Instead, we might draw on the pragmatist traditions East and West and view justice as a larger loyalty achieved as much by the moral imagination of the particular from the first- and second-person perspectives as by rational deliberation on the universal. Using a French novel (The Roots of Heaven, 1958), a Chinese novel (The Disappearance of Lao Hai, 2001), and a Chinese film (Monster Hunt, 2015) as my examples, I demonstrate how literature’s thick narratives can engender an ethics of care by bringing particular instances of non-human distress into aesthetic, affective, and moral proximity with us.

Keywords Animals · Land ethic · Pragmatism · Anthropocene · Environmental justice
Introduction: “A Certain Convocation of Politic Worms”

In *Hamlet*, after the notoriously indecisive prince of Denmark mistakenly kills Polonius in an uncharacteristically rash move, Claudius, his uncle and the new king, inquires about the vanished courtier:

“Now, Hamlet, where’s Polonius?”

“At supper.”

“At supper where?”

“Not where he eats, but where he is eaten; a certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots: your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service,—two dishes, but to one table: that’s the end.” (Act IV, Scene 3)

With biting wit, the Bard gives us a taste of the seventeenth century cosmology in which man and worm are part of the same metabolic cycle and a king and a beggar are but “two dishes” for the regal maggots. It was a worldview that prevailed in the premodern world. Buddhism, for example, is known for a grueling meditation practice whereby novices are to contemplate a corpse in a state of decomposition. On a metaphysical level, it is meant to instill the principle of detachment (from bodily appetites and worldly distinctions); but it also presupposes a holistic view of life. It is to this holistic worldview that the modern environmental movement returns again and again for moral and epistemological resources. Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic,” for example, begins with the idea that humans are not rulers but plain members of the biotic community. Yet this convergence of cosmological visions concerning humanity’s place in “the circle of life” (to borrow a hokey phrase from *The Lion King*) is too often forgotten in contemporary ecological thinking rift by warring philosophies and ethics. In this paper, I consider one such conflict—between conservationism and animal rights—and propose a pragmatist alternative that has roots in religious and philosophical traditions East and West and has informed some of the latest scholarship on the brain and the mind.

The emerging field of animal studies has a curious relationship with environmentalism. Instead of fitting comfortably in the latter’s capacious tent, animal studies has chafed at environmentalists’ commitment to holistic communitarianism best represented by Leopold’s land ethic. The land ethic approaches the biotic community as a pyramidal ecological system that turns on the trophic relations between producers and consumers and between predators and prey. It is a holistic communitarian ethic concerned with populations, species, ecosystems; it speaks of the “land pyramid” (soil, plants, herbivores, omnivores, and carnivores), the “food chain” (transfer of energy from sunlight to plants, from plants to animals, from stomach to stomach), and, above all, natural selection. In Mark Sagoff’s words, “the principle of natural selection is not obviously a humanitarian principle” (2001, p. 89). Given that an ecological system is not an egalitarian moral system governed by humanitarian principles, the land ethic is relatively unconcerned about the
suffering of individual animals. Instead, conservation policies are informed by population biology, not animal rights or equality. The land ethic, in this light, leans toward the natural sciences that traffic in dispassionate fact and objective necessity rather than an ethic that adjudicates competing goods and claims.

Animal rights activists, on the other hand, are concerned with the individual animal or animal species. They see animals as sharing a moral community with humans, as citizens with equal rights of survival and security and freedom from pain and suffering. They tend to focus on the welfare of three groups of animals: how livestock are raised and slaughtered for food, how primates and rodents are used in laboratories, and how some wild animals are poached for body parts and others are exhibited in zoos and circuses. They are against all modes of exploitation of animals—for food, utility, labor, or medical use—and insist that all animals are entitled to equal moral consideration. Many of them volunteer at shelters; some work the legal channels to pass anti-cruelty legislations; others resort to guerrilla tactics to liberate animals from confinement and captivity. Still some believe it necessary to prevent and relieve animal suffering however it is caused, going so far as to propose, insofar as future technology permits, to eradicate predation between animal species (Callicott 2001a, p. 154; McMahan 2016). Nature, in their view, should be made fair, especially for the organisms at the bottom of the food chain, for “the grubs, bugs, and shrubs” (Callicott 2001c, p. 12). Indeed, zoos avoid feeding live prey to their apex predator wards in full view of zoogoers not only because the sight is too scary for children, but also because it is disconcerting for adults (Grazian 2015): What could be more affronting to our moral sensibility than seeing a big cat tear into a bunny? Isn’t morality after all about extending care, mercy, and protection to the weak and defenseless?

D.G. Richie channeled these questions a century ago: “are we not to vindicate the rights of the persecuted prey of the stronger? Or is our declaration of the rights of every creeping thing to remain a mere hypocritical formula to gratify pug-loving sentimentalists?” (quoted in Sagoff 2001, p. 91). Animal rights activists have certainly no wish to be conflated with “pug-loving sentimentalists” who are perfectly fine with the trophic asymmetries of nature and with conservationists’ effort to shore up those same asymmetries—by violent intervention if necessary. Instead, they have repeatedly clashed with conservationists whom they see as arrogant, heartless bureaucrats playing God and who see fit to “chop some down, gun others down, set fire to still others” (Callicott 2001b, p. 119). The internecine fight between the two groups is poignantly dramatized in T.C. Boyle’s novel When the Killing’s Done (2011). Boyle depicts the battle between animal liberationists and the National Park Service (in partnership with Nature Conservancy) over the latter’s decision to cull the black rat, feral pig, and sheep populations on the Channel Islands—all invasive species crowding out the native wildlife.

It is easy to come away from the novel with a dim view of the animal liberationists’ intemperate tactics, uncompromising conviction, and fiery rhetoric. Indeed, the notion of animal rights or species egalitarianism, when pursued to its logical end, would mandate the eradication of all trophic processes beyond photosynthesis (Callicott 2001a, p. 149). But the novel also invites reflection on the alienating effect of modern conservationism’s reliance on an environmental ethics
that asks us to check our emotions at the door and listen instead to the scientists, experts, laws, and governmental agencies and NGOs. The rift between conservationists and animal advocates can be mapped onto the long-standing dispute between the utilitarian and the deontological traditions in Western moral philosophy. As Baird Callicott (2001c, pp. 12–13) points out, both traditions operate from the same “standard paradigm” of modern philosophy. In this paradigm, a philosopher grants moral standing to an entity on account of its possessing a given property or characteristic, be it reason, language, self-consciousness, tool-using, sense of shame, memory, ability to plan, awareness of mortality, sentience, or aliveness. Whereas humanists privilege traits that are allegedly unique to humans, environmentalists insist on an inclusiveness that is progressively coextensive with the entire biosphere, with some animal advocates trying to draw a line at, say, sentience or the ability to suffer. Once a property is thus elevated as ethically enfranchising, the standard paradigm mandates a kind of flexible universalism: all entities in possession of that property must have equal or proportionate moral standing, while those who do not are cast into an ethical limbo or oblivion. Other criteria of distinction, moreover, must thenceforth be deemed morally irrelevant. However, to justify the protection and preservation of animals, plants, and ecosystems by way of the standard paradigm, one has to cope with the problem of arbitrary, counterintuitive, even reprehensible conclusions. What indeed justifies the moral gulf between vertebrates and mammals or between vertebrates and invertebrates? Are fruit flies and sperm whales really worthy of equal moral consideration? Do we really have an obligation to honor our lawn’s interest to be watered, or a mosquito’s right to suck our blood? Are we really supposed to let our pet hamster starve because there are more urgent claims from entities possessing greater quantities of an ethically enfranchising property, say pigs in factory farms or endangered elephant herds in Africa, both of which are demonstrably more intelligent than hamsters? And even more unthinkably, if a human population of seven billions poses a dire threat to the planet’s ecological future, must it be subject to culling operations routinely performed on other species?

In response to these conundrums and the charge of ecofascism, Callicott formulates a defense of the land ethic by melding it to what he calls “our accumulated social ethics” (Callicott 2001b, p. 121) or what social psychologists prefer to call our moral intuitions. He points out that the duty to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community does not cancel or replace the duties attendant on membership in the nested human communities, such as honor thy father and thy mother, cherish thy city, and serve thy country (Callicott 2001b, p. 121). When these “first order principles” come into conflict with one another or with our duty to the biotic community, however, a set of “second order principles” are required. He offers two such principles, designed to be deployed sequentially (122): SOP-1: the obligations generated by membership in venerable, intimate communities (e.g., the family, the village) take precedence over those generated in more recently emerged, impersonal communities (the nation, the biota); SOP-2: the obligations generated by stronger interests take precedence over those generated by weaker interests. To illustrate SOP-2, he asks us to consider the relative weight of the basic survival of African children vis-à-vis luxury toys for
of the interest of the logging industry and the livelihood of loggers. He writes: “livelihood and lifestyle [of the latter], for both of which adequate substitutes can be found, is a lesser interest than life itself” (124).

Essentially Callicott tries to rationalize the central operation of the standard paradigm—to generalize egoism by triaging interests. But he overestimates the ease with which the general public could be brought around to the proposition that the “livelihood and lifestyle” of loggers is a weaker interest than the species survival of the old-growth forests and spotted owls, especially those whose lives are in one way or another tied to the logging and timber industry. He acknowledges that to a layperson, there is something unpalatable about elevating the interests of trees and owls above the interests of humans. Indeed the very idea of placing the two things side by side on some imperious philosopher’s scale can be upsetting to some. Unwilling to let go of philosophers’ deepest desire to uncover a universal, fool-proof principle with which to order our moral life, Callicott in the end veers too far afield from Leopold’s most fundamental insight: “we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in” (2001, p. 104).

The land ethic as adopted by modern environmentalism has been given an excessively utilitarian makeover, so that Leopold’s insight about emotion and moral proximity is largely neglected. In some ways, it shares the fate of the folk ways of organizing ecological knowledge in the age of disenchantment. Eugene Anderson has shown that most traditional subsistence-oriented societies do a fairly adequate job managing their natural resources. This has little to do with harmony with nature or primitive spirituality. Rather, these societies use religion to “encode a tremendous amount of intensely emotional and personal material about animals and plants,” and organize this material into “a simple, memorable worldview that is dramatically highlighted in myth and ritual” (Anderson 1996, p. 72). In other words, through an interlocking web of symbols, beliefs, and rituals, religion encapsulates a great deal of practical ecological knowledge and “sells” it to members of a society in a culturally resonant and emotionally compelling way. He likens religion to a carrier wave that transmit moral codes that promote “a reverent, caring, thoughtful, and grateful attitude toward the natural world and its inhabitants” (70) and that help people navigate the trade-off between short-term and long-term interests, and between local and wide-flung obligations. Chinese fengshui, for example, sees the natural world as “a society of subtle beings—mystic dragons and tigers in the hills —whose bodies are literally the landscape” (16). Fengshui masters are adept at recognizing these subtle shapes and channeling the qi that flows through them to human advantages. Other examples include the land otter myth among Northwest Coast native Americans and Mayan agricultural practices. To be sure, mixed in these bodies of folk wisdom are plenty of erroneous inferences and patently absurd ideas from the point of view of modern science. Yet they offer practicable guides for behavior and for the most part they work and have served their communities well.

Anderson equivocates on why Christianity, in contrast, seems to have sponsored a very different, mostly extractive approach to resource management. Prasenjit Duara (2015) points to its theology of radical transcendence and entanglement with
confessional nationalism and competitive capitalism. The model of modernity and modernization under its dispensation has become unsustainable, argues Duara, who echoes Anderson in his call to turn to Asian traditions of “dialogical transcendence” in search of moral resources. “Transcendence” for him means the overcoming of the egoist self and the exclusive community. By “dialogical” he emphasizes the pluralistic and intersecting paths to truth and a generally syncretic and accommodationist ethos. “Dialogical transcendence” is thus a “reaching beyond the self that is not committed to a single all-powerful God, truth or eschaton” (282). Unlike Abrahamic religions premised on an absolute dualism of the sacred and profane, the dialogic traditions are oriented around polytheistic and pantheistic visions of divinity. The latter, he believes, offers not only different attitudes and ideas about nature, but also “different methods and techniques of self-formation that can link the personal to the social, the natural and the universal to counter the consumerism and nationalism of our times” (10). He too notes the centrality of religion and ritual in mediating the personal and the social: In these traditions, “self and collective were engaged—through bodily practices, self-cultivation exercises, rational and mystical processes, and community activities at various scales and orders of belonging, natural and social—in dialogical exchange with transcendent goals that may have been contentious and hierarchical, but rarely systemically exclusive” (280).

Neither Duara nor Anderson is interested in missionizing for any sort of vague and fuzzy ancient spirituality. They concede that religious transcendence may no longer be the driving force behind the modern commitment to environmentalism. The key then is to identify the “historical and cultural sources for such commitment” (Duara 2015, 11) that used to subtend religiously justified modes of resource management. Anderson writes: “Like it or not, we are separated by vast Weberian disenchantment from a world in which such cults [animism and shamanism] can persuade. However, this does not stop us from invoking an aesthetic and moral system that allows us to care” (1996, p. 173). Elsewhere, he calls it love.

Yet love can cut both ways. Anderson gives several examples that demonstrate how our love of nature is often a mixed blessing. On the one side, there are the cases of the seventeenth-century European fad for beaver hats engendering devastating ecological impact in the New World, and of the American taste for beef leading to the clearing of tropical rain forests to make room for cattle ranches. On the other side, American bird-watchers have been a potent force for saving birds and their habitats. How to ensure that our love is not destructive, that it does not end up destroying the very thing we love or blinding us to the externalities of our appetites? Anderson believes that hope resides in the education of young children and the molding of their young hearts. I would amend that by emphasizing life-long immersion in literature and the arts, which excel in getting us to “see, feel, understand, love and have faith in” things that have no clear economic or scientific or medical value, like wildflowers and songbirds. They do so by translating “the integrity, stability, and beauty of the land” into the aliveness, majesty, inherent worth, vulnerability, and suffering of individual non-human lives. They foster idiosyncratic, particularistic bonds and attachments to specific creature or thing, not to an abstract, disembodied Nature. And above all, they keep alive what I call “an
ecology of the particular” into which the “dialogic transcendence” of traditional religions has migrated. In Duara’s gloss, this is “a space for aspiration, hope and justice beyond the sphere of economic and political ideas…constrained by institutions, procedures, path dependencies and vested interests” (Duara 2015, p. 281). As such it is also a space of accidents, contingencies, and inscrutable emergences that willy-nilly bridges the gap between theories and plans and their realization.

How does literature elaborate an ecology of the particular? Before the rise of modern environmentalism, literary representations of the non-human world tended to filter it through a deeply ingrained anthropomorphic or romantic lens, so that non-human animals are either a cruder replica or a nobler distillation of our self-image. Chinese fox lore, for example, imagines a parallel, albeit inferior, vulpine civilization whereby foxes are for all intents and purposes faux-people who live in houses, cook with fire, wear clothes, possess valuables, engage in commerce (including prostitution), and abide by kinship ethics. Instead of happily burrowing and hunting in the woods and meadows, they practice spiritual cultivation and single-mindedly strive to join human society and partake of the joys of kinship, romance, and human sociability (Huntington 2003). Premodern anthropocentrism may be pervasive and unself-conscious, yet its religious carrier wave carries its own checks and balances. Once the religious trappings fell away, anthropocentrism, aided by ever accelerating technological advancement, managed to precipitate the Anthropocene. This is registered in literary representations that unabashedly celebrate the human conquest of nature. The non-human world is no longer a society of subtle beings, but a repository of malign, unpredictable, and implacable forces: draughts, floods, earthquakes, tornados, tsunamis, plagues, beasts of prey, poisonous flora, vermin, viruses, etc. Civilizational progress is predicated on the subjugation of these menaces in the form of dams, hydroelectric power plants, vaccines, zoos, botanical gardens, and so forth.

The late twentieth century saw a critical backlash against the no-holds-barred anthropocentrism of secular modernity and in its place arose biocentrism, or an effort to value the non-human world on its own terms, however remote or removed it is from human interests and sensibilities. Animal rights advocates, in particular, have pushed forward the biocentric agenda by aligning themselves with social justice causes such as anti-slavery, women’s liberation, gay rights, and civil rights. They argue that justice for non-human animals rests in overcoming species provincialism or speciesism, just as justice for women and various marginal groups rests on overcoming sexism, racism, homophobia, and the like. For the most part, however, biocentrism has remained more a philosophical thesis than a flourishing social or artistic praxis, but not for want of trying. In the last couple of decades, daring experimental artworks have troubled entrenched humanist habits of thinking and feeling. The Italian experimental film Le Quattro Volte (Four Times) attempts a non-anthropocentric visual meditation on the throbbing rhythm of the cosmic circle of life. Moving through the human, animal, plant, and mineral realms, the film holds humans in long shots and muffles their dialogues into distant murmurs. On the other hand, we are given many noisy close-ups of goats, trees, houses, and embers. Enchanting and refreshing as it is, in the absence of a human point of view, the film
is unlikely to be the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the environmental cause. It is my firm belief that eco-literature must address its human audience, for it is humans who must make the transition from conquerors and consumers to citizens and stewards of the planet.

I also believe that between the extremes of anthropocentrism and biocentrism there is a third, pragmatist way of bridging the gap between the human and non-human. It is in fact the most common, indeed dominant mode of eco-literature in the contemporary era. It shuns naïve anthropomorphism without going thoroughly and flamboyantly biocentric or posthuman. It affirms the ethical impulse of humanism and yet is aware of humanism’s blind spots and limitations. It is skeptical of some of biocentrism’s extravagant claims of subjectivity and agency on behalf of the non-human. Perhaps for this reason the pragmatist alternative has received little attention from environmental philosophers. While not addressing directly the environmental question, Richard Rorty’s defense of liberal humanism can lend considerable philosophical oomph to this mode of mediating the human and the non-human, precisely because he painstakingly steers clear of the standard paradigm of modern philosophy.

Rorty questions the categorical opposition of justice and loyalty by pointing out that it is founded on an equally untenable opposition between reason and emotion. In his view, reason is only the name given by Enlightenment thinkers to the largest possible loyalty they could imagine, i.e., that which extends to all of humanity once the distinctions of race, gender, and class were incrementally deemed morally irrelevant. Moral growth is not about reason overcoming irrational sentiments, but about extending moral consideration to an ever greater circle of beings. The thickness of our attachments is in proportion to the thickness of the stories we can tell about ourselves as members of a close-knit group. As we expand our loyalty, the stories we can tell of ourselves as citizens of the world or of the *Homo sapiens* become relatively abstract, sketchy, and thin. “You are in a better position to decide what differences between individuals are morally relevant when dealing with those whom you can describe thickly, and in a worse position when dealing with those whom you can only describe thinly” (Rorty 1997, p. 12). Thus it is proximity more than universal categories of identity (gender, race, or species) that governs our sentiments and loyalties. Indeed, we think little of the species divide when we lavish resources on our beloved pets—about whom we have so many stories to tell—while knowing very well that the same resources could vastly improve the lives of the needy in the global South. Few of us, I suspect, could be swayed by appeals to species loyalty to donate that $300 to Oxfam instead of spending it on Fido or Fluffy, and yet few of us would consider ourselves any less reasonable for it. Adam Smith knew well this pattern of thick and thin when he imagines, in *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a good Englishman who goes to bed contentedly after hearing the news of an earthquake in China that has killed hundreds of thousands of people. Rarely do the claims of distant strangers impinge on us until they are brought to into our moral circle in some compelling way, usually by media or literary representations, prompting us to renegotiate our identity and reconsider who/what matters to us more. “Moral dilemmas are not, in this view, the result of a conflict between reason and sentiment but between alternative selves, alternative self descriptions,
alternative ways of giving a meaning to one’s life” (Rorty 1997, p. 12). Under normal circumstances, the Chinese earthquake victims simply do not figure in the good Englishman’s self-description.

Along a parallel track, anthropologist Webb Keane (2016) borrows the concept of “affordance” from cognitive and evolutionary psychology and proposes a new framework that is cognizant of both the natural and social histories of ethical life. Like Rorty, he accords emotional and subjective experiences—what he calls the first-person perspective—critical role in ethical life, now substantiated by considerable empirical research by psychologists (Haidt 2001). But he insists that our moral intuitions are subject to reflection and critical revision, especially when we are called upon to justify or somehow give an account of our action in an interactive context, or from a second-person perspective (traditionally the purview of the social sciences). When we do so, we often invoke norms and principles that are part of a larger, shared morality system, and we thereby adopt a third-person perspective that permits self-distancing and self-critique (akin to Duara’s “dialogic transcendence”). Moral philosophy, he notes, has long privileged the third-person perspective, and grossly underappreciated the “thickness” of our ethical life, i.e., its emotional and interactive dimensions in the first- and second-person settings, the realm of dialogues and contingencies. It is only in the last decade or so that moral philosophers have begun to reckon with the challenges of the experimental sciences of consciousness and morality (Appiah 2008; Johnson 2014; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Scruton 2017; Slingerland 2011). The emerging consensus is that moral transformation is scarcely possible without mobilizing all three perspectives, without the moral imagination traversing the trick and the thin.

The importance of the first- and second-person perspectives is borne out by Gregg Mitman’s (2004) example of the American-led effort to restrict elephant hunting in Africa and ban the world-wide ivory trade. At first the scientists relied on the tools of population biology such as aggregate statistics and aerial photography while leaving themselves completely out of the picture. The elephants, in other words, were not the subject of any thick description at the eye level. It proved ineffective. When several ethologists, who had actually lived in close proximity with elephant herds and grown very attached to them, began to offer vivid narratives that referred to the elephants by name and shared the minutiae of their family and social life and the affectionate interactions with their human neighbors, the public and politicians listened. In this process, these scientists, most notably Iain and Oria Douglas-Hamilton, became media stars. They armed themselves with the techniques and aesthetic conventions of mass media that were unapologetic about seeing the tree for the forest. In the end, it was their particularistic bonds with a few “pachyderm personalities” that helped sway public opinion and move legislative action in favor of preservation. The gap between theories and policies and their realization was not bridged by appeal to the abstract principle of animal rights, or by triaging the interest of the ivory traders and that of the elephants, but by a leap of the moral imagination, an inscrutable but powerful emergence in the space of faith, belief, and hope nourished by storytelling.

Rorty believes that one cannot resolve competing loyalties by condemning some as parochial and appealing to something categorically distinct from loyalty—the
universal moral principle of justice. True to his pragmatist spirit, he offers no clear formulas. He would probably consider as misguided Callicott’s effort to adjudicate conflicting “first order principles” (loyalties to family, village, nation, species) by constructing a set of “second order principles.” Callicott himself also recognizes that there is no final court of appeal should the second order principles fail to do the job. Elsewhere, he advances a position far closer to Rorty’s pragmatism by invoking David Hume’s theory of morality. In this light, prosocial sentiments, not self-love, are the wellspring of morality, and our moral sentiments are thickest toward those in our face-to-face communities, including non-human beings who live in what Mary Midgley calls “mixed community” with us, such as pets and barnyard and work animals. This is why we feel little compunction when we dote on our pets while tossing out requests for donation from charity organizations dedicated to the relief of poverty or green organizations dedicated to the preservation of tropical forests or endangered species. This is also why the demand for equal rights for all animals strikes many as preposterous. Domestic animals, for example, have been selectively bred to serve a range of functions, from food and utility to companionship. “To condemn the morality of these roles…is to condemn the very being of these creatures. The animal welfare ethic of the mixed community, thus, would not censure using draft animals for work or even slaughtering meat animals for food so long as the keeping and using of such animals was not in violation—as factory farming clearly is—of a kind of evolved and unspoken social contract between man and beast” (Callicott 2001a, p. 153).

Underlying the ethics of the mixed community is a graded system of moral standing highly reminiscent of the standard position on animal welfare that Donald Blakeley distills from the Confucian classics. In traditional Chinese thought, animals are framed within three hierarchical matrices of value. For example, an ox has the self-value of living and prospering as an ox (matrix 1); yet it also serves as a means to other creatures’ ends, including other oxen, mosquitos, beetles, wolves, and humans (matrix 2); ultimately, its welfare is subordinate to the on-going affairs of the cosmos, as when it is made a sacrificial offering to the gods who ensure the proper workings of the myriad things (matrix 3). A sage ruler is he who is “able to exercise proper and prudent judgment regarding the treatment of animals by knowing their placement in the three matrixes” (Blakeley 2003, p. 143). A ruler should not let his inability to tolerate the cruelty of ritual slaughter interfere with the requisite ceremonial use of animals—he should simply abstain from the site of slaughter.1 In other words, he should subordinate his first-person perspective, at least for the time being, to the third-person perspective.

The Confucian position shares the holistic orientation of the land ethic whereby “nature is sustained by utilizing some parts for the good of others which is the good

1 While human sacrifice has mercifully long vanished from the ritual repertoire of most societies, there is no hard rule against applying the Confucian standard position to humans, allowing the subordination of a person’s matrix 1 value to his/her matrices 2 and 3 values, thereby rendering him/her a means to an end and potentially justifying draconian social engineering drives with devastating human costs. Abrahamic religions, in contrast, by drawing a bright line between humans and animals, condemn the latter to an abject existence while at the same time making human lives sacrosanct and giving birth to the modern human rights regime.
of nature as a whole” (Blakeley 2003, p. 144). Contrary to the deontological principle of egalitarianism, Confucianism insists on a graded distribution of benevolence or ren, from parents and kin to the village, the kingdom, and the cosmos. Wang Yangming spells out this logic as a kind of cosmic compact: “We love both plants and animals, and yet we can tolerate feeding animals with plants. We love both animals and men, and yet we can tolerate butchering animals to feed our parents, provide for religious sacrifices, and entertain guests. We can tolerate all these because by principle they should be done” (quoted in Blakeley, p. 152).2

However, our own world is one where “by principle” is no longer a self-evident invocation, and where the peremptoriness of a cosmic compact no longer obtains. What is tolerable and what is intolerable is very much up for grabs and it is becoming less and less acceptable to abrogate the matrix 1 value of others, even or especially when the latter are “dumb” creatures who cannot withhold their consent. A cartoon makes this point cheekily: a pig inquires with another: “So have you filled out your organ donor card yet?” In his inimitable style, T.C. Boyle seeks to blast every pet owner out of his or her complacency with a savage riff on the Lassie franchise in “Heart of a Champion” (1979). Here the legendary supercanine is seduced by and runs off with a scabby coyote while leaving her badly injured teenage master to drown in a flash flood. If animals have rights, surely Lassie is entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” on her own terms? There is admittedly a good dose of American-style “give me liberty or give me death” romanticism about what it means to be a real animal in Boyle’s counter-tale. Nonetheless, as Callicott notes, the most fundamental fact of life in the biotic community has never changed. It is still “eating…and being eaten. Each species is adapted to a trophic niche; each is a link in a food chain, and a knot in a food web. Whatever moral entitlements a being may have as a member of the biotic community, not among them is the right to life” (2001a, p. 154). Even humans, who do claim the right to life and have more or less extricated themselves from the food chain, in the end must submit themselves to the trophic fate of becoming “dishes” for worms and micro-organisms. A viable environmental ethics must therefore be firmly rooted in the recognition that morality is a human construct and is relevant ecologically speaking only insofar as humans are able to stand apart from the fundamental fact of the biotic community and act otherwise than dictated by nature—and only so to a limited degree. Environmental justice, to extend Rorty’s insight, cannot be secured by the logical deduction of the standard paradigm of moral philosophy or by extending moral and legal franchise to a few select species, but through the building of emotional bonds and practical alliances.

The lessons of pragmatism boil down to this: morality is a practical reason or phronēsis, and belongs to the realm of the imagination and practice rather than abstract formulations. It is in the realm of literary and artistic imagination that we

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2 This cosmic compact has been the ideological underpinning of agricultural civilizations the world over, whether or not justified in explicitly theistic terms. My working-class Italian-American mother-in-law, a devout evangelical Christian, once took overt offense at my vegetarianism on the grounds that it was disrespectful to animals, “who offer themselves for our nourishment.” That is, by not holding up my end of the bargain, I have willfully nullified the point of the animals’ existence. Clearly she was drawing on the biblical tradition while being oblivious to the conditions of industrial animal husbandry.
learn not much to progress teleologically from thick to thin, but to acquire a flexibility of perspective that facilitates adventures between thick and thin. Shakespeare’s “politic worms” is but a small and eloquent reminder of the way in which literature can turn something as revolting as swarming maggots feeding on rotten flesh into something comical and amusing and, shall we say, endearing—once the worms are pictured as having congregated in an orderly assembly to sup on dishes perhaps in full observance of English table manners. They too can be “politic.” That we can take a liking to them or at least can manage to suppress a shudder when contemplating our own postmortem fate has more do with a virtuoso playwright’s rhetorical sleight of hand than with the worms’ ecological contribution, as decomposers, to “the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community,” even though the latter is indeed empirically true.

In the remainder of this paper, I read three texts, a French novel (The Roots of Heaven, 1958), a Chinese novel (The Disappearance of Lao Hai, 2001), and a Chinese film (Monster Hunt, 2015), to show how literature and art can incubate a new ecological imagination, a new kind of romance of the species that is neither naively anthropocentric nor radically posthuman, by dwelling on the particular: particular creatures, particular distresses, and particularistic bonds of affection and care. I include a French text to show that this ecological imagination is not unique to any specific cultural tradition, though it does have to negotiate with culturally specific structures of feeling and institutional impediments.

A margin of humanity

Romain Gary’s Goncourt Prize-winning novel The Roots of Heaven (Les racines du ciel) is often hailed as the first ecological novel to become an international bestseller and the source of inspiration for a generation of scientists who took up the cause of protecting African wildlife. It tells the story of a French resistance fighter and survivor of forced labor camps who goes to the French Equatorial Africa after the war to fight for the elephants’ survival. Known simply as Morel, he goes around the various colonial outposts in Fort Lamy in the Chad to collect signatures for his petition to ban elephant hunting. To his mostly impassive listeners, he gives two reasons: One, the elephants are majestic creatures, yet they suffer agonizing injuries and deaths in human hands; Two, humanity should be capacious enough to give elephants a margin of freedom. Neither reason does much to change the minds of his captive audience, who regard him as either a crackpot or a fool, and always a nuisance. In desperation, Morel takes up arms and, with a small band of determined followers, engages in terrorist but non-lethal attacks on notorious trophy hunters, trappers, and vindictive ranchers. The story of his quixotic campaign is picked up by the international press which dubs him “the man who changed species.” This media attention makes him a hot potato for the French authorities. Adding to the latter’s exasperation, a down-on-his-luck but still charismatic African nationalist leader joins forces with Morel, convinced that the latter’s media halo can bring international goodwill to his movement to drive the white man out of Africa.
The story does not end well for Morel, the elephants, or the nationalist fighters. The French government, in a colonizer’s typical paranoid frame of mind, refuses to believe the story of a man who simply wants to save the elephants, and orders Morel’s arrest as an agitator guilty of aiding and abetting native insurrection. The governor of the Chad, too cynical to take Morel seriously but more in touch with the reality on the ground, wants to bring him in as a lunatic terrorist. The nationalists plant a sharpshooter by his side ready to snuff him out the moment he is apprehended by government forces, for they don’t want him to tell the world that he is in it only for the elephants. At the end of the novel, Morel, having run out of ammunitions and lost his followers to disease and exhaustion, disappears into the bush to certain death or capture.

A pioneering work of eco-literature that weaves together two large and complex thematic strands, wildlife conservation and anti-colonial struggle, *The Roots of Heaven* invites reflections on human and non-human species relationship and what it means to “see, feel, understand, love and have faith in” a particular creature or species. Published in the early phase of the modern environmental movement, it is a prima facie humanist text. Its humanist core tenet is most unapologetically voiced by the colonial governor, who finds himself caught between Morel’s single-minded devotion to the defense of the elephants and the metropole’s utter incomprehension of such an apparently frivolous crusade. Proudly proclaiming himself a humanist, he remarks to a game warden and sympathizer of Morel: “Don’t you think...that there are in the world, at the present time, causes, liberties, well...let’s say values, which have a rather better claim than the elephants to that admirable devotion with which our friend and you yourself seem to be overflowing? There are still some of us who refuse to despair, to throw up the sponge and go over the other species for solace. There are men fighting and dying at this very moment, in the streets, on the barricades and in the prisons...One may still be allowed to prefer to take an interest in them” (Gary 1958, p. 58). This sentiment is echoed by Father Fargue, a Franciscan missionary who has dedicated his life and career to the lepers of Africa: “You can stuff those elephants of yours up your— ... On this continent there are I don’t know how many people suffering from sleeping sickness or leprosy, not to mention the yaws, not to mention that they all do more fornicating than gobbling, and that the kids die as quickly as they’re born—and did you ever hear tell of trachoma? And spirochetosis, and filariosis? And you come here belly-aching to me about elephants?” (41)

In no uncertain terms, both men impart to Morel the humanist precept that human interests and welfare take precedence over those of other species. The governor, especially, finds Morel’s refusal to honor this “natural” order of things so perverse that he labels him a misanthrope, a traitor to the human race. Underlying this animosity is the assumption that the interests of the human and non-human species are not only separate but also opposed in a zero-sum logic, and that only after all the hunger, diseases, and violent conflicts are addressed and resolved can humanity turn its attention elsewhere, the elephants perhaps. An even deeper assumption is that moral decision should be powered by utilitarian calculation according to a logic of scarcity: one should aim to do maximum good for the greatest number of human
beings and turn to more distant things only if time and resources can be spared. It is precisely the kind of triaging of which Callicott is wary.

Morel cares little for any kind of triaging. To him, the massive slaughtering of elephants is unacceptable and must be stopped, period. He has not arrived at this conviction after an investigation of the elephants’ indispensability to Africa’s ecosystems, or after carefully weighing the world’s urgent problems and then petulantly settled on a seemingly weightless issue. Nor is he hailing from the deontological camp of animal rights. Instead of the third-person perspective of absolute rights or universal principles, he speaks of freedom, dignity, beauty, pain, and loss—the language of sentiment and sensibility, experience and imagination—from the first- and second-person perspectives. Addressing a cabaret hostess named Minna who would become his lover and fiercest supporter, he explains that he has come to the defense of the elephants because “whoever has seen these giants on the march across the last great free spaces of the world knows that this is something that must not be lost.” And, “did she know that an elephant fallen into a trap often lay in agony, impaled on stake, for days and days? … that those herds of elephants sometimes escape from the blazing savanna [owing to fire set by hunters] with burns up to their bellies, and they suffered for weeks? … Thirty thousand elephants a year [killed]—was it possible to think for a moment of what that meant, without shame?” (36). Again and again, he appeals to the politically wary habitués at the cabaret: “The matter is one which concerns us all. … But this has nothing to do with politics, … it’s a matter of simple humanity” (25).

This is perhaps the most posthuman moment in the novel: by making the defense of the elephants “a matter of simple humanity,” Morel is redefining humanity as a porous community in various degrees of mixed existence with fellow creatures. It has always been a morally elastic species that is capable of acknowledging some, if not all, fellow creatures as moral peers. Humanity for Morel is incomplete unless it leaves open a margin where “this gigantic, clumsy, natural splendor” can flourish. In other words, unless it can accommodate the liberty of the other, humanity cannot be truly free itself. Unless it takes care of the other, humanity has essentially turned its back on itself. In an extended passage of free indirect discourse, we are given a piece of Morel’s mind:

This was what he stood for: a world where there would be room enough even for such a mass of clumsy and cumbersome freedom. A margin of humanity, of tolerance, where some of life’s beauty could take refuge. His eyes narrowed a little, and an ironic, bitter smile came to his lips. I know you all, he thought. Today you say that elephants are archaic and cumbersome, that they interfere with roads and telegraph poles, and tomorrow you’ll begin to say that human rights too are obsolete and cumbersome, that they interfere with progress, and the temptation will be so great to let them fall by the road and not to burden ourselves with that extra load. And in the end man himself will become in your eyes a clumsy luxury, an archaic survival from the past, and you’ll dispense with him too, and the only thing left will be total efficiency and universal slavery and man himself will disappear under the weight of his material achievement. He had learned that much behind the barbed wire of the
forced labor camps: it was our education, a lesson he was not prepared to forget.” (138)

The danger of utilitarianism, of assigning utility and priority to lives, lies in the slippery slope that leads ultimately to the concentration camp, where his passion for elephants was ignited: “Each time we looked at the barbed wire or were almost dying of misery and claustrophobia in solitary confinement, we tried to think of those big animals marching irresistibly through the open spaces of Africa, and it made us feel better. Barely alive, starved, exhausted, we would clench our teeth and follow our great free herds obstinately with our eyes, and see them march across the savanna and over the hills, and we could almost hear the earth tremble under that living mass of freedom” (38–39). Roger Scruton stresses that the concentration camps did not just produce suffering, but also eradicated the humanity of their victims. “They were ways of using the body to destroy the embodied subject. Once the soul was wiped away, the destruction of the body would not be perceived as murder but, rather, only as a kind of pest control” (Scruton 2017, p. 138). For this purpose, the inmates are reduced to “a condition of bare, unsupported, and all-consuming need” (137), that is, an animal existence. Morel’s elephant fantasy, paradoxically, is a tenacious effort to transcend the animal existence and to hold onto the last vestiges of human freedom—imagination—and hence his humanity.

As a free man, he is determined to reciprocate by literalizing the poetic freedom of his fantasy for the sake of fresh-and-blood elephants. It is his humanitarian project, expansively and idiosyncratically envisioned. Elephants captured his imagination as a POW and allowed him to salvage his humanity, and fortuitous as it may be, that is how he becomes devoted to this particular fauna, instead of, say, the lion or the rhinoceros. Again, his project is not hinged on any philosophical argument for animal welfare or rights or environmental argument for Africa’s biodiversity or anti-colonial argument for eco-sovereignty. Instead it is a matter of particularistic loyalty born of a historical and personal trauma. Captivity robbed him of the thickly described web of social relationships and catapulted him to the moral abyss where his humanity was bound up with a particular species of wild animals through prodigious imagination—probably given wings by literary and artistic works he had been exposed to earlier in life. In coming to Africa to take up the elephants’ cause, living in the bushes in close proximity to the herds, and describing to anyone courteous enough to lend him an ear their majesty and splendor and suffering, he is in effect trying to solidify or thicken that bond once conjured up in thin air, as it were.

Furthermore, his project is not about excluding or neglecting the human race tout court, but rather about protecting whomever cannot protect themselves—the sine qua non of humanitarianism. It is not political in the usual sense because it is only “a question of decency, of generosity, a margin of freedom to be preserved at all costs” (222). Yet it astutely acknowledges the biopolitical regime that reigns supreme in the modern age: if biopower propelled by capital has rendered free, beautiful, and majestic bodies valuable and therefore vulnerable, then the only defense is to extend moral consideration to these bodies and to protect them from gross exploitation and brutality. If the elephants can be exterminated because they have proven too
valuable or too inconvenient, what is to stop the bio-political regime from finding other targets—humans included—also in the way of efficiency and progress?

For this reason, Morel refuses to draw a line between elephants and humans, or between saving the elephants from human destruction and liberating the Africans from white domination. To him, the two causes are not mutually exclusive: “Yes, there are some among us who are fighting for the independence of Africa. But why? To protect the elephants. To take the protection of African fauna into their own hands. Perhaps for them elephants are only an image of their own liberty. That suits me: liberty always suits me. Personally, I have no patience with nationalism: the new or the old, the white or the black, the red or the yellow” (94). If an independent Africa could not protect its weakest members, then it would only end up replicating the oppressive power structures of its colonial masters. The elephants must not merely serve as a token of liberty, to be discarded as soon as they are no longer useful symbolically, or worse, to be exploited as before by the new masters of the continent.

To the African nationalists who see Morel as little more than a charming mascot, the elephants are indeed little more than a symbol of their subjection to white Europeans and of the latter’s “shameful exploitation of African natural resources” (105). Beyond that, the elephants are said to be merely “meat on the hoof” for the protein-deprived populations. Morel is little troubled by this attitude or the local practice of hunting by fire, pinning his hope on raising the living standard. Instead, he reserves his animus for the safari trophy hunters, the tusk traffickers, the suppliers for zoos and circuses, and the cattle ranchers who launch punitive campaigns against herds that have intruded on their property. And it is these groups that he goes after, assisted by a ragtag crew of followers that include an indigenous elephant tracker (whose glorious career allegedly has been instrumental to the decimation of the elephant populations) newly converted to his cause.

Far from being a misanthrope, Morel is a posthumanist to the extent to which he sees his project as less a matter of assuming benevolent guardianship over a helpless victim than a matter of holding onto a “friendship” that humanity desperately needs for its own good. His petition, meant for an international conference on the preservation of African fauna to be held in the Congo, states: “Man on this planet has reached the point where really he needs all the friendship he can find, and in his loneliness he has need of all the elephants, all the dogs and all the birds…” (32). In other words, humanity is incomplete unless supplemented by its other, be it “the inhuman, the non-human, the less than human, the superhuman, the animal, the alien, the monster, the stranger, God,” in Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus’s reckoning (2008, p. 97). For Rosi Braidotti, the posthuman is predicated on “an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others” (2013, p. 49). Since bio-genetic capitalism under the biopolitical regime has also embraced posthumanism by subjecting life itself to trans-species commodification, a new egalitarianism based on the shared vulnerability of zoe or bare life must replace compensatory humanism, which is still grounded in species hierarchy and which attempts to extend empathy and human moral and legal privileges to non-human others. Such an egalitarianism of vulnerability seems to be what Morel has in mind when he speaks of the “friendship” between human and nonhuman creatures. It is an egalitarianism that
calls for a reconstituted humanist ethics of care grounded not in metaphysics but in thick descriptions. Insofar as many animal rights activists are able to activate this ethics of care, they are able to win public sympathy, form alliance with similar causes, and move legislative actions far more effectively than climate scientists or conservation experts stranded on the Olympian summit of the third-person perspective.

In the novel, a Danish naturalist named Peer Qvist joins Morel’s band and expresses his understanding of their mission this way: “Islam calls [the reverence of nature] ‘the roots of heaven,’ and to the Mexican Indians it is the ‘tree of life’—the thing that makes both of them fall on their knees and raise their eyes and beat their tormented breasts. A need for protection and company, from which obstinate people like Morel try to escape by means of petitions, fighting committees, by trying to take the protection of species in their own hands. Our needs—for justice, for freedom and dignity—are roots of heaven that are deeply imbedded in our hearts, but of heaven itself men know nothing but the gripping roots…” (172–173). Without falling back on the misty pieties of nineteenth-century Romantics, “the roots of heaven” metaphor captures humanity’s affective, experiential, and imaginative relationship with the planet’s biotic sphere. It is a poetic expression of the ethics of care that does not require any algorithms of utility, any triaging of interests, or any citation of categorical imperatives. It acknowledges the contingency of ethical affordance and permits idiosyncrasies, such as Morel’s singular obsession with elephants to the exclusion of other equally charismatic and equally imperiled megafauna. It does not demand the kind of logical consistency or moral universality that often paralyses animal rights advocates (Why stop at the primates or the mammals or the vertebrates? Do mosquitos have a right to suck our blood? Is vegetarianism a prerequisite for speaking out on behalf of animals?). Precisely because it rests on aesthetic resonance and experiential immediacy, “the roots of heaven” is capable of inspiring passionate dedication and heroic self-sacrifice; and precisely because it is not bound by doctrines or principles, it is capable of pragmatically resorting to a variety of tactics, including taking advantage of the public’s adulation of a bohemian rebel and building alliances with other social justice causes.

Despite his reputation as a sentimental idealist, Morel is really a pragmatist. A young radical in the African liberation movement registers the following frustration to Morel when they are driving down a trail and spot a leopard sauntering by and a troop of baboons scattering into the jungle: “We don’t want any of that. … We don’t want to go on being the world’s zoo, we want factories and tractors instead of lions and elephants. We must first get rid of colonialism, which delights in this exotic stagnation, the principal advantage of which is that it produces cheap labor” (202). Morel is pained by the thought that “a kid of that age should pitch his demands so low” (203), yet he does not refute the young man. So long as the coalition holds and the nationalists are helping him protect the elephants, he is not interested in debating his African comrades on the relative utility of factories and tractors versus lions and elephants. If pressed, he might concede that factories and tractors are more effective in lifting the African masses out of poverty, but he would still insist that there be “a margin of humanity” where humanity’s others could live and thrive. Perhaps he is
hopeful that the roots of heaven will one day grip his comrades and stretch their “stunted hearts,” so that they will come to realize that to move forward in history means to “encumber ourselves with the elephants as well, take a weight of that size along on the journey” (203). There is no freedom without encumbrance, no progress without transcendence. Human beings may never truly grasp the Kantian moral firmament above; they need only feel its gripping roots in their breasts and respond to its summons to ethical action. The elephants, in their clumsy and cumbersome splendor, are humanity’s other that completes our posthuman self.

Monkeys and monsters to die for

Human love of nature has never been a pure blessing, but its destructive side has traditionally been tempered by religious and ritual modes of relating to the environment. In the age of consumer capitalism and modern technology, however, the externalities of our appetites have scaled up catastrophically. Modern tourism and diet have been two areas in which the consumption of natural resources, driven as much by love and awe as by carelessness and greed, have spelt disaster for the biosphere. The two examples I examine below draw our attention to this paradox. They also suggest a distinctly Chinese way of reconstituting a humanist ethics of care: neighborliness and parental obligation as opposed to friendship consecrated to the ideal of liberty.

The Wuhan-based writer Hu Fayun is best known for his Internet sensation Such Is the World@SARS.Come that depicts the biopolitical reduction of both human and animal lives to a state of zoe during the SARS crisis (Lee 2014, pp. 86–92). Hu is also among the growing cohort of eco-writers who have trained their wary eyes on the environmental costs of China’s economic takeoff (Thornber 2012). He has in particular attracted a large online following for his non-fiction chronicles of the plight of animals in newly affluent urban China that has developed a seemingly insatiable appetite for animals: their flesh, bones, milk, hide, fur, as well as showpiece value and companionship. The Disappearance of Lao Hai (Hu Fayun 胡发云 2001)3 bears many resemblances to The Roots of Heaven. The protagonist, Lao Hai, is a photo-journalist banished to a remote outpost after embarrassing his superiors by failing to play by the tacit rules that govern China’s state-owned media, rules that demand a great deal of self-censorship and moral compromise. He befriends a forest ranger and, on one of their many desultory treks through the wilderness in Western Hubei, “discovers” a virgin landscape swathed in otherworldly beauty. They are able to make the discovery only because they ignore the local inhabitants’ warnings against approaching the forbidden vulva-shaped entrance to the lush ravine which they christen “Mother Ravine.” Local legends tell of disasters that befell those who got too close to the inauspicious spot. Dismissing the underlying beliefs in the power and pollution of the female body as feudal superstitions, Lao Hai forges ahead and is soon followed by the county

3 I use an online edition of this novella, and the page numbers are from my printout. In my personal communication with Hu Fayun, he professed ignorance of Gary’s novel.
tourism bureau and various enterprises, and with them the full armada of modern capitalism: electricity, roads, cable cars, telephone poles, restaurants, hotels, shops, and so forth. Lao Hai garners recognition, official citations, and cash rewards (from selling the rights to his documentaries).

Incredibly enough, Lao Hai becomes even more celebrated shortly after for “discovering” a rare primate species in the ravine called *wuhou* (dark monkey), likely François’ langur (*Trachypithecus francoisi*). Rumors soon begin to spread throughout the region that the bones of the jet-black monkeys have special therapeutic powers. The government hurriedly places the monkeys under legal protection, but like all such things in China, the laws prove toothless against the gargantuan maw of the profit motive. A nearby liquor distillery promptly puts out a new brand of medicinal wine called “Three Blacks,” supposedly brewed with the dark-hued bones of three rare species, one of which is the newly discovered monkeys. All of this blindsides Lao Hai, who finds himself swimming futilely against the tidal wave of commercialization that he has helped unleash. He manages to score a minor victory when an injured baby monkey ends up in the refrigerator of the liquor factory and he is able to expose the scandal by tapping into the social capital that has accrued to his celebrity status. Before long, however, he finds himself a bête noir of the officials and developers who resent him for trying to dampen their giddy excitement about the prospect of turning the local economy around, from hovering around the poverty line to *xiaokang* or moderate prosperity—the medium-range target of the Chinese Dream. He and his ranger friend embark on a Sisphyean campaign to protect the monkeys against ruthless poachers. After the ranger dies in a suspicious incident, he moves in with the former’s rustic but beautiful widow and goes “native,” eking out a simple living and carrying on his anti-poaching fight. Unlike Morel, his is a one-man struggle, with no comrades and zero media exposure.

Lao Hai’s story is pieced together by the narrator, who is Lao Hai’s college roommate, one-time collaborator on a documentary project, and practically only friend in the “real” world. They have been out of touch for a long time until a panicked call from Lao Hai’s common-law wife reporting his disappearance brings the narrator, along with a search crew, to his mountain hut. There he divides his time between participating in the search for Lao Hai and sorting out the latter’s fieldnotes and video footages. As hope for finding Lao Hai diminishes day by day, the narrator reminisces their college days, their strained friendship, and Lao Hai’s love life, and gradually forms a picture of what might have happened to his friend from the pile of fragmentary records. Evidently Lao Hai has spent his final months befriending several simian troops who have been displaced by development and helping them migrate to more remote locales. The final cassette tape shows him trying to guide a small group of monkeys across a perilous gulch with mountain climbing gear and ends with an explosion of rifle shots—apparently a posse of poachers have trailed him to the spot and closed in on their prey. The fate of Lao Hai is all but sealed.

Near the end of the novel, the narrator recalls a conversation with Lao Hai during one of their few reunions:

Lao Hai said, people today are too clever for their own good. Back in the day if I had taken seriously what the old folks were saying about Mother Ravine,
perhaps the mess we have today would not have come to pass. Back then I thought it was all ignorance and superstitions due to the lack of education. Come to think of it now: this ignorance, these superstitions, it’s exactly what’s needed to protect the myriad things between heaven and earth. It keeps in check our hubris, our aggression, our delusions of grandeur, our will to mastery. Humans should know reverence, they should know fear…. As soon as they have nothing to fear, they’re finished… Those who said that Mother Ravine was a forbidden territory were right; those who believed that the ebony monkeys brought curses on those who beheld them were right; those who regarded this or that tree as sacred and inviolable were also right. I’ve been thinking: perhaps all these superstitions were a revelation from the heaven above during the first stirrings of humankind to serve as a guiding light of their existence. Now, we have turned our backs against this light. Our punishment is surely to come… (53)

The novel, however, does not romanticize the denizens of the area as a fount of ecological wisdom and living in perfect harmony with nature. Instead, eager to leave abject poverty behind, they respond with alacrity to the modernization drives, taking active part in the drastic reshaping of the landscape and/or taking up poaching as a sideline or mainline occupation. Thus folk religion does not always guarantee “a reverent, caring, thoughtful, and grateful attitude toward the natural world and its inhabitants,” as Anderson claims. Nature can be unkind and provoke fear and loathing. Modernization not only disenchants the world, but also emboldens people to turn their fear into aggression. Both fear and aggression preclude a second-person perspective, a willingness to enter into a dialogic relationship with wildlife or to include it in one’s self-description. Note that without a meaningfully mobilized first- and second-person perspectives, the third-person injunctions of laws and regulations remain an empty letter. Not long after the liquor factory exposé, which leads to its closure, Lao Hai and the ranger catch an armed poacher red-handedly and turn him to the police. Subsequent investigations lead to a crackdown on an entire village and the sentencing, jailing, and execution of nearly all its adult male members, leaving the women, elderlies, and children to scratch out a meager and precarious living, “as if their village had just been pillaged by an invading tribe.” At the trial, Lao Hai is tormented by the sight of the simple villagers, who probably have never done anything transgressive in their whole lives, suddenly find themselves pronounced criminals and sentenced to death or lengthy terms of imprisonment.

Another former college classmate, now a county official, has this to say to Lao Hai after the liquor factory bust:

Look, for the sake of an injured monkey, you brought down a factory. With its hundreds of thousands of yuan in annual revenue, how many people had depended on it for their livelihoods, especially in such an impoverished county as ours! Of course, I’m not saying that it’s a good thing to make liquor with a state protected rare species. We have our reasons and convictions, but the common people have their ideas and beliefs. Throughout the ages, these wild things in their eyes are granted them by heaven. Even the emperors never
pried these things out of their hands. Now all of a sudden they are said to belong to the government…. Understanding requires a process. We have gone through the process. Otherwise, if it weren’t for the few years of schooling that taught us about such things as the environment, natural resources, and the ecosystem, who among us would get worked up about killing a wild beast? Only a few years ago we were still celebrating men who killed tigers as heroes. (32)

Lao Hai concedes that even the educated type who sprinkle their conversations with eco-lingo can live in equanimity with a host of contradictions: those who are against deforestation still love their hardwood floors; those who are against overfishing will not turn down a lavish seafood feast; those who are against air pollution still prefer driving to walking, and so on and so forth (29). Lao Hai despairs of humanity’s ability to overcome its schizoid ways or the divorce between the perspectives, and yet he himself is a proof against his own pessimism. Crucially, education has exposed him to the idea of the natural environment as a finite, fragile thing requiring conservation and protection—the third-person perspective. But unlike the vast majority of educated urbanites who are at home in eco-pieties and yet remain indifferent to the externalities of their consumerist lifestyle, Lao Hai has cultivated a thick relationship with particular things: Mother Ravine and its simian inhabitants. In him we see a glimmer of hope that it is possible for us to break through the paralysis brought on by the disjuncture between the perspectives. And that hope, the novel suggests, lies in the power of literature.

When they were still in college, Lao Hai once told the narrator how as a little boy he was inexplicably touched by a simple essay in their grammar school textbook about a flock of geese in flight: “Autumn has arrived, the weather has turned chilly. A skein of geese are flying south, their formation now describing the character ren, now describing the character yi.” He tried to capture the sensation that had invaded him:

Just those few simple words: autumn has arrived, the weather has turned chilly. You can almost feel the chilly gusts boring through your shirt, and through your skin, all the way to your heart, swelling it with moisture and swaddling it in an ineffable mood at once sweet and melancholy. Just think about it: it’s truly amazing. A young kid felt something fleeting, and yet he remembers it for the rest of his life. And then there were the geese—actually, before that, I had never paid any attention to geese. But when I saw the word geese, it was as if I had always known them. They fly so high up in the sky. Where are they going? What is their destination like? When they are soaring through the void, can they also feel the chilly caresses of the autumnal breeze? Thereafter for years I would look for migrating geese in the sky whenever autumn arrived. At first, I could see them a few times. Then gradually they disappeared…. (4)

What we have here is an eloquent testimony of the power of literature. Told from the first-person perspective that implies a second-person interlocutor, it is an account that explains how a gossamer thread of connection germinates and thickens
between a boy and a particular species—goose. It is a visceral, embodied experience that would prime him to connect with other creatures that stumble into his physical and moral orbit. He falls in love with the ebony monkeys, moves in to be their neighbor, plays with their young, smears himself with their urine to win the trust of the adults, documents their culture and lifestyle, frets about their loss of habitat and state of endangerment, and eventually sacrifices his life for their protection. He has come as close as any character in modern Chinese literature to “change species,” and it is all triggered by a lyrical passage about autumnal breezes and flying geese. Like Morel and his love of elephants, Lao Hai’s love of monkeys is fortuitous and idiosyncratic, but it is what frees his imagination and enables him to achieve dialogic transcendence.

After the crackdown on the poachers village, Lao Hai is tormented by the devastating fallout. After all, the poaching and illegal consumption of the ebony monkeys, likely regarded as bushmeat by locals, pales in comparison with a much graver threat to their survival: tourism-driven development. Every new road is in his eyes a dagger thrust into the heart of Mother Ravine (19); and with each designation and packaging of a new “scenic spot,” the monkeys’ habitat shrinks further and they are forced to migrate again—to ever diminishing sanctuaries. At one point Lao Hai helplessly witnesses a brutal clash between two troops fighting over a tiny territory. The animal kingdom isn’t all peace and love, and yet Lao Hai lays the blame squarely at the feet of humanity.

The same premise is taken up in the 2015 animated feature Monster Hunt (Hui 2015), a mainland and Hong Kong coproduction. A slapstick comedy rehashing the hackneyed motif of a bumbling everyman turned reluctant superhero, the film nonetheless touched a chord with Chinese audiences and broke box office records. Of relevance here is its inchoate but revealing ecological message. The prelude informs us that once upon a time humans and monsters (yao, fairies, goblins, ghouls, ogres) had been co-inhabitants of the planet. But humans eventually drove the monsters into the wilderness and relied on a corps of master hunters (tianshi) to eradicate any remnant or stray monsters. At the beginning of the story proper a war breaks out in the monster domain and the pregnant queen flees to a human village where she magically transfers her fetus to the village mayor Song Tianyin. A powerful restaurateur named Ge Qianhu gets wind of the unborn monster prince and puts out a bounty—monsters are coveted by humans as a delicacy. Two monster-hunters, a male and a female, descend upon Tianyin’s village. Xiaolan, the female hunter, strikes a bargain with the involuntarily pregnant Tianyi: she will assist his escape and help him carry his pregnancy to term, thereupon she will take possession of the infant monster. Through a good deal of frenetic kungfu fighting, she manages to keep her dogged rival at bay. During their journey Tianyin gives birth to a doe-eyed and radish-shaped baby monster with a tuft of green hair and six stubby limbs, and he instantly falls in love with it and names it Huba. At Xiaolan’s insistence, they sell Huba to Ge Qianhu through an intermediary. Remorse immediately seizes them and propels the half-crazed couple straight back to Ge’s palace to rescue the baby monster. Eventually the three of them, now a tight-knit nuclear family, make it to safety. The film ends with a tear-jerker set piece whereby Huba is let go by his human parents so that he can assume his rightful place among his own kind and put
his kingdom back in order. Presumably he will bring a more advanced civilization thither, having already been converted from a vampire’s diet to nut-popping veganism (while humans remain carnivores and cannibals).

Critics have lauded the film for its engagement of the question of how to live with the other—here allegorized as monsters. Habitat loss seems to be the root cause of the monsters’ troubles: some of the them are even forced to live in disguise among humans—Tianyin belatedly realizes that his fellow villagers are all bogus humans—and run the constant risk of being sniffed out by professional hunters in the employ of the Monster Hunt Bureau. But instead of tourism and development, the monsters are victimized for a more elemental reason: they are a prized dish by dint of the putative healing powers of their flesh. Huba, being of the royal bloodline, is especially coveted by human diners. Once he has Huba in his clutch, Ge appoints a special chef to “cook” the baby monster, and gloats to his paying diners about the immeasurable therapeutic benefits to be garnered.

The filmmakers have taken a familiar page from the Hollywood playbook in casting the monsters as good-natured creatures for all their outlandish and at first blush frightful appearances—think of E.T., King Kong, and the garden variety monsters in *Monsters Inc*. Huba, in particular, is an over-the-top cute thing replete with all the requisite neotenic features: large and soulful eyes, a shortened facial region, a soft and plump body, a lilting baby voice, and a playful demeanor. By contrast, the diners are greedy predators champing at the bit to partake of a legendarily cruel feast—scooping out in sashimi fashion the brains of a living and breathing creature fastened under a table with a hollow center that reveals its open skull. Huba is saved from this fate by his human parents and their helpers. While they are at it, they also manage to free Tianyin’s former fellow (monster) villagers who have been rounded up by Ge’s minions and kept in the cages of his pantry-cum-prison, whose inmates include two human children slated to be served in hotpot. The dramatic clincher, or what makes it possible to close the human-monster gap, is the in-your-face gag of male pregnancy and childbirth. What parents do not love their newborn? So what if it is the father who gives birth, and so what if the baby looks a little strange? Difference here is sublimated by unconditional parental affection, powerful enough to make a man coyly parade his swollen belly and a feisty tomboy in touch with her maternal instinct. And it takes only the sight of a cook slicing a radish in the marketplace to make the bereaved pair twitch in horror and simultaneously turn on their heels to rush to Huba’s rescue.

Adam Seligman and Robert Weller (2012) have argued that ritual and shared experience allow us to acknowledge boundaries, negotiate differences, and live with ambiguities, and that the increasingly diminished role of ritual and the shrinking...
space for shared experience in modern life do not bode well for our inexorably pluralistic present and future. Pregnancy and childbearing is perhaps the strongest holdout for shared experience in our secular, atomistic existence. In this case, it is made all the more intense by being placed under perilous conditions. As they note, boundaries and differences give structure to everyday life but make it difficult for us to recognize the humanity of others. When we share experience, we conspire to bracket those differences for the time being in order to “produce an evanescent solution to a particular problem (evanescent, because it is always a particular and unique problem)” (175). Such improvisation or bricolage dispenses with a priori agreement on matters of principle or value (what Seligman and Weller call the “notational” mode) and turns attention away from shared meaning to shared usage.

In the film, Tianyin and Xiaolan become so preoccupied with the challenges of being pregnant while on the run and then of protecting little Huba from all manner of danger that they forget everything that used to matter: that the fetus (and then the infant) is not even human, that Tianyin is a biological male, that Xiaolan is in it for the money. All the categories demarcating “us” (human, male, friend) from “them” (alien, female, enemy) are temporarily bracketed and all discomfitures are thrown to the wind as the odd couple and then the oddest stem family (the trio is joined by Tianyin’s amnesic but swashbuckling grandmother in the final sequences) try to shield each other and fight their way to safety. The bonds that are cemented in this intense shared experience, however, do not permanently do away with difference. Huba is still a monster and must return to his own kind. The boundaries between humans and monsters are transgressed only to be reinstated albeit in a new dispensation, informed by “a syncretic and accommodationist ethos,” and a renewed appreciation for their lack of fixity, their potential to become soft, pliable, and shifted.

If Huba and the monsters are a stand-in for all the endangered species and fragile ecosystems of the planet, is the film telling us that the only way for people to truly care for the latter is through such improvisational solution as imaginary surrogacy and symbolic adoption? Can such highly contingent and contextualized practices be “regularized into long-term social resources” (Seligman and Weller 2012, p. 179)? The film seems to gesture toward a yes, insofar as parenthood is a universal experience. In a way it is a very Chinese solution to the ecological crisis. Parental love may be notoriously myopic and exclusionary, but Confucianism has long recognized it as a powerful fount of love that could propel us to scale ethical heights, though it has little to say about regularization through institutional building. True to its mass entertainment form, the film magnifies the importance of individual enlightenment and heroism with hardly a nod to the role of institutions “whose workings must respond not just to ethical reasoning but to political pressure, bureaucratic logic, funding constraints, and so forth” or to the “ironies, contradictions, disappointments, and even unanticipated successes” of acting in an institutional framework (Keane 2016, p. 256). For the latter kind of engagement, one would have to turn to more reflexive works like The Roots of Heaven and The Disappearance of Lao Hai. Still, in Monster Hunt, viewers are invited to contemplate the ethical ramifications of playing with boundaries and differences.
amid levity and exhilaration generated by incongruous juxtapositions and free-for-all action sequences. That in itself is a valuable emotional and moral education.

**Conclusion**

There are two primary metaphors that structure our relationships to animals: family and tools. The tools metaphor encompasses animals on farms, in slaughterhouses, in laboratories, on racetracks, in zoos, etc., and has been the predominant mode in which we relate to animals since the dawn of human civilization. It is only eclipsed by the family metaphor, applied mostly to pets, in the post-industrial age. At about the same time, a new metaphor has also gained currency: citizens (Sabloff 2001). Yet what kind of “citizenship” may be conferred upon which animals is a tenuous and contested affair. Citizenship is premised on a legal fiction of equality, and defining the terms of this equality has preoccupied many a philosopher operating within the “standard paradigm” outlined in the introduction of this paper. I hope to have shown, through the three literary examples, that it is not only futile but also unnecessary to settle on an ethically enfranchising property that will clinch, once and for all, the argument for equality for animals. True equality, on either the emotional, moral, or legal plane, is but a philosophical fiction that has never been fully and finally realized even among humans. And as Seligman and Weller have argued, such absolute equality, premised on the erasure of all differences, is far from desirable. For too long, philosophers have maintained that moral progress is premised on the universal adoption of the third-person perspective, i.e., standing back from the *mise-en-scène* in order to work out the deontological or utilitarian rationale for a decision. But recently, more empirically based research has shown that much of our ethical life unfolds at the first-person level involving our moral intuitions and psychological dispositions and in our second-person relationships to particular others, and that progress in fact hinges on our ability to move among the first-, second-, and third-person perspectives as we negotiate our emotional, moral, and legal relationships with others, human and otherwise.

Romain Gary gives us an elephant lover who wants to be friends with the pachyderm herds; Hu Fayun gives us a monkey lover who tries to be a good neighbor and guardian to the simian troops; Raman Hui gives us two monster lovers who are single-mindedly devoted to their baby monster. Each works with a different metaphor: friendship, neighborliness, and parental devotion. All are highly particularistic and idiosyncratic, and precisely for that reason they are all potent forces driving our heroes to ethical heroism. As such they are often the only ones standing between wild animals in their matrix 1 value grid and their subservience to matrices 2 and 3, i.e., their reduction as tools to be consumed, used, and manipulated. For them, the elephants, monkeys, and monsters are “theirs” in a very particular, non-possessive sense. Never are these creatures merely generic citizens.

No philosophical argument in the standard paradigm will help Lao Hai answer the charge that it is unconscionable to cause a factory on which so many people’s dreams of prosperity are pinned to go bust for the sake of an injured monkey who can no longer survive in the wild in any case. Lao Hai certainly understands the
third-person perspective that prioritizes the greater good. But unlike the county officials, he refuses to be bound by the third-person perspective and insists on returning to the thickness of the first- and second-person perspectives. He has no defense against the charge of unreasonableness, other than the bare fact that he really cares for his simian neighbors and cannot bear the thought of any of them being brutalized by humans, and he is intent on fulfilling his neighborly obligations. Yet feeble as this justification may be philosophically speaking, we as readers are fully on his side for it is his relationship to the monkeys—this particular self-description and way of giving meaning to his life—that is thickly described and therefore made emotionally resonant and morally weighty for us. The same goes for Morel and for Tianyin and Xiaolan.

In another paper (Lee 2018), I borrow the concept of “public things” from Bonnie Honig who in turn borrows from D.W. Winnicott’s object relations theory to argue that things like public parks, public utilities, and publicly funded art and entertainment are vital to democracy because they furnish “a holding environment” in which citizens can forge bonds and alliances over their shared tending and enjoyment of these things. I extend her list of public things to include wild animals, particularly endangered species, on the grounds that they are one of the few things still collectively “owned” and resistant to neoliberal marketization, and that their vulnerability calls for redoubled effort at tending and caring. As such they keep alive a global commons for ecological citizenship in which collective action need not be justified in utilitarian or even scientific terms—there isn’t always a clear-cut ecological case to be made for saving a specific species from extinction. Sometimes it is enough that one cares, for whatever idiosyncratic reasons.

The idea of treating endangered species as public things for the good of humans might rub against the grain of biocentrism or deep ecology. But in the Anthropocene when the human impact on the planet is all but irreversible, the biocentric stance can become an unwitting pretext for shirking responsibility. For Herbrechter and Callus, posthumanism is pointless unless it brings about a return to the ethics of care: “In the midst of a call for human(ist) ethics, the peril that scares us most deeply is the end of our capacity for care. It is in rediscovery of that capacity that humanity is revived. Yet this ethics is never more radically challenged than when it must legislate for the possibility of the posthuman. To re-echo Latour, we will never have been human until we have accepted the posthuman” (2008, 109). The history of the modern conservation movement has treaded a long and tortuous path to legislate for the possibility of the posthuman by laying down rules and regulations, but it is up to imaginative narratives to entrench a habit of the heart that feels, understands, loves and has faith in the world around and beyond us. Franz Kafka famously said that a good book is an axe that breaks open the frozen sea within each of us. It is a powerful metaphor, but a tad too gloomy. I prefer to think that each of us has a small campfire in our breast, enough to keep ourselves and those near and dear to us warm, but offering little light or heat to strangers. Literature is rather like the autumnal breezes that connect Lao Hai and the geese: it bores past our boundaries and defenses and sends up sparks, perchance igniting a prairie fire from which a phoenix can rise up.
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