Whales are meant to be saved, supposedly. Cattle are meant to be eaten, we might be told, and dogs are supposed to be your best friend. Everyone might not agree, but these tend to be dominant narratives – at least in certain places. In other places there might be different narratives about the same species, so that whales and dogs are meant to be eaten, for example, while cattle are protected and revered. We tend to assume that the animals themselves remain the same, so that a cow is a cow, whether it is in India or Indiana. There might be different breeds, but they are sometimes seen primarily as variations of biological traits, even if different human cultures have different attitudes toward them, and even if we might think that some of them have feelings and experiences more like our own. Still, most people would think that an animal is easily distinguishable from humans who might be associated with that animal or called the name of that animal for something they have done. To say that humans sometimes act like wolves to each other, for example, does not necessarily suggest that we can’t tell the difference between a human and a wolf. But it might assume that both humans and animals have instincts that are naturally violent, as well as heterosexual, with evolution providing a broader sweeping narrative that blurs the line between human and animal. Different species can also become representatives (and sometimes stars) of grand narratives about planetary change: Whales can be symbols of biodiversity and the need for environmental conservation; cattle can symbolize domestication and breeding certain species for food; and dogs may signify evolution, the result of wolves evolving toward life with humans. All of these assumptions, however, have a tendency to oversimplify what are actually complex forms of animality.

Recent and ongoing work in the humanities and social sciences – in interdisciplinary fields such as posthumanism, human-animal studies, ecocriticism, multispecies ethnography, science and technology studies (STS), and animality studies – has revealed how animals are much more
complicated than previously thought, blurring the lines between nature and culture, between “the human” and “the animal.” All of the traditional markers of humanity – from language to reasoning, tool use, social relations, emotions, compassion, and so on – can be found in other species, and many of these capabilities are not present in certain human beings. Amazing discoveries continue to be made in animal behavior studies, which have revealed different forms of culture in nonhuman species. Researchers have found, for example, that “groups of killer whales maintain their own vocal dialects despite interaction with other groups”; sperm whales have “matrilineal groups, or clans,” and some “appear to have distinct cultures and dialects”; while humpback whales “show evidence of cultural transmission,” as when at one point, “two male humpbacks from the Indian Ocean arrived in the Pacific with a new song. Within two years, all the Pacific males had changed their tune, picking up the migrants’ songs.” In addition to ethological studies, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have unsettled distinctions between human and nonhuman species and taken nonhuman animal life very seriously, including ethical considerations, as well as advocacy in relation to environmental threats such as climate change, pollution, and habitat destruction.

Nonhuman animal cultures can also be explored in relation to human cultural studies and literary analysis. When we identify certain human behaviors as wolfish, for example, or treat certain humans like cows, or call someone a whale, we construct and reinforce ideas about what a wolf or a cow or a whale is. But these notions are neither universal nor timeless. For many slave owners in the early history of the United States, for example, it was acceptable to think about – and own – human slaves as if they were cattle. They were not counted as fully human in the racist logic of that time. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in major US cities such as New York, working-class white men who had sex with other men often called themselves “wolves” but would not have considered themselves “gay.” These narratives about cattle-like people or wolfish men, which now might seem quite foreign to us, are constructed through discourses and literary texts that simultaneously construct the nonhuman species itself. Is it natural for cattle to be enslaved or wolves to be queer? We can explore why we might continue to assume that wolves cannot be gay, or that cows are always dumb, despite evidence and examples to the contrary. Classic literary texts in the United States such as Jack London’s The Call of the Wild, Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle, and Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick both reinforce and resist dominant discourses like these. But the canine, bovine, and cetacean characters in these novels are quite

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108872263.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press
different from what we find in texts from other historical and cultural moments. The nature of animality, then, is an open question in literary and cultural studies, which can lead to further inquiries: Why do we need to assume that animals in the same species are the same everywhere? Why can’t animals be seen as having cultures of their own that go beyond sociobiology, or behaviors that can’t be reduced solely to evolutionary explanations? How are discourses of animality related to human constructions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and disability? What can we learn from precarious human populations that have been historically animalized and associated with various animal species? Finally, how do literary and cultural texts play significant roles in both producing and resisting these various forms of animality? The purpose of this chapter is not only to survey how various interdisciplinary fields have laid the groundwork for considering the nature of animality but also to identify how the limitations of some of these fields can open up new questions to explore.

16.1 Posthumanism and Human-Animal Studies

The fields of posthumanism and human-animal studies have made significant progress revealing how the traits and practices supposedly unique to human beings deconstruct themselves upon closer analysis. This work focuses primarily on recognizing new formulations of subjectivity that reveal how various animals can rightfully and logically be seen as subjects, agents, and actors. The decentering of “the human” in posthumanist theory has successfully raised significant challenges to traditional ways of justifying the exploitation of both nonhuman animals and environments. More generally, posthumanism contributes to the longer development of poststructuralist intersectional cultural theory, continuing the project of replacing universalist understandings of “the human” with historicized and situated studies of particular humans at particular places and times. This work has been taken up over the past fifty years or so by various disciplines in the humanities, bringing sustained attention to the significance of different aspects of human cultures, from language to literature, art, music, history, religion, and philosophy. Posthumanism has gone further with interdisciplinary work that brings together the humanities with the social sciences, aiming to reject universalist understandings of “the animal” as well as “the human.” This has been successful to the extent that deconstructing the human/animal binary has led to a rejection of human exceptionalism, opening the door to greater consideration for nonhuman animals and environments.
One of the signature moves of posthumanism in this regard has been to call for greater specificity, rather than simply exploring “the animal” in general. This attention to multiple species follows the injunction of Jacques Derrida to resist what we might call a sweeping narrative about “the Animal” itself, which persists in relation to a form of human exceptionalism set against every other living creature on the planet. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), Derrida reveals the problems related to “the usage, in the singular, of a notion as general as ‘The Animal,’ as if all nonhuman living things could be grouped within the common sense of this ‘commonplace,’ the Animal, whatever the abyssal differences and structural limits that separate, in the very essence of their being, all ‘animals’” (34). This deconstruction of “the animal” has often focused on revealing how “the human” cannot be defined as the only species possessing language, the ability to suffer, and subjectivity in various forms. Cary Wolfe’s “In the Shadow of Wittgenstein’s Lion” in *Animal Rites* (2003), for example, surveys various genealogies of language theory, from Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Hearne to Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, and Derrida to systems theory with Luhmann, in order to reveal how there can be no rigorously defensible claim that language broadly conceived is absent in nonhuman animal species. Wolfe has also built upon Derrida and Luhmann to argue that animals share a “double finitude” with humans including their ability to suffer. Vinciane Despret’s *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (2016) goes further in a posthumanist vein, with questions such as, “Do beasts know ways of being in the world?” The question leads to a reflection upon Jakob von Uexküll’s theory of “the Umwelt,” in which the idea of an animal’s concrete or lived milieu need not be fundamentally different from a human’s, despite Heidegger’s infamous claim that animals are “poor in world.” Various other posthumanist theorists continue to emphasize most clearly the general sense that subjectivity cannot be logically limited to human beings, particularly in the work of Braidotti, Wolfe, and Haraway. Haraway has nonetheless attempted to distance herself somewhat from posthumanist theory, foregrounding instead what can be identified as human-animal studies, in which interactions between specific humans and specific animals need to be situated in their historical and cultural contexts. Haraway’s influential work has focused on the potential for “becoming with” other companion species, building upon Deleuze and Guattari’s work but marking out her own territory in terms of interactions and relations between species. Haraway’s work resists universalist forms of ethics, however, such as the kinds of abolitionist and animal rights
discourses that can be found in thinkers such as Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Carol J. Adams, and Paola Cavalieri. Wolfe has also explicitly critiqued rights discourse for reinforcing a hierarchy of species when it seeks to extend rights down to other species, beginning with those presumed to be most like human beings.¹²

While there are thus some differences within and between posthumanism and human-animal studies, including varying degrees of emphasis upon individual animals, there remains a tendency to imply that animals from the same species will in effect be generally the same, even if they can be situated in relation to various human historical and cultural contexts. As Erica Fudge has argued in “A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals” (2002), for example, it has been difficult for human-animal studies to pursue a “history of animals” that is not actually “the history of human attitudes toward animals.”¹³ Fudge goes so far as to say that “the history of animals” is “impossible” because animals are “inarticulate,” they “leave no documents,” and “have no sense of periodization.”¹⁴ This brings her to the argument that the history of animals should be put under erasure in a Derridean sense, leading instead to her own posthumanist conclusion:

> By rethinking our past – reading it for the animals as well as the humans – we can begin a process that will only come to fruition when the meaning of ‘human’ is no longer understood in opposition to ‘animal.’ Then ‘human’ can be recognized as meaning something quite new: a being which only differentiates itself by being able to write and interpret its own history.¹⁵

While these claims might productively help to deconstruct “the human,” it remains difficult to see why we must continue to insist upon these other ways of declaring human exceptionalism. Why must we continue to construct animals as “inarticulate”? Do human oral cultures have no “history” as such? Are there alternative ways for understanding how animals leave traces and can potentially understand “periodization”? There are significant difficulties here, particularly when we consider trying to understand and interpret nonhuman cultures that seem to be incapable of traditionally human forms of self-representation, such as writing their own histories or voting in human elections. The field of biopolitics can point in alternative directions, such as revealing productive parallels between certain nonhuman lives and certain human lives that might both lack the cognitive functions necessary for these kinds of activities.¹⁶ Other fields in the social sciences have begun to point toward different ways of approaching animals as well, including alternative forms of communication.
16.2 Multispecies Ethnography and Science and Technology Studies

Going beyond the humanities to engage with fields such as multispecies ethnography and science and technology studies (STS) can point toward new ways of studying the nature of animality, including more engagement with sciences such as biology, ethology, evolutionary science, and ecology. Some anthropologists might still be wary of using the term “culture” to describe nonhuman social relations, but ethnography as a method has significant potential for contributing to the analysis of the nature of animality. The field of multispecies ethnography has prioritized multispecies relations (including nonanimal species, and not necessarily always including humans) in new and important ways, taking up questions such as the problem of “voice” or “speaking for” animal others. In their “Introduction” to *The Multispecies Salon* (2014), for example, Eben Kirksey, Craig Schuetze, and Stefan Helmreich invoke the comparison with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous reflections on the question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Considering “Who should be speaking for other species?” raises similar problems related to anthropologists representing other people, resonating with Arjun Appadurai’s comment that “Anthropology survives by its claim to capture other places (and other voices) through its special brand of ventriloquism. It is this claim that needs constant examination.” Kirksey et al. acknowledge the need to be similarly careful when it comes to “speak[ing] for members of other species – or even attempt[ing] to speak with them, in some cases.”

They go on to cite Haraway’s work in *Primate Visions* (1989) and *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) in terms of humans who have attempted to communicate with animals, as well as Bruno Latour’s call in *Politics of Nature* (1999) to bring “democracy to nonhumans by drawing them into parliamentary assemblies, where they will be represented by human ‘spokespeople’.” But their objection to Latour is primarily in terms of defining nonhumans by something they lack: speech.

Multispecies ethnography more broadly can include collaborating with “artists and biological scientists to illuminate how diverse organisms are entangled in political, economic, and cultural systems,” or, more generally, “studying the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds.” More recently, Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster have suggested the umbrella term “multispecies studies” in their special issue of *Environmental Humanities* (2016), encompassing not only multispecies ethnography, but also etho-ethnology,
anthropology of life, anthropology beyond humanity, extinction studies, and more-than-human geographies. Van Dooren et al. are inspired by the influential work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and her idea of “passionate immersion,” taken from her “Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom” (2011). Tsing there identifies “a new science studies afoot” that allows for “passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans being studied.”

Tsing’s emphasis is on engaging with scientific knowledge regimes – although Indigenous forms of knowledge are also often foregrounded – and on organisms that are more difficult, at least for now, to study in terms of their own cultures and social relations within their own species. As van Dooren et al. suggest, multispecies scholars can explore various questions by “immersing themselves in the lives of fungi, microorganisms, animals, and plants,” offering a “broader taxonomic scope of inquiry” than animal studies, focusing on “the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations that include, but always also exceed, dynamics of predator and prey, parasite and host, researcher and researched, symbiotic partner, or indifferent neighbor.”

Multispecies studies can even extend to apparently nonliving entities, “from stones and weather systems to artificial intelligences and chemical species.” Tsing’s work has been a central and ongoing model for this kind of approach, including more recently The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins (2015). In literary and cultural studies, “immersion” might take different forms, including sustained attention to particular species through a wide range of texts and situated discourses. We can incorporate methods that are closer to archival research, for example, including analyzing not only scientific practices and discourses but also Indigenous histories and knowledges, bureaucratic and legal documents, and literary and cultural texts that foreground animals or questions about the nature of animality in particular historical and cultural contexts.

Much of the work in multispecies studies more generally builds upon earlier and ongoing fields such as science and technology studies (STS) and specific theoretical frameworks such as actor-network theory (ANT) as formulated by Bruno Latour. Reconceiving animals as actors with agency is not necessarily new in this theoretical tradition, but it tends to insist upon distinctions such as individual as opposed to distributed agency. Other theoretical work suggests new directions, such as Mel Y. Chen’s Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect (2012), which explores the potential of the concept of animacy. For multispecies studies
work that comes out of the STS tradition, though, it makes sense that there would be an ongoing and developing engagement with scientific practices and discourses. As Tsing notes, the “new science studies” might seem different from earlier forms in that “its raison d’être is not, mainly, the critique of science, although it can be critical . . . . The critical intervention of this new science studies is that it allows learnedness in natural science and all the tools of the arts to convey passionate connection.”30 In his “Foreword” to Despret’s *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Latour frames Despret’s work in this context, in what he calls “scientific humanities,” noting that Despret spends considerable time engaging with scientific literature and experiments,31 as well as what has been called philosophical ethology.

From my perspective, much of this new work in “multispecies studies” could be more accurately described as “multispecies science studies,” making more explicit the STS theoretical genealogies that remain central in the field. This is not to say that multispecies science studies is not engaged with human cultural issues. As van Dooren et al. point out, “much of this work has sought to explore, in rich historical and ethnographic detail, the unequal labor, risks, positionalities, and exposures, as well as ways of being and knowing, of different individuals and communities. Histories of gender and race, of political economy and colonization are layered into multispecies worldings – how could they not be? – shaping possibilities for everyone.”32 These kinds of histories have also been prioritized in other fields that have been influential for literary and cultural studies, opening up new ways of exploring the nature of animality.

### 16.3 Animality Studies

The field of animality studies provides a foundation for bringing together human and nonhuman animalities, emphasizing the ways that histories of animality and animalizing certain human groups have led to significant and problematic consequences for various human populations, such as racist justifications for enslaving and discriminating against African Americans in the United States.33 Work in animality studies has emphasized the history of animality in relation to human discourses such as racism, homophobia, sexism, imperialism, and ableism, particularly through sweeping narratives such as evolution.34 It has foregrounded animalities such as “monkey-” or “ape-like” humans and “wolf” sexualities within human beings, particularly as they have been constructed through literary and cultural texts.
My own work in developing animality studies previously focused on a historically situated discourse of animality in the United States that constructs a survival-of-the-fittest jungle in which humans like animals must fight to survive. As a result, violence in the name of survival and heterosexuality in the name of reproduction are naturalized in new ways. This formulation of animality is tied to a particular situated context: the convergence of Darwinist and Freudian thinking at the turn of the twentieth century, in which “animal instincts” are assumed to drive human beings as well. Authors as diverse as Henry James, Jack London, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Upton Sinclair, and Frank Norris both reinforce and resist the discourse of the jungle at its foundational moment. There are also clearly other discourses of animality at that and other historical and cultural conjunctures, in which animals can be different kinds of signifiers for human characteristics or behaviors and might have rather different implications for both human and nonhuman animals. The emphasis of this kind of animality studies is on cultural politics and historicized literary and cultural studies. It can focus on examples in texts that not only reflect but also produce dominant discourses of animality at different historical and cultural moments.

Animality studies can potentially be seen as linking up with other work that has previously been labeled species critique and postanimal studies, as well as ecofeminist and environmental justice studies, in the sense that the emphasis is on both human and nonhuman impacts. These fields can be seen as paying attention to human populations that are oppressed or discriminated against as much as the other species inhabiting the same environments or discourses. Critical attention to discursive animalities can be linked to postcolonial and ethnic studies, for example, in the form of what Neel Ahuja has called “species critique,” offering “new tools for rethinking transnational circuits of power and identity. By tracing the circulation of nonhuman species as both figures and materialized bodies within the circuits of imperial biopower, species critique helps scholars reevaluate ‘minority’ discourses and enrich histories of imperial encounters.” In When Species Meet (2008), Haraway gives us the pithy reminder that “Species reeks of race and sex,” referring to the sordid history of “species” being constructed in the deployment of racist and heteronormative discourses in various historical contexts, and also illustrating how Haraway’s work cuts across various fields. While “species critique” or “species studies” might thus seem to have good potential for defining a field – with particular emphasis on the critique of species discourses – it seems more productive to me to see the term “species” as
a specific way of thinking about animality (as well as nonanimal species), which animality studies can explore, while other historical and cultural moments produce other discourses that can be studied in analogous ways. I am also reluctant to tether animality studies to species as simply the next identity category—added to race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and so on—and linked to “speciesism” as its primary object of study. That kind of work seems more logically aligned with human-animal studies, whereas animality studies finds it problematic to insist that “species” should be seen as either simply analogous to other human identity categories or, to the contrary, more fundamental than all of them, as Wolfe has argued (2003).

In our “Introduction: Animality and Advocacy” in the collection *Species Matters: Humane Advocacy and Cultural Theory* (2012), Marianne DeKoven and I discuss the implications of adding species as an identity category, particularly in relation to various advocacy movements, as well as the difference between animal studies and animality studies. We suggest it might be more productive to think of the difference as a continuum or spectrum, rather than a binary opposition. But the ongoing emphasis on animal advocacy in animal studies can be seen in the recent introduction to *Animals, Animality, and Literature* by Bruce Boehrer and Molly Hand (2018), who argue that “animal studies has developed in one sense as the historical consciousness of the animal-liberation movement,” which thus grounds the project of focusing on “the history of literary engagement with animals in the West, particularly as that engagement unfolds against the background of a developing animal-rights sensibility.” As mentioned previously, not everyone in human-animal studies—which I believe is more specific than “animal studies”—would necessarily align themselves with animal rights rather than animal welfare, for example. Animality studies, to the contrary, prioritizes questions of human cultural politics in relation to how we have thought about human and nonhuman animality at various historical and cultural moments. Increased attention to the history of animality and related discourses from the perspective of animality studies can lead to new insights in fields such as the history of sexuality, critical race studies, disability studies, and cultural studies more broadly, with an eye toward anti-oppressive, anti-homophobic, anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-ableist cultural politics. From my perspective, we need to continue building upon this kind of approach.

Literary and cultural texts are particularly productive sites for exploring how the nature of animality is animated, so to speak, in part because texts allow us to imagine how animals of various kinds might experience their lives and cultures. This kind of “sympathetic imagination” can have
a significant influence on what various people think about a particular species, including when other humans are associated with that species. Literary and cultural analysis can also build upon methodologies and scholarship stemming from other interdisciplinary fields, such as those surveyed in this chapter. We can open up new ways of mapping and comparing various human-animal engagements, for example, both central and peripheral, tracing particular kinds of intertwined “becomings,” exploring multiple kinds of agency, and building upon actor-network theory and other poststructuralist critiques and reformulations. Without assuming a radical difference between humans and animals, this approach in its broadest sense can explore a wide spectrum of relationships between and among species, from love and trust to exploitation and domination. It can also provide new insights into old debates in literary and cultural studies, such as the “voice” of the other, and different ways of defining “them” as opposed to “us.” In order to analyze the nature of animality in literary and cultural texts, the challenge might be to immerse ourselves in a wider range of texts and discourses related to specific nonhuman animals and species. What is the nature of the whale, the cow, the dog – or other kinds of animals and animalities – in the text you want to explore? There are many approaches to that kind of question. But perhaps we need to foreground our own methodology more explicitly: What is the nature – and culture – of your immersion in animality?

Notes


5 See, for example, Jacques Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press,

6 Wolfe, Animal Rites, 44–94.

7 Cary Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human: ‘Animal Studies’ and the Humanities,” PMLA 124, no. 2 (2009): 564–75. Wolfe’s article is part of an issue of PMLA 124, no. 2 (2009) that includes a foundational “Theories and Methodologies” special forum on “Animal Studies,” with contributions from Laurie Shannon, Nigel Rothfels, Susan McHugh, Michael Lundblad, Ursula K. Heise, Susan M. Griffin, Una Chaudhuri, Rosi Braidotti, Colleen Glenney Boggs, Bruce Boehrer, Kimberly W. Benston, and Neel Ahuja. Many of these contributors have subsequently published influential monographs, articles, and book collections, thus suggesting a good overview of work that has been identified as animal studies, specifically in relation to literary and cultural studies.


9 Ibid., 161–7.

10 See Braidotti, The Posthuman; Wolfe, What Is Posthumanism?, and Haraway, When Species Meet and Staying with the Trouble.

11 See especially Haraway, When Species Meet.

12 Wolfe, Animal Rites, 21–43.


14 Ibid., 5–6.

15 Ibid., 16.

16 For more on the intersections between animality and disability, see the special issue I edited on “Animality/Posthumanism/Disability,” in New Literary History 51, no. 4 (2020).


18 Ibid., 3.

19 Ibid., 3.
20 Quoted in Ibid., 3.
21 Ibid., 3.
22 Ibid., 2.

23 Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545. Kirksey and Helmreich’s identification of multispecies ethnography as a new field in this special issue of *Cultural Anthropology*, as well as *The Multispecies Salon*, edited by Kirksey in 2014, include contributions from both established and emerging figures in the field, such as Haraway, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Karen Barad, Kim TallBear, and Eva Hayward.

24 Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, “Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 5. The field of anthrozoology could also be included in this list, emphasizing as it does the relations between humans and animals, while foregrounding the work of zoology, ethology, and veterinary science. The journal *Anthrozoös* publishes relevant work.


26 van Dooren et al., “Multispecies,” 3.

27 Ibid., 4.


30 Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion.”


The description of animality studies in this section is adapted from my introduction to Animalities.

The work of Dominique Lestel, which has been appearing more regularly in translation from the French, theorizes animality in ways that are not as skeptical of evolutionary discourses and therefore do not necessarily line up with my formulation of animality studies as a field. For examples of Lestel’s work, see a special issue of Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities 19, no. 3 (2014), on “Philosophical Ethology I: Dominique Lestel,” eds. Brett Buchanan, Jeffrey Bussolini, and Matthew Chrulew.

See Michael Lundblad, The Birth of a Jungle.


Haraway, When Species Meet, 18.


The idea of “sympathetic imagination” is developed and defended perhaps most memorably by the character of Elizabeth Costello, created by J. M. Coetzee in The Lives of Animals (1999).