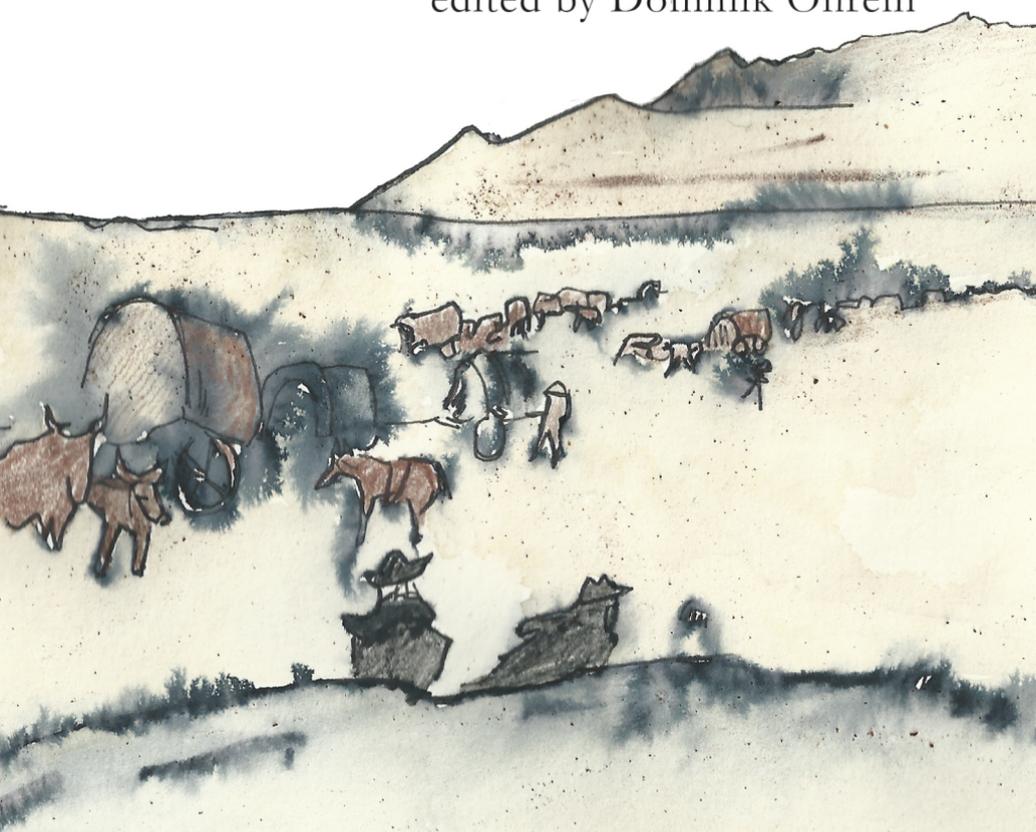


AMERICAN BEASTS

Perspectives on Animals, Animality
and U.S. Culture, 1776–1920

edited by Dominik Ohrem



Dominik Ohrem (ed.)
American Beasts
Perspectives on Animals,
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The Ends of Man

The Zooanthropological Imaginary and the Animal Geographies of Westward Expansion in Antebellum America

Dominik Ohrem

Passing across borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal, to the animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself.¹

Animality remains a horizon of the human, that of its loss or escape outside of itself.²

In the unusually cold winter of 1818, New Hampshire lawyer Estwick Evans left behind the comforts of his home to embark on an arduous “pedestrious tour” through the Michigan and Illinois Territory to the Great Lakes region and other parts of what was then still referred to as ‘the West.’ Travelling westward, we learn, Evans sought to “acquire the simplicity, native feelings, and virtues of savage life; to divest myself of the factitious habits, prejudices and imperfections of civilization” and “to find, amidst the solitude and grandeur of the western wilds, more

1 Jacques Derrida: *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. from the French by David Wills. New York: Fordham UP 2008, p. 3.

2 Dominique Lestel: Hybrid Communities. In: *Angelaki* 19,3 (2014), pp. 61–73, here p. 62.

correct views of human nature and of the true interests of man.”³ To anyone who might come up with the valid question why he decided to begin his journey in February in the dead of winter, Evans had an answer as well: “The season of snows,” he explains, is preferable for those wishing to “experience the pleasure of suffering, and the novelty of danger.”⁴ In preparation and as part of the accoutrements for his Western trip, Evans picked an outfit that, despite its obvious practicality, seems rather peculiar: “a close dress consisting of buffalo skins” with “epaulettes made of the long hair of the animal,” an “Indian apron [...] covered with fine bear skin” buckled around his waist, a fur cap and fur gloves, and “moccasins” made of deer-skin.⁵ (Fig. 1) Somewhat unsurprisingly, Evans’ dubiously fashionable transformation into a bipedal fur-bearer is met with a not always welcome amount of curiosity that at times made him wish he was “less conspicuous,”⁶ with some even warning him that his “mode of dress” might result in him being mistaken for an actual nonhuman fur-bearer and shot by hunters on his way through the forested wilderness parts of the country.⁷ But despite the isolation, the discomforts and the many dangers – human, animal or environmental – that might be a threat to ‘civilized’ Americans traveling through the regions of the early West, Evans remained undeterred, even exhilarated, for it was “in the season of danger” that “the human soul triumphs in the conviction of its own indestructibility.”⁸

Evans’ Western journey and his comparatively little-known written account are one of the earlier nineteenth-century expressions of white Eastern American imaginings and experiences of Western wilderness environments and concomitant fantasies of (temporarily) escaping the ‘artifices’ of civilization. At the same time, Evans’ narrative also anticipates the way in which Manifest Destiny’s collective vision of a

3 Estwick Evans: *A Pedestrious Tour, of Four Thousand Miles through the Western States and Territories, During the Winter and Spring of 1818*. Concord: Joseph C. Spear 1819, p. 6.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, p. 7. “I think a garment or two of Buffalo or some other warm skin, to be worn occasionally,” Evans remarks on the practical advantages of his mode of clothing given the severity of winter in the region, “would [...] save many a man from rheumatism, and even from being frozen to death” (*ibid.*, pp. 27–28).

6 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

nation-building process that would gradually encompass most of the continent drew on, and found its expression in, individual narratives of perilous adventure and rugged perseverance on and beyond the frontiers of American society. After the end of the War of 1812, the United States entered what is sometimes referred to as the Age of Manifest Destiny, a period of unprecedented territorial expansion into the regions west of the Mississippi that had been foreshadowed by the purchase of the enormous Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 and a number of subsequent scientific-military expeditions, most famously those of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (1804–06), Zebulon Pike (1806–07), and Stephen H. Long (1819–20). Even though earlier proponents of the exploration and settlement of the trans-Mississippi West such as Thomas Jefferson could hardly have imagined the rapidity of territorial expansion – Jefferson believed that it would take more than one hundred generations until American settlement reached all the way to the Pacific –, early on the West became a fertile discursive and imaginary environment, a vast domain of untold and untapped economic, political and cultural potential. And indeed, while often commenting critically on the prospects of westward emigration and the risks it posed to both the physical and the economic health of western individuals and families, Evans no doubt echoed the expectations of many (white) Americans of the time with his estimation that “the prevailing spirit of emigration, from the maritime to the inland frontier, will have a very beneficial influence” and that “great and permanent advantages will arise from the settlement of our western states and territories.”⁹

And yet, antebellum visions of the growth of an American ‘empire of liberty’ (in Jefferson’s famous phrasing) and the rampant triumphalism of Manifest Destiny in the 1830s and 1840s notwithstanding, westward expansion also produced a persistent undercurrent of cultural anxiety that continued to unsettle aspirations towards continental dominance and at times even challenged the very desirability of further territorial expansion. While antebellum skepticism of, or outright opposition to, territorial expansion was a multifaceted phenomenon, one long-standing concern focused on the supposedly decivilizing effects of Western wilderness geographies on both individuals and the character of American society as a whole. Insightful

9 Ibid., p.23.



Fig. 1

Estwick Evans in his buffalo dress, leaning on his rifle, together with the two dogs who accompanied him on his Western journey, only to be “destroyed by wolves” (p. 7).

Frontispiece of Estwick Evans: *A Pedestrious Tour, of Four Thousand Miles through the Western States and Territories, During the Winter and Spring of 1818.*

Concord: Joseph C. Spear 1819.

scholarship has addressed this aspect in terms of contemporary ideas about the environmental malleability of race and the supposed danger of racial or civilizational decline because of the ‘lure’ of the frontier and the absorption of an increasing number of white Americans into ‘savage’ Western environments.¹⁰ What figures as the particular point of departure for this chapter, however, is the fact that such concerns about the prospects and risks of westward expansion were frequently articulated in the language of animality and human-animal difference, as many contemporaries wondered how the often unpredictable forms of environmental and animal agency and the relations between (civilized) humans and (wild) animals in the sociospatial arrangements of the antebellum West affected those Americans that worked there for extended periods of time or even lived there permanently. Evans’ furry metamorphosis may have been a “constant source of amusement” to his contemporaries in “the settled parts of the country,”¹¹ his animalistic exterior merely a façade which, half-practically and half-humorously, enveloped a stable, unshakable core of refined humanity and as such only served to underscore his status as a specimen of hegemonic white civilization. But as more and more Americans traveled or emigrated to the West, and as Western life became more prominent in antebellum cultural productions, the bodies, behaviors and lifeways of Western humans were regarded not merely with curiosity but also with anxiety and concern, pointing to the fact that (to paraphrase the Derridean epigram to this chapter) self-identified civilized Americans were indeed animals significantly at unease with themselves.

As I want to argue here, such contemporary anxieties about the extent to which Western environments challenged or subverted the supposed ontological bifurcation between human and animal worlds serve to highlight the broader significance of animality in the context of westward expansion and the ways in which the figure of the animal – both

10 See, for example, Richard Slotkin: *Regeneration Through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP 1973; Daniel P. Barr: “A Monster So Brutal.” Simon Girty and the Degenerative Myth of the American Frontier, 1783–1900. In: *Essays in History* 40 (1998). <http://www.essaysinhistory.com/articles/2012/114> (accessed August 15, 2016); Conevery Bolton Valencius: *The Health of the Country. How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land*. New York: Basic 2004; Katy L. Chiles: *Transformable Race. Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2014.

11 Evans: *A Pedestrious Tour*, p. 26.

as an elusive abstraction and a fleshy, living being – inhabited and traversed the discursive, imaginary and material environments of the antebellum West. In turn, Western environments functioned as spaces of ontological speculation and experimentation that influenced shifting conceptions of animality and humanity in an era in which the ‘Darwinian revolution’ loomed on the horizon. From antebellum times onward, Western environments, their human and nonhuman inhabitants, and the relations between them thus played an important role in what I will refer to as the ‘zooanthropological imaginary’ of nineteenth-century American culture, a nexus of different and at times conflicting knowledges and imaginings that was not limited to specialist debates in scientific circles but also, and more importantly, extended into the broader cultural sphere through the writings of (amateur) historians, novelists, journalists, businessmen, explorers, travelers and others in a social environment that featured a burgeoning print culture. I use the term ‘zooanthropological’ in this chapter to indicate the way in which the irresistible figure of the animal inhabits every conception of anthropological difference and human uniqueness. Historically speaking, what Jacques Derrida has famously brought to our attention as the ‘question of the animal’ has always been inextricably bound up with the ‘question of the human’ – so much so, in fact, that articulating the one always already, in a mode of inevitable co-articulation, also evokes the other.

The Zooanthropological Imaginary and the Antebellum (Human) Animal

What an heterogeneous animal is man! — sometimes exalted to an approach towards divinity, sometimes debased to lower than brutality: — A perpetual struggle between the essence and the dregs.¹²

Many contemporaries would likely have agreed with Evans’ assertion that the animal world and “the subject of Zoology” offered not only “an inexhaustible source of instruction and entertainment” from which “man may derive important lessons in relation to industry, economy and perseverance” but that it also embodied and displayed “all the passions

12 Fortescue Cuming: *Cuming’s Tour to the Western Country* [1810], ed. by Reuben Gold Thwaites. Cleveland: A. H. Clark 1904, p. 223.

and affections incident to human nature” and thus had an “intimate connexion” with the “moral nature” supposedly unique to the complex interiority of human beings.¹³ In the decades leading up to Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and its unsettling implications for traditional notions of the human-animal boundary, in a debate that spanned across the discursive domains of natural history, (natural) philosophy, theology, politics, literature and other fields, contemporary zooanthropological thought grappled with contested issues such as the boundary between human and animal life, the fixity or malleability of human nature, the importance and fragility of human sociality, and the supposed uniqueness of human moral and reasoning capacities. Due to the increasing popularity of natural history and natural philosophy, articles that addressed issues discussed in these fields were frequently included in general interest magazines like the *North American Review* or *Harper’s Magazine*. The growing number of (sometimes short-lived) periodicals published especially from the 1820s onward functioned less as passive receptacles of specialist knowledges or unidirectional avenues for the cultural reception of contemporary scientific, theological and other debates but in fact actively shaped the debates themselves.¹⁴ An 1845 article published in the *Knickerbocker*, for example, pseudonymously authored by “One of the People,” defines the study of human nature as an inquiry into “all that essentially belongs to man, physically, intellectually and morally, and whether to him exclusively, or in common with other beings.”¹⁵ We learn that the human being is an “omnivorous” migratory mammal who, “though for the most part terrestrial, is, under some circumstances, aquatic” and whose “physical nature seems to partake of that of the cock, swine, and East-Indian dog.”¹⁶ But while (perhaps to smooth over these somewhat humbling affiliations) the article characteristically goes on to define the human’s “intellectual and moral character” as the proper subject of the study of human nature in contrast to “the study of anatomy, physiology, phrenology,

13 Evans: *A Pedestrious Tour*, p. 182.

14 The period between 1825 and 1850 was already recognized by contemporaries as the (first) “golden age of periodicals.” Frank Luther Mott: *A History of American Magazines, 1741–1850*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP 1970, p. 341.

15 “One of the People”: Hints on Human Nature, Style, Etc. In: *The Knickerbocker* 26,6 (December 1845), pp. 536–543, here p. 536.

16 *Ibid.*

and gastrology,¹⁷ it remains unclear to what extent these capacities can in fact be assigned to the sphere of human life alone. This is because it is not only the “passions and affections” that humans share with other living creatures, but, if the human is indeed “an intellectual being,” this as well is a characteristic shared with the rest of the animal world, as is evident in the fact that the human, “like the bee and beaver, builds, lays up stores of provisions for winter, or against time of need; and like these animals, forms communities and establishes governments.”¹⁸ This begs the obvious question: If humans have all of these characteristics at least to some extent in common with nonhuman beings, doesn’t the study of human nature threaten to lose the specificity of its subject – or indeed its subject as such? Even though we learn that “in matters of conscience or moral sense, and religion, man is said to be *sui generis*,”¹⁹ whether or not the study of human nature is not in fact always already the study of more-than-human nature is a question that remains unaddressed by the article’s mostly anecdotal line of argument.

Related to arguments about the human as a being uniquely endowed with rational and/or moral capacities was another quality sometimes employed in definitions of human exceptionalism: the uniqueness of human sociality. As John Quincy Adams argues in the *American Whig Review*, while “[i]t is the property of all animated nature to be *gregarious*,” humans alone may be considered truly social beings. “The beasts of the forest and the fields, are drawn by the laws of their nature together in *herds* – the birds of the air in *flocks* – the fishes of the ocean in *sculls*; reptiles *cluster* in the recesses of the earth, and the insect tribes no sooner quicken from their shells into life, than they people the sun-beam in swarms.”²⁰ But, Adams argues, the *purpose* of this nonhuman propensity to congregate for the most part remains a mystery to us, because it doesn’t seem to have one.

It is neither conducive to the subsistence of the individual nor to the continuance of the species. It affords no means of intellectual communion, where there is no mind to cultivate; no accession of strength to resist the destructive power of the elements, or the ravin of superior animals. The pigeon, surrounded by myriads

17 “One of the People”, p. 536.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid, pp. 536–537.

20 John Quincy Adams: Society and Civilization. In: *American Whig Review* 2,1 (1845), pp. 80–89, here p. 80, original emphases.

of others, is as defenceless as in solitude against the talons of the hawk. There are in natural history a few instances of animals, perhaps exaggerated by human wonder, who unite in common labor for a common benefit – like the beaver, the ant and the bee; they are rare examples of animals partaking of the social nature, but not of the principle of progressive improvement. They exercise no powers but such as have always been exercised by their species. Powers untaught and unteachable, and no more vivified with mind, than the tendril that seeks a hook for its support, or the ivy that creeps around the oak.²¹

As the *Knickerbocker* article discussed above indicates, however, Adams' rather Cartesian conception of the nonhuman animal world as governed by an unminded mechanicity or instinctuality, while still shared by many contemporaries, was increasingly being challenged by those who questioned the defining characteristics (though rarely the idea) of human exceptionalism. Even the previously neglected or abjected human animal body, perhaps necessitated by the wider post-Enlightenment acceptance of the human as, at least in his earthly, corporeal existence, part of the animal kingdom, could now be reconceptualized in the service of exceptionalist arguments. Indeed, while still insisting on the importance of an immaterial principle that raised humans above other animals, another article from the *American Whig Review*, published a few years after Adams' piece, explains that even in their *animality*, in their "organic and sensuous attributes," human beings are vastly superior to the rest of the animal world to such an extent that "[f]rom the ape to the man there is no transition, but an abyss of differences."

In the man first appears the upright figure, beauty of outline, universal grace of motion, smoothness and purity of skin, a countenance equally beautiful in motion or repose; speech, distinct and varied; authority, and skill of hand. [...] His *senses* are infinitely appreciative and delicate; his *instincts* powerful and complete; his *intelligence*, *passion*, and *affection*, incomparably superior to those of any other organized being.²²

21 Ibid. For Adams, the exceptional sociality of human beings is tied to another supposed aspect of human uniqueness: history, which "must necessarily have reference to the existence and condition of *Man*," and which is, in its nineteenth-century teleological conception, premised on a uniquely human form of sociality defined by the "principle of progressive improvement" (ibid., original emphasis). For the interconnection between humanity and historicity, also see the introduction to this volume.

22 Passions and Intelligence of Men. In: *American Whig Review* 16,95 (1852), pp. 541–551, here p. 541, original emphases.

As this brief selection of examples from antebellum magazines shows, contemporary zooanthropological imaginings were involved in reconfiguring conceptions of humanity and animality in an era of increasing ontological uncertainty, when traditional models of human identity and the metaphysical reassurances that had hitherto underpinned humanity's exalted status were gradually losing influence, and what it meant to be human was perhaps less certain than ever before. I would argue that, on the broader level of antebellum discourse, it was precisely the interplay between 'elevating' animal life (to some extent) and acknowledging human animality (with important reservations and qualifications) that cleared the epistemological and rhetorical grounds for a reaffirmation of human exceptionalism based on a different and more diverse set of parameters. On the other hand, however, this diversity of arguments employed to reconceive the "abyss of differences" between humans and animals in the pre-Darwinian decades, rather than bolstering exceptionalist dogma, also threatened to achieve the opposite: it produced an increasingly ambivalent and polymorphous discursive space in which the metaphysical self-certainty of the human being (or, rather, of Man as its white, 'civilized' incarnation) underwent a disconcerting transformation from a more or less confident claim into an open question.

The conceptual struggle with the human animal also involved otherwise unorthodox antebellum figures such as Henry David Thoreau. Well-known today for his attentive affection towards and interest in nonhuman beings, the variety of "brute neighbors"²³ he encounters during his time at Walden Pond, Thoreau exhibits a perhaps unexpected concern with, and even hostility towards, *human* animal life. In the chapter "Higher Laws" from his 1854 book *Walden*, he offers some remarkable ontological elaborations on the question of human animality. Emphasizing his trademark allegiance to wild(er)ness, he initially reflects in a rather positive tone on his awareness of "an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, [...] and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both."²⁴ Thoreau acknowledges the way in which both 'instincts' co-animate human existence – they are distinct and perhaps contradictory, but they also complement each other, and it seems that both have their role to play in the development and vicissitudes of human life. It quickly becomes

23 Henry David Thoreau: *Walden*, ed. by J. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton: Princeton UP 1989, p. 223.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

clear, however, that, for Thoreau, it is the spiritual life which represents the true *telos* of both the individual becoming-human that characterizes each person's biographical development and the historical and cultural becoming of the human as a species. Thoreau establishes a hierarchy in which the value of the 'primitive' and the 'savage' is ultimately not determined on its own terms but with regard to its ancillary function for the worthier aspirations towards the 'higher' life. It doesn't take long, then, that Thoreau's conciliatory tone begins to change, perhaps because the vague romanticism of his initial gestures towards a primitive life and his feral fantasies of "ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment"²⁵ are now confronted with the more tangible question of the animal corporeality of the human. "We are conscious of an animal in us," Thoreau writes, "which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies."²⁶ Because the human is continuously threatened by the "inferior and brutish nature to which he [*sic*] is allied," the full realization of the *humanitas* of the human, the not-animal part of the human which supposedly constitutes the human being's true essence or destination, hinges on a practice of anxious spiritual regulation, or even violent exorcism, of the brute within – or, as Thoreau puts it: "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established."²⁷ The antagonistic relation between the animal and the spiritual nature of the human thus manifests itself in the form of a developmental continuum from 'lower' to 'higher' modes of being, with the former characterized by the prevalence of animal physicality and the latter testimony to the fulfillment of human potentiality, which is attained precisely by emancipating oneself, as far and fully as possible, from all physical demands and necessities. As Simon Glendinning puts it, this "terminal achievement [...] in which man attains to what is most human, human in every part," is the embodiment of the fantasies of disembodiment characteristic of both humanist and Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism, "the *termination* of

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., pp. 219–220. For an insightful discussion of the "Higher Laws" chapter and Thoreau's conception of human animality, see Neill Matheson: Thoreau's Inner Animal. In: *Arizona Quarterly* 67,4 (2011), pp. 1–26.

27 Thoreau: *Walden*, p. 220.

man existing as a finite creature – the transcendence of, the freedom from all determination by, human animality.”²⁸

Echoing models of collective progression from savage to civilized states of social existence inherited from French and Scottish Enlightenment thinkers and their popularization of the ‘four-stages theory,’ Thoreau explains that “even in civilized communities, the embryo man passes through the hunter stage of development.”²⁹ And, it seems, even in these communities not all humans are equally successful in fully transcending this primitive stage of human life. A case in point is the French-Canadian woodchopper, Alek Therien, who frequently visits Thoreau during his time at Walden Pond and in whom “the animal man chiefly was developed,”³⁰ while “the intellectual and what is called spiritual man [...] were slumbering as in an infant.”³¹ Therien’s behavior is determined by an “exuberance of animal spirits,”³² his thinking “primitive” and almost wholly “immersed in his animal life,”³³ and despite Thoreau’s appreciation of the occasional glimmers of unrefined, ‘natural’ genius he recognizes in Therien, his portrayal of the woodchopper indicates the underlying predicament that troubles Thoreau’s metaphysics of the human: that humanity is not simply a given but a potentiality that needs to be actualized through continuous individual spiritual and collective civilizational effort, and that any concept of the essence of the human being is unsettled by the disturbingly performative nature of being, or becoming, human. Anthropogenesis, it seems, is not a natural, linear unfolding of an innate capacity but realizes itself in the mode of ceaseless corrective attempts at keeping in check, and trying to emancipate oneself from, an animal nature from which escape ultimately remains impossible.

In his 1851 book *The Hunter-Naturalist*, Thoreau’s less well-known contemporary, the journalist, naturalist and adventurer Charles Wilkins Webber, offers a similar distinction between the spiritual and

28 Simon Glendinning: From Animal Life to City Life. In: *Angelaki* 5,3 (2000), pp. 19–30, here p. 27.

29 Thoreau: *Walden*, p. 213.

30 Ibid., p. 146.

31 Ibid., p. 147.

32 Ibid., p. 146.

33 Ibid., p. 150. For a discussion of Thoreau’s relationship with and attitudes towards Therien, see Robert W. Bradford: Thoreau and Therien. In: *American Literature* 34,4 (1963), pp. 499–506.

the animal aspects of the human by employing the broader difference between avian life and the earthy existence of quadrupeds to make sense of the dual character of the human being. Given the many traits that they, as living, breathing beings, share with humans, birds and beasts are expressive of “the most intimate relations to the life below us,” but in their respective lifeways they also point beyond the fact of human-animal kinship in that they embody “separate and living types of our compounded selves.”³⁴ Accordingly, Webber continues, while “we see in the bird the type of our intellect – of the soul,” the beast represents “the type of our sensuous life – it appeals to our material and lower impulses. It prefigures and embodies individually those purely physical attributes which we find expressed in man the Microcosm.”³⁵ In marked contrast to the lofty nobility of feathered beings, the wingless beast is forced to bear the ignominy of living “with its belly in the dust.”³⁶ Mired in the struggle for survival and the vagaries of subsistence, it merely “lives to eat,” while for birds, in their relative congeniality with the “higher intellection” of human life, “alimentation seems [...] rather a means than an end.”³⁷ Unlike the truly ‘animal animal’ whose mode of being-in-the-world is limited to the sensuous and instinctual life of the body and its precarious environmental embeddedness, birds are reminiscent of the human capacity to transcend their own animality for the purpose of a higher life, guided by ‘higher laws’ (although it seems somewhat ironic that Webber’s birds are able to raise themselves into the immaterial-incorporeal sphere of “pure ether”³⁸ by the very means of their specific *corporeal* endowments). However, if, for Webber, human existence is characterized by a precarious ontological intermediacy between divine transcendence and beastly immanence, he appears to be much less hostile towards and anxious about the human animal than Thoreau. In fact, while surely most “humiliating to a transcendental pride,” he goes on to admit that “as yet the beast more closely approximates our sympathies, appeals to us through more numerous traits of consanguinity than the bird.”³⁹ And while humans should continue to cultivate the

34 Charles W. Webber: *The Hunter-Naturalist. Romance of Sporting; Or, Wild Scenes and Wild Hunters*. Philadelphia: J. W. Bradley 1851, p. 18.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., p. 19.

38 Ibid., p. 18.

39 Ibid., p. 19.

spiritual aspect of their nature, Webber argues that it is equally important and necessary for them to be “true animals”⁴⁰ and to look back without shame to “that antediluvian era in which our giant progenitors wrestled hand to claw with their brute antagonists.”⁴¹

The zooanthropological ruminations of Thoreau and Webber illustrate the second sense in which the term ‘zooanthropological’ can be understood in the antebellum context (and beyond): besides underlining the broader epistemological interdependence of conceptions of human and nonhuman animality, it also refers in a more specific sense to attempts at grappling with the realization that *anthropos* might indeed be fully immanent to the realm of animality – that (even civilized) humans were, in the words of Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Ferguson, “animal[s] in the full extent of that designation.”⁴² As I will discuss in more detail in the next section, however, unlike Thoreau’s, Webber’s writing and the way it is shaped by his Western experiences also serves to illustrate how white antebellum Americans in their speculations about human-animal difference, human specificity and (the ethics of) human-animal relations frequently looked, or indeed took, to the West. Not all too surprisingly, a strong interest in the forms and modes of life – human, animal or liminally ‘inbetween’ – on and beyond Western frontiers is particularly evident in contemporary accounts of Western travel. But more than merely offering instructive or entertaining descriptions of ‘foreign’ regions or societies, generic narratives of exploration and adventure or utilitarian evaluations of Western nature and animals, antebellum zooanthropological curiosity about Western environments was a crucial aspect in philosophical debates about the differences between human and animal life – debates that were also of an inherently *political* nature. At the same time, travelers’ implicit or explicitly articulated intentions of, to again quote Evans, finding “more correct views of human nature” in the West also served to legitimize their travels as an activity conducive to human knowledge production in contrast to the seemingly mindless or merely subsistence-oriented roaming of nonhuman animals and human savages, into whose ‘haunts’ their journey would lead them. Travelers, as an 1835 *Knickerbocker* article puts it, “trace human nature, by its action, and consequences, up to

40 Webber: *The Hunter-Naturalist*, p 19.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

42 Adam Ferguson: *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* [1776], ed. by Fania Oz-Salzberger. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1995, p. 48.

its source,” and if “they seek the home of the savage, [...] it is to develop his passions, his feelings, his wishes, the very powers of his intellect, when he is under no curb but that of nature and his own finite existence.”⁴³ In its connection with the advancement of human knowledge, the very activity of travel was already indicative of the superiority of civilized humanity, with the curiosity of the traveler being an expression of their intellectual and imaginative faculties and thus of the ‘spiritual’ life idealized by Thoreau and others: “Divest human beings of curiosity, and we [...] linger on a mere animal existence,—capable only of mere animal pleasures,—unworthy of the high place in the scale of created beings, which it has been our favored lot to attain.”⁴⁴

The Animal Geographies of Westward Expansion

There is something in the atmosphere of the broad prairie that gives to those who make it their home an air of boldness and independence. The wild mustang of the plain has a stride and a step which the farm-bred steed never acquires. So it is with the prairie man.⁴⁵

Again and again I looked toward the crowded hill-sides, and was sure I saw horsemen; and riding near, with a mixture of hope and dread, for Indians were abroad, I found them transformed into a group of buffalo. There was nothing in human shape amid all this vast congregation of brute forms.⁴⁶

By the 1830s, “the great peculiarity of that newest of all possible worlds, called the Western Country,”⁴⁷ as James Kirke Paulding puts it in his 1832 novel *Westward Ho!*, was fast becoming a staple of Euro-American cultural identity as well as expansionist political ambition. While the Western environments of Paulding’s novel are still chiefly those “eternal forests” of the myth-historical tradition associated with the late eighteenth-century hunter-explorer and frontier icon Daniel Boone, “roamed by herds of savage beasts and savage men”⁴⁸ and dotted by the

43 A Chapter on Travelers. In: *The Knickerbocker* 6,3 (September 1835), pp. 253–261, here p. 256.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

45 William G. Brent: Commerce of the Prairies. In: *The Knickerbocker* 41,1 (January 1853), pp. 41–44, here p. 42.

46 Francis Parkman: *The Oregon Trail* [1849], ed. by Bernard Rosenthal. Oxford: Oxford UP 1996, p. 77.

47 James Kirke Paulding: *Westward Ho! A Tale*. New York: J. & J. Harper 1832, p. 9.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

log cabins of fearless pioneers, others began to turn their gaze towards the farther and stranger domains beyond the Mississippi. Already in 1827, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*, the third installment of his Leatherstocking series, sees its protagonist, Natty Bumppo, relocate to the Great Plains, an environment that differed markedly from the familiar Eastern Woodlands and came with unique challenges, beginning with the very attempt at aesthetic description.⁴⁹ As Cooper explains in the revised 1849 introduction to his novel, in the face of ever-advancing American civilization and with the 'primevality' of his forests now increasingly disturbed by the settler's axe, the "philosopher of the wilderness" had emigrated beyond the Mississippi to spend the final years of his life as a trapper on the "denuded plains that stretch to the Rocky Mountains,"⁵⁰ a region Cooper himself never visited and 'knew' only through the few accounts that had been published by explorers and travelers. In the years that followed the publication of *The Prairie*, however, an increasing number of works based on actual personal experiences of travel into the trans-Mississippi West would be published, with Washington Irving's *Tour of the Prairies* (1832) and Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* (first in serialized form in *The Knickerbocker* from 1847–49) ranking among the more prominent examples.

Wilderness was a well-established concept widely employed to characterize the bioregions of the antebellum far West, which, like much of the Great Plains, seemingly "resisted both agrarian settlement and white bodies."⁵¹ The conceptual substance of wilderness, in the antebellum American case and elsewhere, has always been less about geo- or topographical specifics than about a contrasting juxtaposition of the geographies of civilized society – the rural and built environments east of the Mississippi and on the Atlantic seaboard – with those spaces imagined as yet beyond the transformative reach of white civilization. But as much as wilderness was and is a (European or Euro-American) human construct and an integral part of hegemonic discourses that

49 For early American encounters with and impressions of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, see Anne Farrar Hyde: *An American Vision. Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820–1920*. New York: New York UP 1990.

50 James Fenimore Cooper: *The Prairie. A Tale* [1827], ed. by James P. Elliott. Albany: State University of New York Press 1985, p. 6.

51 Stephanie LeMenager: *Manifest and Other Destinies. Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2004, p. 16.

underpinned racialized and gendered ontologies of the human, cultural discourses and imaginaries of wilderness should also be considered as references to forms of environmental and animal agency beyond those normally encountered or accepted in evidently anthropogenic and anthropocentric environments, where such forms of agency are usually strongly circumscribed. In turn, these forms of ‘wild’ environmental and animal agency also shaped the kinds of corporeal and intercorporeal experience of self-identified civilized Americans in environments in which they found themselves, in the words of Parkman, “suddenly brought back to the wants and resources of their original natures.”⁵²

Even a cursory look at some of the sources should be sufficient to demonstrate the omnipresence of animals and animality in antebellum writing about the trans-Mississippi regions. But it might be instructive to discuss in some more detail the specific ways in which, in the contemporary zooanthropological imaginary, Western environments figured as *animal geographies*, conceptualized here, in Harawayan parlance, as thoroughly ‘naturalcultural’⁵³ spaces that interweaved cultural discourses and imaginings with forms of environmental materiality and (human-)animal (inter)corporeality. Strictly speaking, of course, almost all geographies – animated as they usually are by a multiplicity of living beings and forms of interspecies relations in varying degrees of intensity and visibility – would have to be characterized as ‘animal’ to some extent, which makes the term appear somewhat tautological. The reason I want to discuss the phenomenon of antebellum westward expansion under this heading has to do with the specifics of historical perception and experience. Contemporaries perceived and experienced life in Western bioregions as radically different from that in built or rural Eastern environments, and three interrelated aspects

52 Parkman: *The Oregon Trail*, p.62. The reality of wilderness, its uncomplicated, straightforward material existence ‘out there’ or its social constructedness and problematic role as a constitutive element of settler colonialist discourse, has taken center stage in a debate that reverberates well beyond the field of American environmental history. For the standard work on the cultural significance of American wilderness, see Roderick Frazier Nash: *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale UP 2014, first published in 1965 and now in its fifth edition. For an important problematization of the concept, see William Cronon: *The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*. In: Id. (ed.): *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. New York: Norton 1995, pp.69–90.

53 See Donna J. Haraway: *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008.

should be particularly highlighted in this regard: the exceptional *presence* of animal life, the manifold expressions of animal *agency*, and the specific modes of *relations* between humans (both indigenous and Euro-American) and animals (both wild and domesticated) in Western environments. Given that in the East animal life was for the most part incorporated into human-shaped environments according to predominantly utilitarian aspects, with strongly regulated forms and spaces of human-animal encounter and interaction,⁵⁴ antebellum travelers who remarked on the wild liberty of the mustang, the thunderous pre-ecocidal immensity of bison herds – “a sea of life—of muscular power—of animal appetite—of bestial enjoyment!”⁵⁵ – or even the curious subterranean ‘republics’ of prairie dogs acknowledged the relative autonomy of animal bodies, movements and lifeways in expressly more-than-human environments that challenged Manifest Destiny’s fantasies of (white) human supremacy, while, at the same time, providing the necessary stage for adventurous performances of Western ‘conquest.’ In antebellum accounts of Western travel, the often remarked upon presence of animal life in the trans-Mississippi West sometimes contrasted strongly with the supposed *absence* of human life in these environments. In the words of an 1845 *Knickerbocker* article which nicely captures this widespread perception, “[n]o human being may be the companion of the traveller in the immense solitude, yet will he feel that he is not alone; the wide expanse is populous with myriads of creatures; and, in the emphatic language of the red man, ‘The Great Spirit is upon the Prairie!’”⁵⁶ And while Irving muses that “there is something

54 This is not to say, of course, that animals were somehow ‘irrelevant’ or absent in Eastern rural or urban environments. Pre-twentieth-century cities could be distinctly “anthrozootic” and characterized by a “near-constant contact” with animals “on streets and in homes, in slaughterhouses and rendering plants, stables and dairies, and at race-tracks, dog-fighting pits and rat baits,” as Scott Miltenberger points out in *Viewing the Anthrozootic City. Humans, Domesticated Animals, and the Making of Early Nineteenth-Century New York*. In: Susan Nance (ed.): *The Historical Animal*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP 2015, pp. 261–271, here p. 262. Rather, my point is that in the city (most) animals were quite rigorously incorporated into the routines of human life (as Miltenberger’s list of spaces and practices of urban human-animal relations itself suggests), and the implications of this for expressions as well as human imaginings of animal agency should not be disregarded.

55 Thomas Jefferson Farnham: *Travels in the Great Western Prairies, the Anahuac and Rocky Mountains, and in the Oregon Territory*. New York: Greeley & McElrath 1843, p. 33.

56 Lewis F. Thomas: *Sketches of the Great West*. In: *The Knickerbocker* 25,3 (March 1845), pp. 189–196, here p. 196.

inexpressibly lonely in the solitude of a prairie” in comparison with the “loneliness of a forest,” where “the view is shut in by trees, and the imagination is left free to picture some livelier scene beyond,” he also notes that even this “desert world” supposedly devoid of humanity is nonetheless animated by manifold forms of animal life, its pervasive silence frequently being “broken by the cry of a distant flock of pelicans” or the howling and whining of a “scoundrel wolf.”⁵⁷

For Webber, Western environments, where “the civilized man, the savage and the brute have been brought into extraordinary relations,”⁵⁸ offered fertile grounds for pre- and proto-Darwinian delineations of human-animal difference and the ethics of interspecies relations, including and especially those between humans and other creatures. Appropriately enough, Webber’s own biography in many ways epitomizes the recklessness of antebellum frontier adventure and Manifest Destiny. Moving from his home state of Kentucky to the conflict-ridden Texas frontier of the late 1830s to join a company of Texas Rangers, he later led an ill-fated expedition to Arizona Territory, attempted to improve transportation in the Southwest with a ‘camel company,’ and eventually died in Nicaragua while participating in William Walker’s infamous mid-1850s filibustering exploits. In 1844, concluding his Texan adventures, Webber moved to New York to work as a journalist, serving for two years as editor for the *American Whig Review* and publishing several articles and stories about his Western experiences, the “erratic wanderings” which brought him into familiarity “with all wild, grotesque and lonely creatures that populate those infinite solitudes of nature.”⁵⁹ In the introduction to his *Hunter-Naturalist*, a collection of accounts of wilderness and hunting adventure interspersed with natural historical and philosophical elaborations which was planned as merely the first book of a projected series, Webber explains how his books are supposed to bear testimony to the lived relationality of human and animal life and that this relationality must also be taken into account on the

57 Washington Irving: *A Tour on the Prairies*. London: J. Murray 1835, pp. 271–272. Of course, trans-Mississippi Western environments were never really devoid of human life, and the reasons for this Euro-American perception can be found less in the respective environments themselves than in the history of settler colonial racism and its physical as well as discursive erasures of indigenous societies and ecologies.

58 Webber: *The Hunter-Naturalist*, p. 30.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 90. For biographical information about Webber, see Thomas W. Cutrer: Webber, Charles Wilkins. In: *Handbook of Texas Online*. <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fwe08> (accessed September 5, 2016).

level of narrative presentation: “The wild creature and its Human peer must go together in our treatment—the one re-acts upon and modifies the other; let us exhibit the passions and the life of both.”⁶⁰ The Western lives of “the Wild Indian and his Buffalo—the Trapper and his Beaver,”⁶¹ Webber seems to suggest, are dynamic co-enactments in which the lifeways of animal species are interwoven with that of their respective human types. However, while the image of animals and their “Human peer[s]” (even if distinguished by capitalization) suggests that the “extraordinary relations” of Western life are characterized by a certain horizontality, the specific type of relationship that permeates Webber’s wild Western scenes as well as his conception of interspecies life and ethics more broadly obviously contradicts this idea: Just like the book’s eponymous figure of the ‘hunter-naturalist’ embodies two domains of practice and knowledge traditionally associated with forms of epistemic and physical violence expressive of a masculinist dominance over nonhuman beings, the relations Webber refers to throughout his book are neither harmonious nor symmetrical because they are those between hunter and hunted, predator and prey – and “man, in a world of pursuers and pursued, is chief hunter of them all!”⁶² While for Thoreau hunting was a necessary developmental stage with some educational value that was (or should be) limited to “the thoughtless age of boyhood,”⁶³ neither the “sickly benevolence” of some of his contemporaries nor “baby ethics, *alias*, transcendentalism”⁶⁴ could distract Webber from the reality that Man was the apex predator in a universe defined by a relentless struggle for existence in which “the *strong*, of course, conquer.”⁶⁵ But even if humans were taken out of the equation, Webber’s conviction that violence was the defining principle of interspecies relations was apparently supported by the workings of the animal world itself – and for proof one needed only look at the “lustful battles of the animal tribes among themselves.”⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, after briefly mentioning the “savage contests of the canines, felines, &c,”⁶⁷

60 Webber: *The Hunter-Naturalist*, p. 6.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., p. 17.

63 Thoreau: *Walden*, p. 212.

64 Webber: *The Hunter-Naturalist*, p. 21.

65 Ibid., p. 22, original emphasis.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

Webber bolsters and further elaborates on his point by drawing on his own experiences with Western animal life:

It is a fact, with regard to the habits of the Mustangs, or wild horses of our great prairies, which we have frequently observed personally, that the weaker stallions are invariably, after desperate contests, either killed or driven into solitary banishment, from which they never return to the herd, until their strength and prowess have been so far developed in the solitude, as to give them some hopes of being able to triumph in a renewed struggle with their conquerors. The mares, in the mean time, are passive observers, and surrender without hesitation, to whichever of the opponents may have demonstrated the right to approach them legitimately.⁶⁸

In the 1850s, Webber's red-in-tooth-and-claw conception of animal life was, of course, not exactly a novelty, because it was both shared by an increasing number of contemporaries and had already been anticipated in earlier writings. Evans, for example, while traversing one of the Western hunting grounds, encounters a group of wild deer, who – as he surmises, because of his “garments of fur” – look at him “with rather an inquisitive than fearful aspect.”⁶⁹ Evans is “only half disposed” to shoot the innocent looking creatures, but his canine companions are much less hesitant, pursuing and killing one of the group.⁷⁰ However, while, this scene of interspecies violence provides the context for Evans musings on “the lengthy, and complicated chain of destruction” and the “perpetual carnage” that suffuses the animal world, there is quite a different moral resonance to Evans observations.⁷¹ In contrast to Webber's celebration of Man as the “chief hunter,” for Evans, the role of Man is that of the “great devourer” – and although the “destruction of animal life” may be an unpleasant necessity for the support of human existence, “the life and comfort of animals should never be trifled with. It is the only life which they can live; their little light, once put out, is extinguished forever.”⁷²

While one might argue that the relations between Evans' Western travels and his reflections on animal life and humans' problematic role in the web of interspecies relations were of a coincidental rather than causal nature, throughout the antebellum decades the interconnection between far Western environments and ethico-ontologies of animal

68 Ibid.

69 Evans: *A Pedestrious Tour*, p. 93.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., pp. 93–94.

life and interspecies relations became increasingly visible. More widely read than Webber's writing, Parkman's account of his 1846 travels on the Oregon Trail underlines both this interconnection and the extent to which, in contemporary zooanthropological imaginings, the trans-Mississippi West epitomized the relentless struggle of animal life in a way that also naturalized, and offered a legitimizing framework for, the violence of Euro-American territorial expansion more broadly. A wealthy Bostonian plagued by an undiagnosed neurological disease which often left him nearly blind and weakened his body to the point of total immobility, Parkman attempted to overcome his condition by immersing himself into the invigorating harshness of Western wilderness environments. In Parkman's West, an environment that threatened to make "quick and sharp work"⁷³ of all those too weak to adapt to and cope with its unforgiving realities, "the human biped" was "reduced to his primitive condition."⁷⁴ In the unrelenting physicality of his journey, the privileged white Easterner Parkman imagined himself as both an animal body subject to the undifferentiating natural and animal processes that also affected all other organisms *and* as a specimen of civilized humanity who stood apart and above the worlds of nonhuman animals and savage indigenes, the boundaries of which remained consistently blurry and indeterminate. "No man is a philanthropist on the prairie,"⁷⁵ Parkman writes; and for him and likeminded contemporaries, the human and animal savagery that characterized Western life also exemplified the deeper truth of the animal nature of the human, a truth whose consequences could only be kept in check, but never entirely evaded, by the regulations and 'artifices' of civilized life. "Man is naturally an animal of prey," as Irving concludes from his own Western travels, "and, however changed by civilization, will readily relapse into his instinct for destruction," with his "ravenous and sanguinary propensities daily growing stronger upon the prairies."⁷⁶

73 Parkman: *The Oregon Trail*, p. 183.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 252.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

76 Irving: *A Tour on the Prairies*, p. 125. Charles Latrobe, who accompanied Irving on his tour on the prairies, found it "amusing to see the effect of the life we were leading [...] on the spirits of the most peaceable among us. There was the good, kind-hearted commissioner, whose career had never been stained [...] by [an] act of violence to beast or bird, girding himself in his own quiet way for the expected rencontre with biped or quadruped savages, and breathing destruction to the innocent skunks and

But while the realities of Western interspecies relations could be translated into an aggressive ‘Darwinian’ ethics à la Parkman, they were also suggestive of what might be described as a much less callous (and often neglected) ethics of creaturely commonality that was crucially based on, or at the very least strongly bolstered by, the corporeal experiences of and in Western animal geographies. Identifying this alternative strand of ethics is arguably complicated to some extent not only by the fact that both ‘Darwinian’ and ‘creaturely’ ethical perspectives frequently bleed into each other in the sources and are thus not always neatly separable, but also because – unlike the kind of social Darwinism *avant la lettre* espoused by the likes of Parkman and Webber, which was already approaching something like a semi-coherent ethical ‘system’ in antebellum discourse – the latter were of a much more situational and ephemeral, perhaps even epiphanic character. In the journal he kept during his overland trip to San Diego over the Santa Fé Trail and along the Gila River in 1849, John Robert Forsyth repeatedly comments, in a starkly and unsparingly corporeal language, on the violent fate of some of the domesticated animals accompanying the emigrant trains on their way to California. Among other incidents of animal death and suffering, Forsyth mentions how he encounters a mule and an ox, both abandoned by their respective trains, both about to meet their respective ends at the jaws of wolves, the ferocious embodiment of the Western struggle for existence. While the “poor mule,” “a most miserable object skin & Bone & not even all his skin for if it had not been peeled from his lean sides for Whip Lashes it had certainly been lashed off,” far from water and unable to walk, “would never again wet his burning throat,”⁷⁷ the ox is already being besieged by his predatory assailants. A “brave old fellow,” the animal is fighting back valiantly, “but his hind legs were partly Knawed away,” and with their growing numbers the wolves would soon “gorge their villaneous carcasses with his quivering flesh.”⁷⁸

turkeys. There too was to be seen our friend Irving,—the kindly impulse of whose nature is to love every living thing,—ramming a couple of bullets home into a brace of old brass-barrelled pistols which had been furnished him from the armory at Fort Gibson.” (Charles Joseph Latrobe: *The Rambler in North America, 1832–1833*. London: Seeley & Burnside 1835, pp.205–206.)

77 John Robert Forsyth: *Journal of a Trip from Peoria, Ill. to California on the Pacific in 1849*, p. 64. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, BANC MSS C-F 50 FILM, part 2, reel 1.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

A more extensive account of a similar scene, this time involving one of the train's own animals, the ox Tom, is perhaps worth quoting at some length for the way its language of violent (inter)corporeality resonates with both social Darwinist fatalism and an implicit recognition of the common threads of being that interweave creaturely lives across the supposed rigidity of species boundaries:

When our Train amounted to 44 wagons Tom was considered the noblest Meekest & best trained animal in that vast cavalcade, but now alas to be entirely abandoned to the ravenous Wolves in a strange country to have his beautifully rounded loins, straight back, full & broad chest, delicate Head & full Black Eye torn & mangled by those ever rapacious monsters. the thought was too much & an irresistible tear trickled down my cheek. No Tom said I this shall not be your fate I will drive you on to where some more generous place will yield you a little grass & water & where your strength which you have expended in my service shall be renewed & you be enabled to fight for your life & I impulsively turned to where the feeble fellow stood trying to munch a mouthful of bitter dry weed. I believe In my soul the poor creature Knew me for he turned towards me & approached & as he had often done in the days of his Glory held forward his gentle head for me to pat & fondle I examined it carefully & then step'd round to drive him onward, but horrible! his thighs & legs were fearfully torn & lacerated [...] I turned & left him with a perfect sickness of heart I truly believe I Never had felt before. as long as the road gave me a view of him, I often turned round & still poor Tom was standing there gazing after my retreating figure.⁷⁹

Not able to get Tom out of his head, for the remainder of the day Forsyth continues to be haunted by imaginary scenes of the beloved animal's violent death – of “poor Tom look[ing] round in Terror” while the hungry wolves “collect in hundreds” around him, as both the day and Tom's life are nearing their inevitable end.⁸⁰

In *Corporal Compassion*, Ralph Acampora introduces the term “symphysis” in order to emphasize how interspecies encounters are mediated and shaped by affective-bodily experiences in contrast to the “more airy, psychic notion of sympathy” that moral theory and philosophy are usually preoccupied with.⁸¹ For Acampora, symphysis is based on (but also meant to convey) the fact that humans share a “somaesthetic nexus” with other creatures, and the concept can be defined as a “proto-ethical feeling that assures us of another animal being's morally considerable

79 Forsyth: *Journal of a Trip*, pp.90–91.

80 *Ibid.*, p.91.

81 Ralph R. Acampora: *Corporal Compassion. Animal Ethics and Philosophy of Body*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2006, p.76.

capacity for conviviality.”⁸² Despite what Acampora describes as its essentially pre-reflexive character, he points out that symphysis “retains (at least residually) its affective aspects even upon reflection.”⁸³ I want to argue that we can read Forsyth’s account of the abandonment of Tom and his imaginings of the animal’s lonely death as, at least in part, testimony to the symphyical experiences of interspecies-intercorporeal commonality the long journey on the overland trails inevitably entailed. The fact that Forsyth’s writing takes the form of a journal of day-to-day experiences perhaps also allows us to credit it with a certain amount of experiential immediacy that doesn’t characterize other forms of writing in the same way and to the same degree. This is not to say that we should naively interpret his account as somehow expressive of pure, unmediated experience: not only does it clearly involve a certain amount of self-stylization on the part of the author in terms of a civilized human’s paternalistic care towards ‘inferior’ creatures, it arguably also reflects the ways in which racialized discourses of civilization sometimes functioned to conceptually unite civilized beings across species boundaries in opposition to the savagery of both wild predatory beasts and ‘bestial’ humans. Still, Forsyth’s writing also serves as an example for the way in which Western animal geographies could be imagined and experienced in terms of a “creaturely ‘carnosphere’” (to again borrow from Acampora) in a sense that emphasized the shared corporeal vulnerability of humans and animals beyond the violent ethics of (social) Darwinism.⁸⁴

Somewhat in contradiction to Manifest Destiny’s fantasies of a unidirectional imposition of civilized ways on savage environments and beings, already in the antebellum era Western environments were often regarded as spaces of inevitable corporeal transformation. As Stephen

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., p.77.

84 Ibid., p.76. Acampora uses this term to refer to a broader transpersonal perception of creaturely commonality in the sense of a “quasi-mystical communion with the planet.” I use it in a more limited sense here to refer to transspecific imaginings that are tied to the distinctly corporeal experience of (or vulnerable exposure to) a particular environment. For a discussion of the concept of vulnerability in the context of animal studies, see Dominik Ohrem: *An Address from Elsewhere. Vulnerability, Wonderability and Creaturely Life*. In: Id. / Roman Bartosch (ed.): *Beyond the Human-Animal Divide. Creaturely Lives in Literature and Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (forthcoming).

Tatum argues in an article on what he terms “topographies of transition,” such topographies “depend upon, indeed are bound up with, the extralinguistic realities of the ‘country’ and of laboring bodies. Though such topographies are always, on one level, images and representations, they are notable for their formal strategies in resisting allegory and symbol and returning us to the facts of place and the body.”⁸⁵ I would suggest that we should be similarly attentive to the ways in which at least some historical sources (such as Forsyth’s) are particularly expressive of “the facts of place and the body” and of the corporeal experience of Western environments as spaces in which bodies *as such* became highly visible in their capabilities and limitations, in their *presence*. Arguably, zooanthropological imaginings thus also reflect the fact that the material realities of Western life and travel were not only shaped by the presence and agency of nonhuman animals and environments but also by a heightened experientiality of *human* animality in the sense of a corporeal immersion in, and corporeal exposure to, forms of nonhuman materiality not subject to established Euro-American forms of environmental regulation. “The trials of a journey in the western wilderness can never be detailed in words,” as Western explorer Thomas Jefferson Farnham emphasizes:

To be understood, they must be endured. Their effects upon the physical and mental system are equally prostrating [...]. Loneliness [is] coupled with a thousand natural causes of one’s destruction; perpetual journeyings over endless declivities, among tempests, through freezing torrents; one half the time on foot, with nothing but moccasins to protect the feet from the flinty gravel and the thorns of the prickly pear along the unbeaten way; and the starvings and thirstings wilt the muscles, send preternatural activity into the nervous system, and through the whole animal and mental economy a feebleness, an irritability altogether indescribable.⁸⁶

Seemingly not conveyable by means of linguistic description, the existential character of far Western travel could only be shared *experientially* – and this shared experientiality encompassed not only fellow human but also nonhuman creatures.

85 Stephen Tatum: Topographies of Transition in Western American Literature. In: *Western American Literature* 32,4 (1998), pp. 310–353, here p. 318.

86 Farnham: *Travels in the Great Western Prairies*, p. 113.

Western Humanimalities

Edwin James, who served as a botanist and geologist on Long's Rocky Mountain expedition, surely echoed the sentiments of many of his contemporaries with his belief that "[t]o travellers in such a country, any domesticated animal, however abject, becomes an acceptable companion."⁸⁷ But if Western travelers sometimes developed close and affectionate relationships with the animals that accompanied them in a way that, though usually remaining within the established framework of benevolent paternalism, potentially questioned the rigid ontological and ethical distinctions of the human-animal divide, such interspecies affinities among civilized beings stood in marked contrast to the ways in which whites regarded those members of their own species who happened to find themselves in the way of settler colonial expansion and at the bottom of their racialized hierarchizations of human life. For Parkman, whose narrative is replete with particularly abhorrent acts of epistemic and physical violence against both Western wild animals and indigenous humans,

a civilized white man can discover but very few points of sympathy between his own nature and that of an Indian. [...] [A]n impassable gulf lies between him and his red brethren of the prairie. Nay, so alien to himself do they appear, that having breathed for a few months or a few weeks the air of this region, he begins to look upon them as a troublesome and dangerous species of wild beast.⁸⁸

With an ambiguity in many ways characteristic of contemporary portrayals of Native American peoples, Parkman's 'Indians' are, on the one hand, "brethren" and thus seemingly located within the mythological bounds of the 'human family,'⁸⁹ while, on the other, the notion of an "impassable gulf" is strongly evocative of the 'abyssal' character of the divide that supposedly separates human life from that of all other living beings. Akin to the wild beasts that roamed Western landscapes, indigenous people's dubious humanity substantiated the precarity of their ethical considerability, pointing to the ways in which the recognition of creaturely commonality remained inseparable from, and was frequently broken through, the prism of race as well as other social categories

87 Edwin James: *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819 and '20*, vol. 2. Philadelphia: Carey & Lea 1823, p. 213.

88 Parkman: *The Oregon Trail*, p. 237.

89 See Roland Barthes: *Mythologies*, trans. from the French by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill & Wang 1972, pp. 100–102.

constitutive of the relations of power and inequality among humans. In turn, contemporary distinctions between savage and civilized forms of life encompassed the lifeways of not only human but also of non-human beings: never simply congruent with the dichotomy of animality and humanity, savagery and civilization were notably transspecific concepts, with the “predatory expeditions”⁹⁰ of the human savages of the West not essentially different from the behaviors of their rapacious nonhuman counterparts, such as grizzly bears, cougars or wolves. But, as Parkman remarks, while there was not much to be feared from non-human wolves – “the greatest cowards on the prairie” –, “[i]n respect to the human wolves in our neighborhood, we felt much less at our ease.”⁹¹ Suggestive of how forms of human-animal relations could also function as indicators of civilizational status, the (to Euro-American eyes barely) domesticated animal companions of Western indigenes were living testimony to the latter’s savage ways, with ‘Indian’ dogs in particular serving as a frequent object of critique and commentary by white travelers. In *Astoria*, Irving is repulsed by the appearance and character of the dogs who “swarm about an Indian village as they do about a Turkish town” and who retain the “savage but cowardly temper” of the wolf: “howling rather than barking; showing their teeth and snarling on the slightest provocation, but sneaking away on the least attack.”⁹² It is with similar sentiments that Ross Cox, after learning that one of his group’s dogs has been killed for food, laments that

there was no necessity to justify the murder of a civilized dog, while several of those which had been purchased [from the ‘Indians’] at Oakinagan still remained untouched. [...] I would have preferred picking the bones of the most maigre of the Indian breed, to the plumpest of our own faithful companions. Their keen eye, sharp nose, and pointed upright ear, proclaim their wolfish origin, and fail to enlist our sympathies in their behalf; in consequence of which our repugnance to eat them in periods of necessity is considerably diminished.⁹³

Especially in the American context, the concept of indigenous savagery had always been strongly associated with notions of unrestrained

90 Irving: *A Tour on the Prairies*, p.75.

91 Parkman: *The Oregon Trail*, p.287.

92 Washington Irving: *Astoria. Or, Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains*. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard 1836, p.223.

93 Ross Cox: *Adventures on the Columbia River. Including the Narrative of a Residence of Six Years on the Western Side of the Rocky Mountains, Among Various Tribes of Indians Hitherto Unknown*, vol.2. London: Colburn & Bentley 1831, p. 33.

violence and cruelty – epitomized by the idea of a no-holds-barred ‘savage warfare’ that didn’t shy away from shedding the blood of children, women and elderly people⁹⁴ –, and while such connotations remained influential in the nineteenth century, a more subtle underpinning of the ‘savage ontology’ of indigenous life came to the fore throughout the antebellum period. In this view, indigenous peoples’ inability of transcending their ‘external’ natural environment by transforming it in a way that was in accordance with the requirements of civilization (especially with regard to patterns of habitation and land use) and with the claims of human dominion inherent to this concept was understood as causally related to their inability of transcending their ‘internal’ animal nature. ‘Indians’ were absorbed into and part of the very environments they, as members of the human species, were supposed to subdue, with the specifics of this causal relationship depending on whether savagery was conceptualized as primarily a result of environmental conditions or in biologicistic terms as an innate inferiority. Accordingly, indigenous lifeways were frequently regarded as similar, if not identical, to the lifeways of nonhuman creatures, with the latter supposedly determined by an instinctual preoccupation with bodily subsistence that underscored not merely their being immanent to their environments but what might be described in Heideggerian terminology as their environmental ‘captivation.’⁹⁵ In contrast to the self-governing subjectivity of civilized humans, the life of ‘the Indian,’ not unlike that of the ‘poor-in-world’ animal, was seemingly defined by a diminished form of relating to the world and themselves – their imagination “bounded by the lines of [...] sensible experience,”⁹⁶ their being wholly confined to the realm of material objects and relations: “abstract existence [‘the Indian’] never conceived; the verb ‘to be’ except as relating to time, place, and action, had no meaning in his [*sic*] language.”⁹⁷ While such dehumanizing representations often undifferentiatingly referred to the ‘character’ of ‘the Indian’ as such, emblematic of this

94 See, for example, John Grenier: *The First Way of War. American War Making on the Frontier, 1607–1814*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2005, p. 19.

95 The concept is developed in Martin Heidegger: *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. from the German by William McNeill/Nicholas Walker. Bloomington: Indiana UP 1995.

96 John Ludlum McConnel: *Western Characters: Or, Types of Border Life in the Western States*. New York: Redfield 1853, p. 34.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 44, original emphasis.

discursive relegation of indigenous peoples to the realm of abject animal materiality are antebellum portrayals of the societies of the Great Basin region west of the Rocky Mountains, in particular the Paiute and Shoshone, often collectively referred to as ‘Snake Indians’ or ‘Diggers’ (the latter as a pejorative reference to the supplementation of their diet with edible roots). “Herding together among bushes, and [...] using their instinct only to procure food,” as John C. Frémont describes them in the bestselling report of his 1840s expeditions, “these may be considered, among human beings, the nearest approach to the mere animal creation.”⁹⁸ “In these Indians,” he writes at another point in his account in reaction to a group of Paiute who didn’t seem to welcome the presence of Frémont’s expedition, “I was forcibly struck by an expression of countenance resembling that in a beast of prey; and all their actions are those of wild animals. Joined to the restless motion of the eye, here is a want of mind—an absence of thought—and an action wholly by impulse, strongly expressed, and which constantly recalls the similarity.”⁹⁹ Echoing Frémont’s sentiments, Farnham, in his *Travels in the Great Western Prairies*, describes the “Piutes” as “the most degraded and least intellectual Indians [...]. They provide nothing for future wants” and, frequently being reduced to starvation after harsh winters, “crawled upon their hands and feet, eating grass like cattle. These poor creatures are hunted in the spring of the year, when weak and helpless [...], and when taken, are fattened, carried to Santa Fe and sold as slaves during their minority.”¹⁰⁰ In a follow-up volume focused on his Californian travels, Farnham includes the observations of a fellow Western traveler who, in a description that evokes the notion of an animal removed from its natural habitat and features a telling use of pronouns, recounts his experience with one of the kidnapped indigenes: “From the time it was brought into the settlements of California it was sad, moaned, and continually refused to eat till it died.”¹⁰¹

And yet, while antebellum representations of trans-Mississippi indigenous societies exemplify the ways in which, at the intersections of

98 John Charles Frémont: *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843–44*. Washington, D. C.: Blair & Rives 1845, p.212.

99 *Ibid.*, p.267.

100 Farnham: *Travels in the Great Western Prairies*, pp. 107–108.

101 Thomas Jefferson Farnham: *Travels in the Californias, and Scenes in the Pacific Ocean*. New York: Saxton & Miles 1844, p.378.

zooanthropological and racial imaginings, human animality was displaced onto the bodies and lifeways of racialized others (thus allowing for the discursive emergence of white civilized Man as the pinnacle of humanity), I want to argue that Western environments tended to complicate this discursive strategy both in a general and in a more specific sense. First, the inevitable foregrounding of human corporeality in Western geographies confronted westering whites with the facticities of their own animal bodies, which, in their insistent, vulnerable materiality, frequently forced themselves into the travelers' writing. "But hunger!!," Farnham exclaims, "Every bud was fed; every bird had its nourishment; the lizards even were not starving. We were."¹⁰² Ironically enough, antebellum travelers' accounts are not seldom characterized to a considerable extent by the same preoccupation with subsistence activities that supposedly relegated indigenous people to the uncultured domain of animal existence. If the civilized East was inhabited by the *human* animal (or, even, the human animal), Western animal geographies tended to foreground the unwelcome presence of the *human animal*. This doesn't mean that an immersion into Western environments always resulted in *in extremis* situations of some sort, but rather that the exposure to and experience of these environments highlighted the animal vulnerability of human beings (particularly those unfamiliar with them) in the face of larger more-than-human forces not adapted to and, in fact, often counteractive to their needs and wants – an existential vulnerability shared by all living creatures, human and nonhuman, white and nonwhite. This primacy of human animality in Western environments is also evident in the forms of bodily practice expressive of the fundamental human dependence on nonhuman animal bodies in these environments (and indeed, though often beyond the thresholds of visibility and recognition, in all kinds of environments): in the way humans sustained their bodies by consuming the flesh of hunted animals or by otherwise making use of animal matter – for instance, by using the flammable excrement, usually referred to as 'buffalo chips,' left behind by herds of bison to warm their bodies and cook their food in woodless Plains environments; in the way they clothed themselves in the skins and furs of Western animals; and in the way they interpreted the diversity of behaviors, tracks and traces of animal bodies as environmental

102 Farnham: *Travels in the Great Western Prairies*, p. 131.

cues that were sometimes essential for survival. The heroization of Euro-American pioneers and frontiersmen in the mythology of westward expansion already emergent in the literature of the antebellum period is thus haunted by a certain tension between human agency and vulnerability, human activity and passivity, that is not often commented upon and perhaps drowned out to some extent by the boisterous chorus of Manifest Destiny and tales of frontier bravado. In fact, as already pointed out by botanist John Bradbury in his 1817 account of Western travels, the ‘agency’ of pioneers and frontiersmen in the ‘conquest’ of the West involved not only their clichéd “hardihood” but also a remarkably passive “capability of suffering.”¹⁰³

Second, this inevitable foregrounding of human animality was connected with a more specific type of concern already alluded to in the introductory section of this chapter: as much and as widely as the process and progress of westward expansion was understood as a reaffirmation of the dominion of white civilized humanity over savage forms of animal and animal-like human life, the transformative powers that Western environments undoubtedly wielded over civilized bodies evoked troubling questions about the fate of those individuals or families that lived or worked on or beyond the fringes of American society. What to make of those people who left behind – turned their back on? – American civilization in favor of the vagaries of the wilderness, where many of them, in the words of George Frederick Ruxton, “rival the beasts of prey” and “destroy human as well as animal life with as little scruple and as freely as they expose their own”?¹⁰⁴ Were these westerners really the vanguard of the march of American civilization, conquerors of a continental wilderness, or was it, in fact, the wilderness that did the conquering? More than merely about the habits of a geographically and socially marginal group of antebellum Americans, the lives of Western whites were of importance due to their seeming implications for the distinctions between humanity and animality, civilization and savagery. Writing about the “trappers of the Rocky Mountains,” whom he refers to as a “genus’ more approximating to the primitive savage than perhaps any other class of civilized man,”¹⁰⁵ Ruxton illuminates the decivilizing

103 John Bradbury: *Travels in the Interior of America, in the Years 1809, 1810, 1811*. London: Sherwood, Neely & Jones 1817, p. 10.

104 George F. Ruxton: *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains*. London: John Murray 1847, pp. 241–242.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 241.

trajectory of civilized Man in Western environments in a language expressive of the interrelated twin specters of ‘becoming animal’ and ‘becoming savage’:

Their lives being spent in the remote wilderness of the mountains [...], their habits and character assume a most singular cast of simplicity mingled with ferocity, appearing to take their colouring from the scenes and objects which surround them. Knowing no wants save those of nature, their sole care is to procure sufficient food to support life, and the necessary clothing to protect them from the rigorous climate. [...] When engaged in their avocation, the natural instinct of primitive man is ever alive, for the purpose of guarding against danger and the provision of necessary food.¹⁰⁶

Reviled as “White Indians” by some, these men “may have good qualities, but they are those of the animal” and indeed “just what uncivilised white man might be supposed to be in a brute state, depending upon his instinct for the support of life.”¹⁰⁷

The ambiguous role assumed by the figure of the white westerner complicated discursive strategies through which human animality became almost exclusively associated with racialized otherness. Shy of a complete animalization, like ‘Indians,’ actual – that is, (semi-)permanent – westerners seemed to be suspended in, or veering towards, a state of liminal humanimity that was particularly associated with the concept and the spaces of the Western ‘frontier’ which, though notoriously vague in meaning, were often imagined as the “meeting point between savagery and civilization.”¹⁰⁸ White frontiersmen not only inhabited the frontier in a geographical sense, they also *embodied* it in an ontological sense, pointing to the metamorphic agency that resulted from its dangerous intermixtures of civilized and savage, human and animal ways of being. What Derrida, in the epigram to this chapter, imagines as a process of ontological border-crossing that demands (or allows for?) a “surrender to the animal,” for many antebellum Americans found its geographical expression in the spaces of, and beyond, the Western frontier. As sources and authorities of knowledge about the very environments which also reshaped their civilized humanity, white westerners

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid., p. 242.

108 This is, of course, the famous 1893 phrasing of Wisconsin historian Frederick Jackson Turner. See id.: *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. In: *Frontier and Section. Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner*, ed. by Ray Allen Billington. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall 1961, pp. 37–62, here p. 38.

were both subjects and objects of zooanthropological inquiry. To antebellum travelers like Bradbury, they provided first-hand information “concerning the nature and habits of animals, with which no men are so well acquainted,” and who were even able to “imitate the cry or note of any animal found in the American Wilds, so exactly, as to deceive the animals themselves.”¹⁰⁹ But in the eyes of others, these men’s animal mimicry went well beyond the technique and tactics of the chase – at worst, it underscored the failure of their ontological acrobatics, that precarious act of walking the line between human and animal worlds of which supposedly only civilized whites were capable. What the antebellum fascination with Western life thus also highlights is that, only seemingly paradoxically, in its endeavors to pinpoint the differences between human and animal life, contemporary zooanthropological imaginings relied to a considerable extent on precisely those figures who were regarded as not neatly fitting into either category. As Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman explain, it is precisely because the human being has “no sharp or evident frontier” that the shifting metaphysics of the human is crucially and self-constitutively dependent not only on the meta-figure of the animal but on an ensemble of “contrasting border-figures, partly human – or, rather, intermittently human and inhuman according to their context.”¹¹⁰ It is this epistemic situationality or even volatility of the human/animal that also evokes unsettling questions about the validity of both concepts.

Capturing the Derridean ambiguity of the term, for many antebellum Americans the “ends” of American Man lay westward in more than one sense: in the sense of ‘his’ continental *telos* as it was most visibly epitomized in the feverish expansionism of Manifest Destiny, but also in the spatial and ontological sense in which Western animal geographies both underwrote and challenged white American self-conceptions as the embodiment and actualization of human potentiality.

109 Bradbury: *Travels in the Interior of America*, pp. 106–107, footnote.

110 Erica Fudge / Ruth Gilbert / Susan Wiseman: Introduction: The Dislocation of the Human. In: *Iid.* (eds): *At the Borders of the Human. Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 1999, pp. 1–8, here pp. 2–3.